

A Kennedy Center World Premiere Commission

Cuesheet  
PERFORMANCE GUIDE

Based on the novel  
Darius & Twig by  
Walter Dean Myers

Adapted by  
Caleen Sinnette  
Jennings

Directed by  
Eleanor Holdridge

# DARIUS & TWIG

"Some things  
gotta be done,  
even if they  
don't make  
sense."

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# Getting Ready to See



## About the Play

Darius writes. Twig runs. Both are really good, and their talents could win them college scholarships. But these two 16-year-old best friends face tough challenges. Living on the ever-dangerous streets of Harlem, they confront huge problems like violence, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, bullies, and “the system”—plus their own fears and doubts. They have each other’s backs—but with all these things working against their hopes and dreams, can they ever really escape the hood?

## Meet the Characters

(in order of appearance)

**Fury**, a falcon (Darius’s “alter-ego”)

**Darius Austin**

**Manuel Fernandez** (“Twig”)

**Coach Day**, Twig’s track coach

**Mr. Ramey**, the school counselor

**Miss Carroll**, Darius’s writing teacher

**Midnight**, the neighborhood bully

**Tall Boy**, Midnight’s “sidekick”

**Brian Austin**, Darius’s younger brother

**Mama**, Darius’s mother

**Lionel Dornich**, editor of *The Delta Review*

**Uncle Ernesto**, Twig’s uncle

Plus police officers, running competitors, schoolmates, a reporter, and a rental agent

## Fury Takes Flight

Darius often wants to strike back against the cruelty of the mean streets. When that happens, he imagines his inner anger as Fury, a peregrine (pronounced PER-i-grin) falcon. These predators are about the size of crows and hunt and eat other animals. Their superb vision allows them to spot their prey as they soar high in the sky. Then they swoop down at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour and snatch their victims with their powerful talons (claws) and beaks.

## “Run with Your Heart, Man”

Twig is training for a big 3200-meter race—that’s eight laps around a standard running track, or nearly two miles. While talent helps, his only hope of winning is through lots of discipline and hard work...striving to be the best, and following Darius’s advice to run with his heart.

## Hard Times in Harlem

“It’s a cold world, Twig,” says Darius. That world is their neighborhood of Harlem, which plays an important role in the story. This part of New York City once was a beacon of hope to black Americans, who moved there through the early 1900s. They created an unprecedented amount of African American art, literature, music, and poetry, a period known as the Harlem Renaissance (ren-uh-SAHNS). But inner-city life turned harsh and unforgiving when the area fell on hard times. Change has been underway again, with an influx of new Hispanic and white American residents and more businesses and jobs. Yet parts of Harlem remain stricken by poverty, gang violence, drugs, and high death rates, especially for young men.


# Darius & Twig

## (Not) Getting Along

Among Hispanics living in Harlem, a large number come from the Dominican Republic (a Caribbean island). That includes Twig's family. His Uncle Ernesto, who owns a bodega (boh-DEY-guh, a grocery store), rudely asks Darius whether he is Haitian (he isn't) and looks down on Darius for being black. In some parts of the United States, there is a history of tension between African American, Dominican, and Haitian communities. But for Darius and Twig, the only race that matters is the next one Twig has to win.

## An Absent Father

After coming home from fighting in the Iraq War, Darius's father became distant and troubled and left the family. Although not named in the play, this kind of severe distress after a terrifying event is often a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It is estimated that PTSD affects up to 20 percent of Iraq war veterans.



"I'm a writer, he's a runner,  
Wish our paths were smooth and sweet  
But Twig and I come from Harlem,  
We live on some real mean streets."



# The Write Stuff

## Imagining Darius and Twig

*Darius & Twig* is adapted (changed) from a book of the same name by best-selling author Walter Dean Myers. His award-winning writing often explored the difficult lives of young people. Having grown up in Harlem himself, Myers once said he wrote about inner-city children to “make them human in the eyes of readers and, especially their own eyes.” He also purposely created the friendship between Darius (who is African American) and Twig (who is Dominican) to address racial tension and build a bridge between communities.

## Bringing It to the Stage

The challenge of turning a 200-page book full of rich characters and inner-city life into a play fell to playwright Caleen Sinnette Jennings. She aimed to change very little but instead compact the story. That meant omitting some characters and scenes from the book. But if you’ve read the book, you’ll notice the play keeps all the major turning points and some of the original dialogue.

## The Poetry of Inner Life

In the book, Darius describes his dreams, fears, and worries as well as observations on life in the neighborhood. Such inner thoughts might sound funny simply said out loud on stage. But the playwright wrote them as spoken word—poetry written to be performed aloud with energy and rhythm. You’ll know you’ve entered Darius’s inner world when he speaks lines like these:

I name my falcon Fury  
He lifts me as he flies  
I breathe him and I dream him  
He lives in my mind’s eye

We are never friendly  
And he is not my pet  
He’s my killer instinct  
And I am in his debt





## Conflicts Arise

Darius and Twig want to use their talents to escape Harlem—but neighborhood bully Midnight resents their success and wants to sabotage it. The friends and Midnight want opposing things, and that creates suspense in the story, something called dramatic conflict. Characters also can have conflicts within themselves. Both Darius and Twig struggle with fear and doubt. The way all these conflicts are resolved is an important part of theatrical storytelling.

## What's the Big Idea?

The play explores some big ideas, or themes. They include friendship, living your own dream even if it seems impossible, having compassion for others (even difficult people), doing the right thing, and finding your inner strength. During the performance, watch how these themes play out through the characters' actions.

Think about: What is your dream? What friendships can help you achieve it? How can you help your friends achieve their dreams?

## To Be a Writer

What does a writer need to know and do to create a great story? This question shadows Darius as he tries to rewrite his story. You'll hear Darius's teacher's advice to him, and here's some more...

On writing books, from author Walter Dean Myers:

- Read the best writing you can.
- Do the thinking the writing demands.

On writing plays, from playwright Caeen Sinnette Jennings:

- Read as many good plays as you can.
- See as many good plays as you can (lots of theaters have special discounts for students and opportunities to usher).
- Write your story—even if you don't know the art and craft of playwriting.
- Listen to how people speak—it's fascinating—and become a student of conversation.
- Don't judge people or your characters. People are never ALL bad or ALL good. People are complex. Observe and listen to people in all kinds of settings. Become a student of human behavior.

After the performance, try applying some of this advice to your own writing.

"Twig's free  
When he runs,  
he flies like a bird  
My escape is in books,  
in language, in words."



# Bringing Darius and Twig

## Making It Real

Capturing Darius and Twig's world on stage before a live audience takes some imagination and skill from a team of creative people—director Eleanor Holdridge (the person overseeing the whole production); the playwright; the actors; and the set, props, costume, sound, and lighting designers. Here are some of the tools they might use while designing the show:

- **Set Design**—backdrops and structures that give the feel of the decaying neighborhood
- **Lighting**—spotlights and other lighting to give the sense of movement and chaos
- **Sound**—effects suggesting sounds of the street, such as cars, sirens, gunfire, and crowds
- **Costumes**—everyday clothes in neutral colors that can be easily enhanced with pieces like sweaters, glasses, and hats to create different characters

## The Set Up

The set, or the scenery you see on stage, gives a sense of where the story takes place—homes, school, the park, the streets, rooftops, and racetracks. For this performance, the set designer had to create scenery that could represent the tough feel of Harlem and easily and quickly become different places in the story.

The preliminary sketch on the next page shows the set designer and director's early ideas. Notice how the prominent blue sky, which represents hope and optimism, contrasts with elements like the broken window air conditioner, which represents decay. During the performance, compare this early design with what you see on stage. Why do you think the designers made the decisions they did?

## The Race Is on...Stage!

On your mark, get set...Whoa! Wait just a second. How will they show Twig's two-mile race on a stage? That's just the type of problem theatrical production teams must solve all the time. Brainstorm some options yourself (including using lighting, slow motion, sound, and projections). Then during the performance, see how the designers and performers created the illusion of a race.

## Showing Fury

Fury the falcon exists only in Darius's imagination, yet he plays an important role in representing Darius's anger and desire for control and strength. How do you portray Fury as Darius imagines his watching, soaring, hunting, and striking his prey? That's another one of the challenges faced by the production team. Try thinking about some options (such as using a puppet, projections, birdlike movements, or simply letting the audience members use their imaginations). Then, watch to see what the team decided and, after the performance, discuss how you think it worked.

## Double Time

Four actors play twenty characters. Yep, that's a lot. However, the magic of theatrical storytelling and great acting is that you won't even notice. But you might want to pay attention to how a skilled actor uses a simple costume change—like a hat or hoodie—and a change in posture, speaking style, and movement to become a completely different character right before your eyes. And anyone can play anyone—a woman can play a man, an African American young man can play an older white man, and a person can "become" a falcon. When actors play more than one character, it is called doubling. This allows small groups to perform more complex stories—and also gives the performance energy.



# 's World to Life on Stage



Set design by Andrew Cohen

"I go up to my roof to  
be closer to the sky  
To give my worries distance  
To think so I won't cry."



# A Few More Things

## Watch for...

- how the violence of the story is portrayed on stage.
- how rooftop scenes are shown.
- how Darius evolves as a writer and the moment when his story becomes clear to him.

## Listen for...

- the humor and teasing between Darius and Twig and what it says about their friendship.
- hip-hop style music accompanying Darius's spoken word passages.
- the types of sound effects that remind you of the city.
- different styles of speaking among the characters.

## Think about...

- the moments Mama, Twig, and Darius each decide to do the "right thing even if it doesn't make sense." Would you have done what they did? Have you ever done the right thing even if it didn't make sense? Why?
- whether the story Darius wrote about the boy and the dolphins was about hope or despair, and why he gave the boy a bad leg.
- what makes Twig want to quit running races, and what helps him continue.
- whether the play changed the way you perceive kids like Darius, Twig, and Midnight. If so, how?

## Write...

...the next chapter. After the end of the play, what do you think happens next for Darius and Twig? If these two friends achieve their college dreams, what will their new dreams be and what challenges will they have to overcome to reach them?

"What it takes to be a runner,  
what it takes to be a writer  
You have to be the best you can,  
you have to be a fighter."

David M. Rubenstein  
*Chairman*

Deborah F. Rutter  
*President*

Mario R. Rossero  
*Senior Vice President, Education*

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