THE HISTORY OF SOPHIATOWN - BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The township of Sophiatown was named after the wife of Herman Tobiansky, Sophia. He was a developer who bought a portion of the farm, Waterval, in an area to the west of Johannesburg town centre, in 1897. The suburb was established in 1904 for white people. Four streets – Gerty, Ray, Edith and Bertha - were named after his daughters. Before the Land Act of 1913, black people could buy properties, and people of any race could own businesses in Sophiatown. As a result, many people of different races bought or rented property there. Later, the Johannesburg Town Council built sewerage disposal facilities in the area next to Sophiatown. This made the properties in Sophiatown worth less money. Most white people left, leaving a mixed community of black, coloured, Indian and Chinese people. Sophiatown was a freehold, meaning it did not have a superintendent or a fence around it like other black municipal areas, and so anyone could live there. After 1913 when many black people lost their smallholdings and farms in the country, they came to live in cities like Johannesburg. Many people moved to mixed areas like Sophiatown. Sophiatown became a place known for creativity in writing, journalism, music and politics. In the play, many famous people are mentioned in order to show this. Jakes represents the well-known journalists who wrote for the famous ‘Drum’ magazine, all of whom lived in Sophiatown at some point. These journalists were Can Themba (who called his house in Sophiatown ‘House of Truth’), Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and Henry ‘Mr Drum’ Nxumalo. ‘Drum’ magazine published stories about life in Sophiatown and the growing black urban culture of the time. Many famous musicians lived or performed in Sophiatown, like Miriam Makeba, the Manhattan Brothers and Dolly Rathebe. There were also many famous political activists who lived in Sophiatown, and who are mentioned in the text. They included Father Trevor Huddleston, the priest in charge of the Anglican Mission in Sophiatown who protested against the forced removals; Bo Resha, one of the
accused in the 1956 Treason Trial; Dr AB Xuma, the first black South African to qualify as a medical doctor (who lived on Toby Street); Albert Luthuli, President General of the ANC; Oliver Tambo, the Secretary General of the ANC at the time; and Regina Brooks, a white woman living who was jailed for seven years for living with a black man in Sophiatown (because interracial relationships were illegal).

In the first scene of the play, Jakes also speaks about important places in Sophiatown like the Odin and Balansky Cinemas, the Windmill Theatre, the Back o’ the Moon, Thirty-Nine Steps Shebeens and Freedom Square, where political meetings were held. Sophiatown was overcrowded. There was a lot of poverty, as people moved to the cities in search of work. As a result, there was a lot of violence and gangs—people were looking for any way to make money to support themselves and their families. Gangs such as The Americans, The Russians, The Vultures, The Gestapo and The Berliners were often involved in crime and fighting over territories. All these gangs are spoken about in the play and Mingus is involved with one of them – The Americans. Gang members spoke Tsotsitaal (a slang mixture of different South African languages like Afrikaans, English, Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho). Other people in Sophiatown started to speak Tsotsitaal too. Tsotsitaal gave people a sense of identity and belonging. Most of the characters in the play speak Tsotsitaal.