



**EllaMental**  
by Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin



Newport, Maine

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## **EllaMental**

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**ORDER #3385a**

# EllaMental

## CHARACTERS:

**Ellament** — 12 years old. Smart, sassy. Her mother clearly liked Earth, Wind & Fire. She likes to read YA novels, play on her Nintendo Switch, and film TikTok dance crazes. Her grandmother, who she was very close to, has recently passed away. She feels “weird” all the time and thinks something might be wrong with her. Weird is another descriptor for anxiety. (Played by Actor 1)

**Ms. Aliyah** — 30’s. After School Program coordinator, definitely overworked but loves connecting with the after-school students. She is no-nonsense. Tough but fair. (Played by Actor 2)

**Mrs. Shephard** — Veteran teacher who believes that children should be seen and never heard. Rules with an iron fist. (Played by Actor 2)

**School Kid** (Played by Actor 2)

**EllaMental** by *Dee-Dee Darby Duffin*. 2f. About 30 minutes. Contemporary costumes. Simple Setting. Created specifically for grades 4-6, **EllaMental** centers on Ella, a Black, twelve-year-old sixth-grader struggling to make sense of her Big Feelings from the pandemic—grief, loss, fear, and anger—in a post-pandemic world. "I wanted to give voice to children with 'behavior issues' who often are not asked what they think or feel about the world around them. I was lucky enough to find teachers (or did they find me?) who were able to see me and all of my heartache and offer me a life raft, a place to put all that stuff that was bottled up inside of me." **EllaMental** engages students in an accessible, real-time, comforting conversation, one as barrier-free as possible, one that instantly invites students to live inside the play rather than searching for a way in. Instructive without feeling preachy, **EllaMental** provides a much more chill experience than students in grades 4-6 might expect: one that is natural, aspirational, and even inspirational. **ORDER #3385**

Born in the "Charm City" of Baltimore, playwright **Dee-Dee Darby-Duffin** has been a part of the Theatre artist of Color Workshop with Plan-B since 2017, where she has created her plays “DOLs” for the LOCAL COLOR series of short plays, 2021, *Fried Chicken*, 2024), “Aphasia” (Play at Home commission, 2020), and *ELLAMENTAL* 2024 Elementary School Tour. Dee-Dee has worked as an elementary school teacher and as a trainer of elementary school teachers. She has taught playwriting workshops for students in grades K-12 at three different schools as a Plan-B Theatre Teaching Artist (2018-2022), as well as scripting and narrating *ENCORE: A CELEBRATION OF BLACK SYMPHONIC MUSIC*, a Plan-B Theatre/Utah Symphony co-production of concerts for students in grade 5. Dee-Dee is also an actor, singer and vocalist. She has created roles in several world premieres including *CARAVAN* by Carol Lynn Pearson (Parliament of the World's Religions, 2015), along with several regional credits. As a vocalist, Dee-Dee has been delighting audiences with her mixture of jazz standards, R&B, soul, and funk for a quarter of a century. Dee-Dee completed a western tri-state tour with her band in 2023 and is now focusing on securing more regional acting credits.

# EllaMental

*(On stage: two chairs, yoga pillows, Wheel of Emotion Pillow, a whiteboard, timer; magnetic strips denoting activities like Deep breathing, Journal Writing, Stretching, Homework, Recess.)*

**Scene 1: Outside. Ella is standing by herself.**

**School Kid:** Ella-men-TAL! Ella men-TAL! Ella men-TAL!

**Ella:** Stop calling me that!

**School Kid:** Why, you are mental. Ella-is-mental, EllamenTAL!

**Ella:** I'm not mental. What does that even mean? You're just a... a...

**School Kid:** *(taunting her)* You can't even think of anything good. You're like a zombie. EllaMenTAL!  
EllaMenTAL!

*(School kid laughs and runs off.)*

**Scene 2 Classroom**

**Mrs. Shephard:** Ella, Ella. Ellament! Do you hear me talking to you?

**Ella:** Huh! I mean yes, Mrs. Shephard.

**Mrs. Shephard:** Are you sleeping in class young lady?

**Ella:** No ma'am, I wasn't sleeping.

**Mrs. Shephard:** Now you are lying to me?

**Ella:** I-I-I'm not lying.

**Mrs. Shephard:** I called your name three times.

**Ella:** I wasn't sleeping I promise.

**Mrs. Shephard:** Well, you certainly were not listening. What is going on with you? Are you done with your assignment?

*(She comes over to Ella and looks at her paper.)*

You haven't even started it!

**Ella:** I'm sorry Mrs. Shephard. I got distracted. I can do it tonight for homework.

**Mrs. Shephard:** Everyone else finished. I gave you plenty of time. Now you will have to finish it in Principle Dixon's office.

**Ella:** But we are watching the National Geographic bird movie next.

**Mrs. Shephard:** And you won't get to watch that because you didn't finish your math assignment.

**Ella:** But the only reason the class even knows about those birds is because of the paper I wrote for science. Please Mrs. Shephard. I promise—

**Mrs. Shephard:** —It wouldn't be fair to give you special treatment Ella. Might I suggest that while you are in Principle Dixon's office, you focus on completing your assignment and sleep at home.

**Ella:** But I wasn't sleeping!

**Mrs. Shephard:** Now, you are talking back young lady!?

*(She calls the office.)*

Hi there, I am sending Ellament Spaulding down to spend time with Principal Dixon. They are in a meeting? Well, what am I supposed to do with this student who is being a problem? I certainly can't reward her with a movie like the rest of the class. Who else is available to look after her and make sure she isn't having any fun! Great I will send her down. Ella, pack up your things. You are to go to Ms. Aliyah's room.

**Ella:** But I didn't do anything!

**Mrs. Shephard:** Exactly. Out!

**Scene 3** — *ELLA takes her time getting to MS. ALIYAH's room. It is set up like an open classroom study corner. No one is there so ELLA just goes in and sits on the yoga cushion. MS. ALIYAH enters singing and both her and ELLA scream as they startle one another. ELLA stands up.*

**Ms. Aliyah:** Ella, you nearly scared me to death, why aren't you in class?

**Ella:** Mrs. Shephard told me to come here.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Why would she do that?

**Ella:** Because Principal Dixon is in a meeting.

**Ms. Aliyah:** What does this have to do with Principal Dixon?

**Ella:** Because Mrs. Shepard said I was sleeping in class when I really wasn't.

**Ms. Aliyah:** There has to be more to the story.

**Ella:** So, then Mrs. Shepherd said I was talking back when I was only trying to explain that my mind just went blank.

*(MS. ALIYAH looks exasperated.)*

Then she saw that my assignment wasn't finished, so now I've got a third offense of not working. So, she was going to send me to see Principal Dixon. But Principal Dixon was in a meeting, so she said I had to come see you. My guess is because you are the only adult available.

**Ms. Aliyah:** "Ellament,

*(she looks outside)*

I see a class at recess. You may go outside and join them."

**Ella:** First of all, Ms. A, it's really cold outside.

**Ms. Aliyah:** That why they make hats and coats. Second of all?

**Ella:** What?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Do you have a second argument for why you don't want to go outside?

**Ella:** *(clearly thinking of a reason)* I...I thought maybe you needed some help.

**Ms. Aliyah:** I do not. Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air.

**Ella:** I can erase or rearrange the white board or sharpen pencils for journal writing time.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Pencils are already sharpened, and I can handle moving a few magnetic strips around. It is the end of the day. I need to get ready and refocus for tomorrow's class. I will see you then.

**Ella:** How do you do it?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Do what?

**Ella:** Refocus.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Depends on what other things are going on inside my brain.

**Ella:** Sometimes I feel like I can't catch up with all the things that are going on inside my brain.

**Ms. Aliyah:** What was going on inside your brain, that you couldn't focus in class?

**Ella:** I was thinking about the last recess.

**Ms. Aliyah:** What happened at the last recess?

**Ella:** Some of the kids called me Ella-“mental.”

**Ms. Aliyah:** What! Who calls you that? Why do they call you that?

**Ella:** I have been out of it lately. It doesn't matter.

**Ms. Aliyah:** It does matter Ella.

*(Speaking softly)*

Look, even if you have been struggling or having issues, you are still an amazing human being.

**Ella:** You have to say that.

**Ms. Aliyah:** No I don't. I mean it! No one calls Ashley names.

**Ella:** Yes they do. She wears braces on her legs.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Ooookaaaayyyy!

*(Thinking of other students)*

No one calls Connor or Gentry names.

**Ella:** They're both on the spectrum. Of course kids call them names.

**Ms. Aliyah:** You're right. Kids say horrible and mean things all the time. But we try to get all of you to accept people for the lovely human beings that they are. Tell me what's happening. Why are your friends all of sudden calling your mental health into question.

**Ella:** I don't know.

**Ms. Aliyah:** I don't know is not a reasonable response from a 12-year-old.

**Ella:** I just haven't been myself lately.

**Ms. Aliyah:** What does "not being" yourself look like?

**Ella:** *(shrugs)* I don't know.

*(MS. ALIYAH gives her the look.)*

I just don't really feel like hanging out with the other kids.

**Ms. Aliyah:** That's okay, maybe you are tired. Maybe you're not getting enough sleep. What else?

**Ella:** Ummm, I-I-I don't really want talk to my friends. I don't know what to say to them.

**Ms. Aliyah:** *(nods)* And?

**Ella:** And I dropped out of the school play.

**Ms. Aliyah:** But you loved doing theater!

**Ella:** I know.

**Ms. Aliyah:** So why did you drop out?

**Ella:** Because I don't feel like I should be doing anything that makes me happy right now.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Why not?

**Ella:** Because we. I. I don't know. I feel like since the pandemic has been over EVERYONE thinks that we should all go back normal. But I don't know what normal is anymore! And Covid was nuts. Online school was stupid.

*(She is becoming increasingly overwhelmed.)*

And I still feel stupid and behind on everything—like I am never going to catch up.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Okay. Okay.

*(Soothing)*

Those are all normal feelings. Have you talked to your parents, told them how you feel?

**Ella:** They're dealing with enough, already. Everything is supposed to have gone back to normal by now. I know it's been a while but honestly, I still feel like the pandemic *just* happened and can happen again!

**Ms. Aliyah:** It was a scary time. A lot of us didn't know anything.

**Ella:** All the stuff I shoved down; I feels like it's leaking out. I feel like all my feelings are seeping into each other. And my grandmother just died so my mom is pretty sad.

**Ms. Aliyah:** I am so sorry to hear that. Did your grandmother live here with you?

**Ella:** No, my mom had to go back east to where she lived.

**Ms. Aliyah:** So, it's just you and your father at home for now?

**Ella:** Yeah. My mom is taking care of my grandmother's things.

**Ms. Aliyah:** *(suddenly remembering Ella's Dad)* I remember you saying your dad is a chef, right? You must have some great dinners.

**Ella:** I mostly eat cereal or Hot Pockets. My dad just went back to work after not working for like a year. He works a lot to make up for all the work he missed during the pandemic. He and my mom say they are trying to play catch up.

**Ms. Aliyah:** I think they would still want to know what's going on with you.

**Ella:** I don't even know what's going on with me.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Well do you want some help figuring it out?

**Ella:** How would we do that?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Welcome to my ‘Den of Zen.’

*(She pulls out a yoga mat, a tray table, and a sign that says Den of Zen and wraps a scarf around her head.)*

**Ella:** *(not convinced)* I don’t want to bother you. I just don’t feel like going outside. Can I just hang out in here?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Ellament, in the Den of Zen, no one is a bother. Plus, there are card games. Cop a squat and Go Fish.

**Ella:** *(a smile starts to form)* Okay. I’m down.

*(MS. ALIYAH shuffles and deals.)*

**Ms. Aliyah:** Do you have any sevens?

**Ella:** Go fish. Do you have any threes?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Go fish. You know what Ellament. They say that “Being *heard* is so close to being loved, that for most of us we can’t tell the difference. Do you have any jacks?

**Ella:** Here you go. What does that even mean?

**Ms. Aliyah:** It means it feels good when you know that someone who cares about you is listening. They don’t have to solve your problems. They just listen to you and hear what you have to say. Do you have any nines?

**Ella:** Go fish. Do you have any tens?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Go fish. What was she like? Your grandmother.

**Ella:** My mom says I act just like her.

**Ms. Aliyah:** So, she was also very smart and very sassy? How about queens?

**Ella:** Oh my goodness!

*(rolls her eyes and laughs)*

Go fish!

**Ms. Aliyah:** Did she have a nickname for you? Come on—spill it. I won't tell a soul.

*(she holds her right hand up)*

My grandmother called me sweetie-pookie-face.

**Ella:** Wow!

**Ms. Aliyah:** Calm down. What was yours?

**Ella:** Sass-ah-frass!

**Ms. Aliyah:** Well, that is pretty on point!

**Ella:** Alright! Okay.

*(ELLA holds both hands up in defeat, momentarily showing her cards. They BOTH laugh.)*

**Ms. Aliyah:** What was she like?

**Ella:** She knew a lot of things. Like a lot! She used to be a teacher. Did you know that sassafras is a tree and tastes a lot like root beer? It used to be an ingredient in root beer but there is something in it that the government said causes cancer and liver problems. *(She gets overwhelmed.)*

**Ms. Aliyah:** What happened just now?

**Ella:** I got sad. I mean I got mad. I don't know.

**Ms. Aliyah:** It's okay. What made you sad?

**Ella:** My grandmother used to call me every week with this smarty pants dinner conversation.

**Ms. Aliyah:** What was this dinner conversation about?

**Ella:** It would always be some random thing she knew or had looked up. She called them tidbits.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Small, bite-sized pieces of food.

**Ella:** What?

**Ms. Aliyah:** Or small, interesting pieces of information.

**Ella:** Yes! She would speak in a British accent and say, “Darling, are you ready for our Smarty Pants Dinner Conversation?”

**Ms. Aliyah:** What would you have to say?

**Ella:** “Oui Madame, I have been waiting with bated breath!” and then she would tell me some random things like sassafras used to be in root beer or that when actors say “break a leg” it means good luck.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Did telling me about the sassafras tree make you think of your grandmother?

**Ella:** Yeah.

**Ms. Aliyah:** You said it made you sad and mad. How did thinking about it make you mad?

**Ella:** I’m mad that I won’t get to hear another smarty pants dinner conversation.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Okay. Why are you sad?

**Ella:** I didn’t know how much I really liked doing that with her. I never told her.

**Ms. Aliyah:** I think she knew.

**Ella:** How would she know if I never told her?

**Ms. Aliyah:** *(In a fake British accent)* Because, my dear, you kept playing the game.  
*(Regular voice)*

You know, the smarty pants dinner conversation isn’t over and done with because your grandmother isn’t here anymore.

**Ella:** What are you talking about. It’s not like she can text me or call me from wherever she is.

**Ms. Aliyah:** I know that sassafras! I’m saying, she left it to you to carry on. You get to choose, if you want, to start that treasure with someone else. Your parents, a best friend at recess—

**Ella:** —Nah, I'm good!

**Ms. Aliyah:** You don't have to decide now. Someday you might have a family of your own and think differently.

**Ella:** Maybe...I don't know.

**Ms. Aliyah:** You know what Ella; a lot of people are experiencing the same thing that you describe.

**Ella:** What do you mean?

**Ms. Aliyah:** I mean I am not a doctor, so if you are sad—I mean more than what you are telling me—you really should go see the school counselor. But from what you describe, I think what you are experiencing is grief.

**Ella:** But that would mean I would be sad all the time.

**Ms. Aliyah:** Grief is not like a math ruler; it doesn't go in a straight line. You could be sad one minute and then something else triggers you and all of sudden you are on the floor laughing.

**Ella:** Oh good grief!

*(They BOTH laugh.)*

What do other people do when they grieve?

**Ms. Aliyah:** *(a correction)* Grieve.

**Ella:** Right—grieve. What do people do when they grieve?

**Ms. Aliyah:** They play cards.

**Ella:** What! No, they don't!

**Ms. Aliyah:** What are we doing right now?

**Ella:** I'm, I—

**8 MORE PAGES TO THE END**