



The Rep
MILWAUKEE

September 26 – November 4, 2012

THE MOUNTAINTOP

Play
Guide

The Mountaintop

PLAY GUIDE

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MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER

108 E. Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI • 53202

Milwaukee Repertory Theater
presents

THE MOUNTAINTOP

By Katori Hall

September 26 – November 4

Stiemke Studio

MARK'S TAKE:



"*The Mountaintop* isn't a biography, per se, but rather a very smart, very funny, very moving, and very respectful exploration of the ideas that were occupying Dr. King's mind on the night prior to his death. The maid character is essential to this innately theatrical play, but impossible to describe without giving away a clever twist that the audience will absolutely lap up!"

-Mark Clements, Artistic Director

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SYNOPSIS



Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
“Mountaintop” Speech, April 3, 1968

After his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., retires to his room in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He is tired, overwrought, in need of clarity, and deeply questioning both the success of and his value to the Civil Rights movement.

Camae, a beautiful young hotel maid, enters. She is as awed by Dr. King's fame as he is by her beauty. The chemistry between them sparks immediately, and Dr. King invites her to sit and talk for awhile. Their ensuing conversation, lasting throughout the long night, covers topics both personal and political—from Dr. King's children, to the Memphis Sanitation Strike, to a debate about violent versus non-violent revolution.

As the evening progresses, Camae grows more mysterious, revealing thoughts and events about which only Dr. King could know. As it becomes increasingly clear that Camae is more than just an ordinary maid, she leads Dr. King through a powerful, vivid exploration of his life and legacy on what would become his final night on earth.



CHARACTERS

KING

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

CAMAE

A maid at the Lorraine Motel.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led the American Civil Rights Movement from December, 1955, to April 4, 1968, preaching a philosophy of non-violent protest, grassroots organizing, and civil disobedience.

Dr. King was born into a religious family. His grandfather and father were pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. King drew on his faith for his principles and spoke frequently about his duty to God.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with his wife, Coretta and their first daughter, Yolanda.

Dr. King attended segregated public schools in Georgia, and then attended Morehouse College, an African-American institution in Atlanta, from which both his father and grandfather had graduated. Dr. King then studied theology for three years at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where he was elected president of a predominantly white senior class. He then enrolled in graduate studies at Boston University, completing his residence for the doctorate in 1953. In Boston, he met and married Coretta Scott, a young woman studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. They would have two sons and two daughters.

By 1954, Dr. King was a member of the executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. When the Montgomery bus boycott began in 1955, Dr. King became one of the leaders of the movement.

The Montgomery bus boycott became one of the most successful non-violent demonstrations in modern history. During the boycott, King was arrested and his home was bombed, but he emerged as a great leader of the non-violent Civil Rights Movement. The boycott lasted 382 days and ended with a Supreme Court decision declaring bus segregation unconstitutional.

In 1957, Dr. King was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), formed to provide leadership for the growing Civil Rights Movement. For the next eleven years, Dr. King travelled the country speaking over twenty-five hundred times, leading protests, and acting against injustice. He wrote "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," a manifesto for the civil rights movement, following his arrest during a protest in Birmingham; he told over 250,000 people "I Have a Dream" during a march in Washington, D.C.; and he led thousands in marches from Selma to Montgomery. At the age of thirty-five, Dr. King became the youngest person to win a Nobel Peace Prize. He gave the prize money to the Civil Rights Movement.

In April of 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, to support a sanitation workers strike, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. The news shook the nation. Dr. King remains a symbol of non-violence across the world and he is the only non-president to have a memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

📖 For further resources on Dr. King go to www.MilwaukeeRep.com/season/mountaintop.html

KATORI HALL



Katori Hall

Katori Hall is a playwright and performer from Memphis, Tennessee. Her work has been produced on Broadway, in London's West End, and in regional theaters throughout the United States.

As an African-American growing up in a predominately white neighborhood, Hall was very aware of racial issues and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement as a child. She was raised in a working-class household, the youngest of four daughters. In 2003, she graduated from Columbia University and continued her training at Harvard and Julliard.

While training as an actor at Columbia, Hall felt a lack of roles for African-American women. At that moment, she knew she had to write. Today, Katori Hall's published plays include *The Mountaintop*, *Hoodoo Love*, *Hurt Village*, and *Saturday Night/Sunday Morning*.

The Mountaintop was inspired by Hall's mother, Carrie Mae Golden. In 1968, Carrie Mae asked her mother if she could go to hear Dr. King speak at the Mason Temple. Her mother did not let her go because she feared that the church would be bombed. The female character in *The Mountaintop*, Camae (short for Carrie Mae), is named for Katori Hall's mother, giving her the chance she never had to meet Dr. King.

📖 For more on Katori Hall go to www.MilwaukeeRep.com/season/mountaintop.html



Katori Hall

THE “MOUNTAINTOP” SPEECH

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his final speech at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968. He spoke to support a strike by sanitation workers, and expressed his vision for the future of Civil Rights. His comments about the end of his life seem to predict his own death. Below are some selected quotes from the speech.



“Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today . . . – the cry is always the same:

We want to be free.”

“Somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly, somewhere I read of the freedom of speech, somewhere I read of the freedom of the press.

**Somewhere I read that the greatness of America
is the right to protest for right.”**

“The question is not, ‘if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?’ . . .
**The question is, ‘if I do not stop to help the sanitation workers,
what will happen to them?’ That’s the question.”**

“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop . . . And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I’m happy, tonight.

**I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man!
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”**

QUESTIONS

Dr. King mentions death frequently in this speech. Was Dr. King predicting his own death the night before his assassination?

Dr. King is remembered as a great public speaker. What rhetorical devices does he use in the speech to captivate the audience?

From this speech, how does King imagine the future of the Civil Rights struggle?

📖 The full text of “The Mountaintop” speech can be found at www.americanrhetoric.com. For more on “The Mountaintop” speech visit www.MilwaukeeRep.com/season/mountaintop.html

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S FINAL DAYS

MEMPHIS SANITATION STRIKE

The Memphis Sanitation Strike began on February 11th, 1968, incited by the poor working conditions and the recent deaths of workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two black men crushed by the accidental trigger of a compactor machine, on February 1st, 1968. Along with these deaths, twenty-two black sewage workers were sent home that day without pay while their white supervisors were paid. These events incited the strike of nearly all 1,300 black sanitation workers in Memphis. They campaigned for better wages, benefits, safety, and union recognition. Even with a recommendation from the city committee, Mayor Henry Loeb refused to comply with their requests. With support from the community and organizations such as the NAACP, they organized a city-wide boycott. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., became actively involved in the effort. Dr. King spoke at a rally on March 8th, and led a march on March 18th. Though Dr. King preached non-violence, the march became violent as a group of rowdy students used their picket signs to break windows and loot stores. As a result, sixty people were injured and one boy died. During the strikes and marches, men waved and wore signs that bore the slogan "I AM A MAN." Despite being warned that the strike could not resolve peacefully, Dr. King returned to Memphis on April 3rd, giving his final speech, "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," at Mason Temple to rally the city and speak on behalf of the people of the city of Memphis. The strike ended on April 12th with the sanitation workers winning better wages, equipment, and treatment.



Strikers in the Memphis Sanitation Strike, 1968

"Must have been thousands upon thousands of people there...Everybody from old men to teenage girls to little boys holding up signs that said, I AM A MAN."

-King, *The Mountaintop*

RALPH ABERNATHY

Born on March 11th, 1926, Ralph Abernathy was a leader of the Civil Rights Movement and a close friend to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Abernathy served overseas during WWII, obtained a B.A. in Mathematics from Alabama State University, and a M.A. in Sociology from Atlanta University. He was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1948. Abernathy was an active member in the NAACP and chaired the committee on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. After Rosa Parks' famous boycott, Abernathy – along with Dr. King and nearly 150 other ministers – came together and formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Through their association, they boycotted the public bus system in Montgomery and made a lasting imprint on the Civil Rights Movement. After Dr. King stepped down as President of MIA, Abernathy was appointed President. He was also made Vice-President of the SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, by Dr. King because King believed that, in the event of his death, Abernathy would be the best candidate to carry the movement forward. For years, the two men travelled together, shared the same hotel rooms and jail cells, and spent their leisure time together with family and friends. Abernathy was present at the assassination, cradling his beloved friend in his arms until the paramedics arrived. After Dr. King's death, Abernathy took up the leadership of the SCLC and followed through with Dr. King's plan to help the sanitation workers. Later, he organized the Poor People's Campaign, the last major movement of the SCLC. Abernathy resigned in 1977 from the SCLC and returned to pastoral work at the West Hunter Baptist Church.



Ralph Abernathy

"More loyal than a dog. He the one called me down to the church tonight. Got me out of bed."

-King, *The Mountaintop*



The Lorraine Motel, room 306

LORRAINE MOTEL

Originally known as the Windsor Hotel, the Lorraine Motel was built in 1925 as a white-only establishment. In 1942, Walter and Loree Bailey purchased the Windsor, renamed it the Lorraine Motel, and opened it to African-American guests. During legal segregation, it hosted many black celebrities such as Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, and Aretha Franklin. Dr. King and his colleague, Ralph Abernathy, stayed at the Lorraine so often that their room was known as the “King-Abernathy Suite”. The motel became famous as the site of Dr. King’s assassination. Dr. King and Abernathy were on a trip to support and help organize a sanitation strike and protest occurring in Memphis, Tennessee. Standing outside

his second story room, Dr. King was shot. Today, the motel is a National Civil Rights Museum, a privately owned museum honoring Dr. King and the Civil Rights struggle. The “King-Abernathy Suite,” Room 306, is the same as it was on April 4th, 1968, the night Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated.

“Room 306. Yes, we call it the ‘King-Abernathy Suite,’ too.”

-King, *The Mountaintop*



Colleagues gather on the balcony outside the Lorraine Motel's Room 306, just a few feet from where Dr. King was shot, April 4, 1968. Photo: Henry Groskinsky, Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

ASSASSINATION

At 6:01 p.m., on April 4th, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot by gunman James Earl Ray while standing on the balcony outside Room 306 at the Lorraine Motel. Paramedics took him to St. Joseph Hospital where he was pronounced dead at 7:05 pm. Dr. King had been standing on the balcony talking to friends and associates in the parking lot below when the shot was fired. He was struck in the chin by the bullet which proceeded into his neck and shoulder. Ray, 39, purchased his rifle through a false alias and rented a room nearby at a rooming house at 422 ½ South Street. A witness in the room next to Ray’s recounted how the shared bathroom was locked and occupied. After he heard the gun

shot, the witness heard Ray running down the hall and opened his door in time to see Ray turning the corner with a large object tucked underneath his coat. Ray wrapped his gun, binoculars, and other belongings in a green blanket and dumped them outside the nearby Canipe Amusement Company.

“Speak by love. Die by hate.”

-Camae, *The Mountaintop*

His belongings, including the gun, were found later with Ray’s fingerprints on them. After a two-month, worldwide man hunt, Ray was caught at London’s Heathrow Airport. James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the murder, and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He died in prison in 1998.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

With the end of slavery in the United States came a new set of laws treating African-Americans as second-class citizens. For over ninety years, the “Jim Crow Laws” enforced racial segregation in education, housing, transportation, and public facilities.

The Civil Rights Movement struggled in the 1920s and 1930s. By the mid-1950s, the federal government began to support Civil Rights activists. In 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” school facilities were unconstitutional, ordering integration in public schools. In the decade that followed, Civil Rights activists, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., fought a hard battle for equal rights. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the Civil Rights of all Americans were established by law.

CIVIL RIGHTS TIMELINE

Rosa Parks refuses to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, as required by city ordinance; the Montgomery Bus Boycott follows, and the bus segregation ordinance is eventually declared unconstitutional.	 Rosa Parks	1954 — U.S. Supreme Court declares school segregation unconstitutional in <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> ruling.
The federal government uses the military to uphold African-Americans’ civil rights as soldiers escort nine black students to desegregate Little Rock High School .		1955 —
At the Greensboro Sit-in , four black college students refuse to move from the lunch counter of a Greensboro, NC, restaurant where black patrons are not served, launching sit-ins across the South.	 The Greensboro Sit-in	1957 — Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., helps found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to work for full equality for African-Americans.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his “I Have a Dream” speech to hundreds of thousands of supporters during the March on Washington, the largest Civil Rights march in history.	 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.	1960 —
		1962 —  Malcolm X becomes the National Minister of the Nation of Islam. He rejects the non-violent Civil Rights Movement and preaches African-American separatism and securing equal rights through “any means necessary.”
		1963 — Arrested for a protest in Birmingham, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writes the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” a manifesto for the Civil Rights Movement.



With Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in attendance, President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act into law

1964

Congress passes the **Civil Rights Act**, giving the federal government powers to prosecute discrimination based on race in employment, voting, and education.

A year after splitting with the Nation of Islam, **Malcom X is assassinated** in New York City.

The **Voting Rights Act is passed**, outlawing the practices used to disenfranchise African-American voters.

Thurgood Marshall becomes the first African-American justice on the Supreme Court.

The Poor People's March on Washington, a march against poverty planned by King before his death, goes on.

1965



Selma to Montgomery March

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., organizes a **march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama**. Police beat and teargas protesters; the images are shown on television across the country.

1965

1966

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seales found the **Black Panther Party**, a radical black power group.

1967

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated. The event sparks riots across the country.

1968



King speaks to supporters on the National Mall on August 28, 1963.

VOCABULARY

Baton — an object passed off between team members in a relay race

“I know I have dropped this baton so many times over this race.”

– King

Bougie — derived from “bourgeois”; a derogatory term describing someone who aspires to be of higher class

“Well, let me school you, you bougie Negro. I don’t need a PhD to give you some knowledge, understand?”

– Camae

Catchin’ flies — behaving as though in a state of drunkenness

“Cause these white folks here ‘bout to be catchin’ flies now the way they be acting wit’ Negroes these days.”

– Camae

Diatribes — a bitter verbal attack or criticism

“Not too many maids spouting off well-formed diatribes like that.”

– King

Incognegro — a derogatory term referring to an African-American who tries to hide their African heritage

“An incognegro. A spy.”

– King

Injunction — a legal order commanding a person or group of persons to do or not do a particular action

“The city said it was seeking the injunction as a means of protecting Dr. King. . . .”

– King

Larry Payne — a 16-year-old boy, shot by Memphis Police during the sanitation strike

“[Violence] just gives these police an excuse to shoot innocent folks. Like that boy . . . that 16-year-old boy they shot . . . Larry Payne. Larry Payne. Larry Payne. I’ll never forget his name.”

– King

Malcolm X — an African-American Muslim minister, public speaker, and human rights activist; he was assassinated in February 1965

“I know God liked Malcolm X. And you woulda liked him, too. He didn’t drank. Smoke. Cuss.”

– Camae

Martyr — a person who suffers or is killed while defending a principle, belief, cause, or idea

“You’ll be a man-made martyr. No, better yet! A saint!”

– Camae

Oratorical — a characteristic of someone with eloquent and superior public speaking ability

“Well...tell me... How are my ‘oratorical skills’—see y’en thank I knew them words?”

– Camae

Panther — a reference to the Black Panther Party, an African-American revolutionary group active from 1966 until 1982

“So are you an honorary Panther?”

– King

Preponderance — carrying superior weight, power, or importance

“We have gathered here today to deal with a serious issue. It is an issue of great preponderance”

– Camae

Promised Land — in the Bible, the land promised by God to Abraham; also, a place or situation believed to hold ultimate happiness

“I have plans. Lots of plans in my head and in my heart and my people need me. They need me. I need to see them to the Promised Land.”

– King

Poor People’s Campaign — a campaign organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to address the issues of economic justice and housing for America’s poor

“The plan. It’s all in the works. The Poor People’s Campaign!”

– King

Siddity — a term for someone who is pretentious or conceited

“You can call me siddity all you like, I want me a Pall Mall.” – King

Spook — a term for a spy; also, a derogatory term for an African-American

“Well, you’re not gonna catch me again! Where the hell is Ralph?/Ralph! I got a spook!”

– King

Square — a term for a cigarette

“You ain’t gone leave me here to work through the night wit nothin’ to smoke on. ... All I got is one square left.”

– Camae

THEMES

MAN VS. ICON:

The face of the Civil Rights Movement during the fifties and sixties, Martin Luther King, Jr., had a well-crafted public image. People know him as a leader, a preacher, and a moving public speaker. *The Mountaintop* looks past the public figure that King presented and remembers him as a real person. King calls his wife and children after an exhausting day, as well as relaxes with a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

QUESTIONS:

What responsibilities come with being a leader? How does being the leader of a movement affect a person's behavior?

In *The Mountaintop*, King says "everybody should break a rule now and then". Is that true? Is it accepted that our leaders break rules? Are leaders held to a higher standard than others?

Did your view of Martin Luther King, Jr., change after seeing *The Mountaintop*? If so, how?

"Well, sometimes you done cleared the hurdles and sometimes...you ain't. You done brought us far. But you a man. You just a man, baby. You're not God, though some folk'll say you got mighty close."

-Camae, *The Mountaintop*

NON-VIOLENCE:

Dr. King is perhaps best known for his steadfast belief in non-violence as the path to Civil Rights. Unlike some of King's counterparts such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, who believed violence was sometimes necessary to promote social change, King enforced non-violence in the marches and protests associated with him. Some followers believed King should use more aggressive tactics when fighting for equality, but King firmly believed that non-violence was the key to achieving progress in the fight for Civil Rights and equality. In *The Mountaintop*, playwright Katori Hall pits King's non-violent beliefs against the beliefs of a young maid, who considers herself an "honorary Black Panther".

Camae: **"Walkin' will only get you so far, Preacher Kang."**

King: **"We're not just walking; we're marching."**

-*The Mountaintop*

QUESTIONS:

How did King's non-violent approach to the Civil Rights movement help strengthen and validate the movement in America?

How can non-violence affect social change?

PERSEVERANCE:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., faced many obstacles as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. In *The Mountaintop*, we are introduced to a worn-down, tired King. His voice is hoarse from all his public speaking. He is scared for his family, for his movement, and for himself after receiving numerous death threats, but his faith in his actions is so strong that he keeps pushing forward. King knows that the only way to reach the "Promised Land" is to persevere despite the obstacles in his way.

QUESTIONS:

Despite being afraid, Dr. King kept pushing forward. How can fear motivate a person into positive action?

What other personal characteristics helped King succeed during his fight for equality? When do we see those characteristics personified in *The Mountaintop*?

When times become hard, how do we as a community persevere? As individuals?

"My house has been bombed!... My arrn twisted behind my back. My face shoved into a ground of gravel. I have been kicked at. Spit at. Pummeled. Abused. Looked at with the deepest scorn...After all that? Tell me I ain't jumped over every hurdle of this race!"

-King, *The Mountaintop*

PASSING THE BATON:

King is afraid that the Civil Rights Movement will end without him. *The Mountaintop* asks the audience to look at how far we have come since Dr. King's death, and challenges the audience to continue to work towards his dream of equality. Mentioning others that have picked up the baton and carried the movement forward, *The Mountaintop* looks to the future, and asks the audience to think about how far the movement has come.

QUESTIONS:

Have we reached the Promised Land? In what areas have we succeeded? In what areas are we still improving? In Milwaukee? In America?

Where is social injustice still prevalent in our society?
What can we do to "pick up the baton" in our daily lives?

"But you gone have to pass off that baton, little man. You in a relay race, albeit the fastest runner we done ever seen't. But you 'bout to burn out, super star. You gone need to pass off that baton..."

-Camae, *The Mountaintop*

CREATING THE REP PRODUCTION

The Mountaintop takes place in Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel, the room in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spent his final night. Today, the Lorraine Motel is the National Civil Rights Museum and visitors can look into the room, left as it was on King's final night.

Director May Adrales and Set Designer Lee Savage traveled to Memphis to visit the Lorraine Motel before starting rehearsals for *The Mountaintop* in Milwaukee. The set replicates many aspects of the hotel room. For the purposes of the production, some details have changed but the shape and color of the room, as well as the objects in it, are historically accurate to the moment in time the play depicts.

The Mountaintop production team and the shops at Milwaukee Rep used historical photos and information from the National Civil Rights Museum to research the exact details of the hotel room. Look for the details on the set. Below are two examples of the research and work that went into creating historically accurate props for *The Mountaintop*.



J. Bernard Calloway & Nikiya Mathis

THE BRIEFCASE

In Memphis on April 4th, 1968, photographer Henry Groskinsky took photos of King's hotel room right after the assassination. The prop shop used Groskinsky's photo of Dr. King's briefcase to create the briefcase used in The Rep's *The Mountaintop*. The prop shop found a similar briefcase, and dyed it to match the color of the original. The briefcase in the play includes many of these same objects found in the photo, including the book *Strength to Love*, a collection of Dr. King's sermons. All of King's writings on the set – sermons, letters, etc., in the briefcase and on the tables are in King's handwriting, created from images of original documents.

THE CHAIR

Based on photos of the original chair in Room 306, the prop shop custom built a chair with structure and fabric similar to the original. For the fabric on the chair cushions, the prop shop found fabrics closely matching the stripes and then sewed the fabrics together to create the stripes on the chair.



Dr. King's briefcase. Photo: Henry Groskinsky, Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images



Nikiya Mathis

INTERVIEW WITH MAY ADRALES, DIRECTOR



May Adrales

Milwaukee Rep Education Coordinator Leda Hoffmann sat down with May Adrales, director of The Mountaintop, to talk about the play, Martin Luther King, and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

Leda Hoffmann: This is your second show at The Rep, having directed *Yellowman* last season, also in the Stiemke Studio. What

has it been like working in this space a second time, now on *The Mountaintop*?

May Adrales: I have a long history with both plays. *Yellowman* was the first play I assisted. I have been friends with Katori Hall for a while and saw the first workshop of *The Mountaintop* at the Lark Play Development Center. I have seen these two projects grow and my perspective on them changed as I got older.

In terms of the space, I love working in the Stiemke black box. In both instances we were able to change the seats, although *The Mountaintop* is a much more dynamic seating change. That, to me, is the best kind of theater, when you have the least amount of distance between the last row of the house and the actors. In both of these plays, you want to be as close to the actors and their experience as possible. It has been a really great treat to be able to work in that space and to imagine it in a way that can be a very intimate experience.

Leda: How do you feel that these two plays relate to each other?

May: *Yellowman* is solely about a specific ethnic group – Black Americans and internal racism within that community. At the same time, *The Mountaintop* deals with the late 1960s Civil Rights Movement that was splintering. King was in a really troublesome spot as a Civil Rights leader in his last year and a half or so. There were lots of different factions going on and he found himself in moments of real failure of how to create change in urban cities and in the North.

I was reading in his biography by David Garrow about how difficult it was for King to use his

non-violent philosophies and methods in places like Chicago and in Watts. When he spoke after the Watts Riots, people booed him because they felt he did not know what he was talking about. King dealt with different problems in the North than in the South. That idea of splintering of movements, internal racism within a group that has already been discriminated against, those are things that the two plays have in common.

Leda: You have worked with Katori Hall before. How does knowing her and conversations with her affect the way that you approach this piece?

May: With this piece I have a more distant relationship. I know Katori as a friend, so of course, if there is anything that I want to ask I can always contact her. We had a much more intimate working experience working on *WHADDABLOODCLOT!!!* because that was a premiere and whenever you are working on a premiere the playwright/director relationship becomes a marriage of sorts, looking at every single line and looking at the rhythms. I had her read some lines aloud to me to see how she heard it.

What was great about getting to know her and then coming to this project is understanding how specific she is with her writing. No matter how mundane or ordinary it may sound or read on the page, she has a real rhythm in her head. She would often say, “if I wanted a beat there, I would have written it. If I wanted a pause there, I would have written a pause.” That is one thing that has been fun working on this piece, having worked with her.

She is a real poet and the language that she uses is very rich and colorful and teeming with life. In *The Mountaintop*, the characters are great orators and chewing on that language is really exciting.

Leda: This play explores both King as an icon and as a man. In rehearsals and with J. Bernard Calloway (the actor playing King), how did you go about exploring this character?

May: One of the things I asked him in auditions is “how do you feel about playing Martin Luther King?” It is very difficult to play a historical figure, much less an icon, martyr, and world leader. Inevitably, he is going to be different. It was important to me to be close to the right age of King because I feel this play deals a lot with mortality and dying before your time.

We have been looking at documentaries, speeches, books, and his writings as a way to build the given

circumstances of what King was at that time. What would his point of view on everything they bring up in the play have been? Some of that has to be conjecture because we will never know, but we had to find out how he feels about women, how he feels about the Black Panther movement, and Malcolm X, and how he feels about what a leader is. Those are all things that we had to deduce from the text and supplement with the readings and videos we watched.

Leda: You went down to Memphis before rehearsals started with Lee Savage, the set designer for *The Mountaintop*. What was that like?

May: It really informed the entire design of the set. At the National Civil Rights Museum, you go through the entire Civil Rights Movement and it ends at a hallway looking in through these glass windows at Room 306. That is the perspective from which the audience looks at the play. The audience is basically in that hallway looking into Room 306. When I was describing the space to the cast on the first day, I said it is like one audience bank is in Room 307 and one audience bank is in Room 305.

There is nothing like going to the real place and seeing the balcony where King was shot, seeing his affects in the room, and also seeing that it is unfair that he died there. In *The Mountaintop*, King talks about the fact that it is a moldy hotel room. It is going to be his tomb. It is ironic – he was a great Civil Rights leader, he had a huge mission planned, the Poor People’s Campaign, this march on Washington, and then he is in a moldy hotel room working on a small sanitation workers strike and that is how he meets his end. There is something powerful about seeing that and seeing the humble nature of where he died.

Leda: This play looks to the future and talks about the Civil Rights Movement and its legacy. How does it leave us?

May: I often wonder what Martin Luther King would do if he could look at today. I think he would be amazed – you know Jesse Jackson said, “This is the dream” as he pointed at the soon-to-be President Obama after the election. That alone brings tears to my eyes. Especially for King, he felt like working through the government, working through the system, getting more Black elected officials, was crucial in getting to advance his people. Alabama, for instance, has more Black elected officials than any other state. I think he

would be thrilled with that. It is such progress.

I think that he would be so saddened about the voter disenfranchisement that is happening in swing states – Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Wisconsin included. It is a subtle poll tax, closing places at 4:15 when people do not have cars and cannot get off work early to go and vote. People have to get voter IDs when they have been voting for years. That is a travesty. We fought really hard for our democracy. The only way democracy can work is if you are an active citizen and can vote.

We do not have as much blatant racism now but we are up against a classism that we have not faced since before the Great Depression. That is terrifying because economic disparity is just the beginning of another segment of our population that is not getting basic needs. There is definitely much further to go. The text is asking you to look, as an audience member, at where we left off, where King left off, and what he wanted to do and where we are and what we still need to do.

Leda: Recently, you became a Rep Associate Artist and you are in conversations about the dialogue Milwaukee Rep is having with its community. What sort of things do you hope *The Mountaintop* brings to this conversation as we move forward?

May: I hope that it helps bring in a more diverse audience. This play can be for a lot of people. Age diversity is really important. I think this in the kind of piece that you can go to churches and community groups and get them involved and coming to see it. I was excited, with *Yellowman*, towards the end, that more people were coming because of outreach into the community.

As well, bringing works of new playwrights to Milwaukee Rep is important – this is not *The Mountaintop*’s premiere but it is fresh from Broadway. I know that is part of [Artistic Director] Mark Clements’ vision.

Being an Associate Artist, my relationship to The Rep has changed because I am more invested in every aspect of it and in making sure that I build relationships with the people who work at the theater as well as getting to know the community more. I hope that continues. I am really excited to be back and it is such a special feeling to come back to a place where you had previously never been before and find comfort and the home of it. ●

VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.



Milwaukee Repertory Theater. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The entrance to the Stiemke Studio is located by the large rotunda staircase.

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- Educate over 20,000 students at 200+ schools in the greater Milwaukee area with Rep Immersion Day experiences, student matinees, workshops, tours and by making connections with their school curriculum through classroom teaching programs such as Reading Residencies and Scriptworks
- Maintain our commitment to audiences with special needs through our Access Services that include American Sign Language interpreted productions, captioned theater, infrared listening systems and script synopses to ensure that theater at The Rep is accessible to all
- Educate the next generation of theater professionals with our Artistic Intern Program which gives newly degreed artists a chance to hone their skills at The Rep as they begin to pursue their theatrical careers

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