THE MOUNTAINTOP

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ABOUT THE MOUNTAINTOP PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts, and to encourage essential questions that lead to an enduring understanding of the play’s meaning and relevance.

Inside you will find information about the plot and characters within the play, as well as articles that contextualize the play and its production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions and to analyze and relate key ideas to their personal experiences and the world around them. These can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way to best fit the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our preshow workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

The Mountaintop student matinees and this play guide address specific EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

• Students will identify or describe a variety of roles needed to produce a dramatic performance.

• Students will analyze the use of repetition in creating humor.

• Students will explain how a variety of perspectives creates greater insight into a field or endeavor.

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Steven Rahe, Director of Education, at 502-584-1265 ext. 3045.
SYNOPSIS

*The Mountaintop* takes place on the evening of April 3rd, 1968 in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s motel room in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King is a prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement and a proponent of non-violent civil disobedience. He marches, gives speeches and has been arrested several times in support of Civil Rights. Among supporters he is a beloved hero, among opponents he is a dangerous threat to the status quo.

In *The Mountaintop*, an exhausted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. returns from a prophetic speech during the sanitation workers’ strike and is visited by a mysterious maid, Camae, with a much greater mission than delivering his coffee. With vivid theatrical imagination and powerful emotion, playwright Katori Hall beautifully fictionalizes the final hours of Dr. King’s life in this Olivier Award-winning drama about leadership, legacy and mortality.

SETTING


CAST OF CHARACTERS

**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a prominent Civil Rights activist.

**CAMAE**

Camae is a young African-American woman who works at the Lorraine Motel.
“JUST A MAN”: KATORI HALL’S DEEPLY HUMAN DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. IN THE MOUNTAINTOP

“I’m just a man…I’m a sinner, not a saint,” confesses Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in *The Mountaintop*, Katori Hall’s reimagining of the famed Civil Rights Movement leader’s last night in this world. In *The Mountaintop*, we visit the Memphis motel where King was staying when he was assassinated in April, 1968. But, as the character’s statement above indicates, this is no docudrama or reverential tribute to the Reverend’s achievements. Rather, Hall suggests that behind closed doors, Martin Luther King was more ordinary than we might expect. Yes, he had a heroic drive to crusade for justice, and an extraordinary ability to inspire millions with his speeches—but Hall imagines that underneath the brave words, he must have harbored flaws and fears we can all relate to.

*The Mountaintop*’s depiction of Dr. King is a blend of fact and authorial invention. As Hall explained in a recent interview with NPR, “This play is highly fictionalized, almost anti-historical, even though it starts on April 3, 1968.” King was indeed lodging in Room 306 at the Lorraine Motel that evening, having flown to Tennessee to support black sanitation workers on strike. What transpires in Room 306 in Hall’s script, however, is her fantasy about what his state of mind might have been. The story begins when King returns to the room, having just delivered his prophetic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” address at Mason Temple. He’s tired, stressed, and craving a cigarette. Welcome distraction arrives in the form of Camae, a young maid who brings him coffee and a newspaper. With no small amount of flirting, he convinces her to keep him company for awhile. Initially she’s intimidated by his celebrity, but as the night wears on, she proves more than a match for the venerable “Preacher Kang.” She questions the efficacy of his emphasis on non-violent methods of protest. She calls him out for having smelly feet. And when he jumps at the sounds of the storm raging outside, or clutches at his overburdened heart in a moment of panic, she’s a source of solace.
A Dr. King who smokes and drinks whiskey? A Dr. King who’s faced bomb threats and bullets and police brutality, but is afraid of thunder? It might seem hard to believe—shocking, even. But in pulling him off his pedestal, Katori Hall is after something much deeper. She describes her portrayal as “a very human approach to Dr. King.” According to Hall, it’s easy to look at a figure like Martin Luther King, Jr. and forget that, like us, he was once flesh and blood. Our history books have elevated him to near-sainthood, making his myriad accomplishments seem superhuman. Seeing King light up a cigarette or notice an attractive woman or reach out for reassurance brings him back down to earth. He becomes someone with whom we can empathize, because he’s fallible and vulnerable. And all that he’s achieved becomes even more impressive, because we realize it was the work of a man, not a myth.

Exploring King’s humanity is also a project of personal significance for Hall. An African-American woman from Memphis, she grew up literally surrounded by the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement—and aware that, for all the Movement’s successes, as a society we still have farther to go in the march toward true equality. For example, despite the substantial progress King made with desegregation in the legal system, Hall’s was the only black family in their neighborhood. “I had to contend with people hating me for no reason at all… just due to our unfortunate history as Americans,” she has said. “I just had to figure out, where does this come from? What are we fighting for?” In The Mountaintop, we watch King ask himself the same questions and admit to Camae that he feels like a failure. Hall’s digging into King’s doubts illustrates a difficult answer: meaningful change usually can’t be achieved quickly or without struggle, and there’s always more to be done. In his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, King envisioned a better future almost within reach—but in Hall’s play, no matter how hard he fights the fact of his imminent death, he won’t live to see his dream become reality. Now, Hall implies, it’s our turn to fight for the better future that King foresaw.

It’s no wonder that The Mountaintop has resonated with audiences both in America and abroad. Upon its 2009 London premiere, it won the prestigious Olivier Award for Best New Play. In 2011 it was produced on Broadway, starring Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett, and has spread to countless other stages across the country. With heart, humor, and theatrical spectacle, Katori Hall’s luminous play reminds us that if King could accomplish so much despite his many foibles, than maybe in our own small ways, we can too. As Hall puts it: “Showing the humanity in our heroes allows us to see the hero in ourselves.”

—Hannah Rae Montgomery

“A beautiful and startling piece…keeps you marveling to the end.”
—The Independent

“Katori Hall’s The Mountaintop crackles with theatricality and a humanity more moving than sainthood.”
—Newsday

“The Mountaintop by Katori Hall exceeds all expectations: theatrically, emotionally and politically… Rather than polemical agitprop or a reverential portrait, Hall has created a feisty, human, interesting character study, made all the more intriguing by our knowing what is about to happen.”
—The Philadelphia Inquirer
CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN: 
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.’S FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech contains the famous final words of a renowned leader cut down at the pinnacle of his career. Below, a brief timeline documents some key events in his uphill battle for racial and socioeconomic justice.

January 15, 1929
Martin Luther King, Jr. is born Michael King in Atlanta, Ga., to a pastor of the same name.

1934
Reverend King, Sr. changes his name to “Martin Luther,” in honor of the German religious reformer. King, Jr. follows suit.

1948
King graduates from Morehouse College and enrolls in Crozer Theological Seminary, where he earns his Bachelor of Divinity in 1951.

1954
King becomes pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala.

June 5, 1955
King receives his Ph.D. from Boston University.

December, 1955
After Rosa Parks’ arrest for refusing to give her bus seat to a white man in Alabama, King organizes the Montgomery Bus Boycott to protest segregation on the city’s transportation lines. The Boycott lasts for 382 days, and cements King’s growing reputation as a crusader for Civil Rights.

1956
On June 4, a federal district court rules that segregation on buses in Alabama is unconstitutional. The case makes it all the way to the Supreme Court, which, on November 13, upholds the district court’s decision.

1957
Along with a group of fellow civil rights activists, King founds the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which unites Civil Rights organizations with African-American churches in a non-violent push for reform.

April, 1963
The SCLC campaigns against segregation of public spaces in Birmingham, Ala., by staging peaceful marches and sit-ins. Police respond with such brutality that the footage makes national news. Following an arrest, King composes his famous “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” in which he refutes the critique that Civil Rights activists should pursue change gradually through the legal system. The situation, he insists, calls for direct action.

August 28, 1963
King and the SCLC help orchestrate the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a peaceful demonstration demanding that the government end segregation in schools and discrimination by employers, and increase the minimum wage for African-Americans. More than a quarter of a million people attend; at the time, it is the largest gathering of protesters in D.C. history. King delivers his seminal “I Have a Dream” speech.

July 2, 1964
Thanks to King’s efforts, President Lyndon Johnson enacts the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. It also forbids segregation in schools, businesses, and public places.

October 14, 1964
King is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech is known not only as the last address King would ever give, but also because in it, he seems to predict his imminent death. Despite private doubts and fears, however, King declares the prospect of death doesn’t bother him; he’s living for a vision of the entire nation’s future, not just his own. And he has faith that one day, America will see that vision realized.

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it 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. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speech at Mason Temple, April 3, 1968.

“Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort.”


“By his own accounts, [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] was a man frequently racked with doubt, a man not without flaws, a man who, like Moses before him, more than once questioned why he had been chosen for so arduous a task—the task of leading a people to freedom, the task of healing the festering wounds of a nation’s original sin. And yet lead a nation he did…Like Moses before him, he would never live to see the Promised Land. But from the mountaintop, he pointed the way for us.”

—Barack Obama, address at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Groundbreaking Ceremony, November 13, 2006.
BRIDGework
Building Connections Between Stage and Classroom

The following exercises combine creative drama, theatre concepts and core content to connect the theatre experience with drama activities in your classroom. By exploring drama as a mode of learning, students strengthen skills for creative problem solving, imagination and critical thinking.

At Your Desk

1. Dr. King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech has been described as prophetic, or accurately predicting the future. Read his speech and identify what he might have anticipated for his own life and for the Civil Rights Movement. Share with a partner or the class what you think he expected and what parts of the text support your opinion.

2. A supporter of non-violent civil disobedience, Dr. King was arrested several times for protesting unfair and unequal treatment of African-Americans. Is there a political, humanitarian or environmental cause that you believe in so strongly that you would be arrested if you thought it would make a difference? If so, what is your cause and why do you believe it is important? If not, how did you come to that decision?

Away From Your Desk

1. “Exploding Atom” activity: Have students stand in a circle. Instruct the students to walk closer to the center of the circle depending on how strongly they agree/disagree with the statement you offer i.e., if they strongly agree they walk to the center, if they have mixed feelings they might walk a few steps in, if they strongly disagree they might take a few steps out of the circle. Start with more low risk statements and then move to more potentially controversial statements. After students move to their spots, give some time for discussion about why people moved where they did.

   Potential statements:
   - I like ice cream.
   - I like eating the school cafeteria lunch.
   - I like riding the bus.
   - I have a strong sense of right and wrong.
   - I think it’s important to talk to people about what I value and care about most in life.
   - I think it’s important to talk to people who disagree with my values.

2. Public vs. Private: In The Mountaintop we see a fictional moment from Dr. King’s private life. In this activity students will explore how people present themselves differently in public and private.

   Have students stand in a circle. Ask students to respond physically to each of the following prompts by creating a silent, still statue with their whole body.

   Create a statue that embodies . . . .

   - how you feel today.
   - how you wish for people to see you in life.
   - how you feel at home when you’re relaxed and by yourself.
   - how you see the principal at our school.
   - how you imagine the principal at home.
   - how you see a favorite celebrity on the red carpet.
   - how you imagine that same celebrity at home with their family.

   Ask students how the statues changed over the course of the exercise. What did they notice? Were there similarities between the various public personas? The private ones? What do they think would happen if you asked the statues to speak? How do the students speak differently in public/at school vs. at home?
COMMUNICATION PORTFOLIO

**Narrative: CCRA.W.3**

In *The Mountaintop*, we experience playwright Katori Hall’s imagining of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. might have been like in his private life. Some aspects of his personality that are depicted might be unexpected or controversial. Have you ever been surprised by seeing someone that you usually see in their official or public capacity in their private life—i.e., running into your principal at the grocery store, having dinner with your pastor, or seeing your doctor at a sporting event? Describe what it was like to see this person in a different setting. How was their behavior different? Did you learn anything about them that you hadn’t expected or assumed about them? Did seeing them in this new situation affect how you interact with them in their normal role in your life?

**Argumentative: CCRA.W.1**

In 1975, federal courts ordered Louisville schools to integrate by busing students to schools in different parts of the city. This was the beginning of the student assignment plan, a version of which is still in effect to keep Louisville schools racially, economically and culturally integrated. The student assignment plan and busing have been controversial since their inception, initially because of racial tension, and currently because of logistical issues such as long bus rides for students. Do you think the student assignment plan and busing have been effective? Do the benefits outweigh the difficulties? What do you think would happen if Louisville schools stopped busing?

**Informative: CCRA.W.2**

Write a review of the performance of *The Mountaintop* that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. What parts of the play (the actors’ performances, the set, props, costumes, lighting and sound design, etc.) were most effective? Which parts were least effective? Back up your claims with evidence and details from your experience of watching the performance.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Pre-Show Questions**

1. *The Mountaintop* is a fictional play about an important historical figure. Knowing that the audience will already have some knowledge about the historical Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., what are some special concerns that the playwright, director, actors and theatre needed to consider when writing, directing, performing in or producing this play?

2. As audience members in 2013, we know that Dr. King’s assassination happened the day after the play is set. How do you think this foreknowledge will affect the way you watch the production?

**Post-Show Questions**

1. How did Camae’s revelation of her true nature affect your understanding of the play? If something like that happened to you, how do you think you would handle it? What would you think? What would you say?

2. Since he’s an important historical figure there is a lot of information about Dr. King’s public life. *The Mountaintop* presents a very human representation of what he might have been like in private. Does this fictional interpretation of Dr. King make you think or feel differently about the historical Dr. King? Why or why not?
Attention: Young Playwrights!

Actors Theatre of Louisville is seeking submissions for our New Voices Ten-Minute Play Contest.

Students grades 6-12 living in the Commonwealth of Kentucky or the (812) area code of Southern Indiana are invited to submit their very best ten-minute play to New Voices, Actors Theatre of Louisville’s annual ten-minute play contest for young playwrights!

Guidelines, tips, examples and submission details are outlined at Actorstheatre.org/NewVoices. You may also email your questions to NewVoices@Actorstheatre.org.

Deadline for submissions:
October 31, 2013, Halloween

Missed the deadline? Send us your play anyway! We’ll automatically enter it into next year’s contest.

New Voices Young Playwrights Festival
Winning plays will be fully produced at Actors Theatre of Louisville in April 2014 and will be published in our New Voices Anthology!