The Mountaintop Study Guide

Susan Jacobson & Norm Oliver Present
THE MOUNTAINTOP
Written By Katori Hall
Directed by Fran Smith

April 10–May 3
Running in Repertory with Gruesome Playground Injuries
Founders Theater / 123 East Water Street / 434.977.4177 / livearts.org
Meet the Playwright: Katori Hall

Katori Hall, a playwright, journalist, and actress, graduated from Columbia University in 2003 as an African-American Studies and Creative Writing double-major. She attended the American Repertory Theater’s Institute for Advanced Theater Training and graduated from the Juilliard School’s Lila Acheson Wallace playwriting program (co-taught in part by Christopher Durang, the playwright of *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*). As a journalist, Hall has contributed to the *New York Times, The Boston Globe,* the UK’s *The Guardian,* and *Newsweek.* She also directed a film adaptation of her play *Hurt Village* which received a world premiere at Signature Theatre Company in 2012. This was her directing debut for film.

Her other works include *Hoodoo Love,* produced Off-Broadway, *Remembrance, Saturday Night/Sunday Morning, WHADDABLOODCLOT!!!!,* and *Pussy Valley.* *Remembrance* was part of the Women’s Project presents Girls Just Wanna Have Fund$: six new works about women and wealth. *Hoodoo Love* is a Southern love tale about a young woman, Toulou, who escapes from Mississippi to pursue her dream of singing the blues. *Hurt Village* is a drama about life and change in a Memphis housing project. It was performed at the Off-Broadway Signature Theatre Company, starred Tony-winner Tonya Pinkins, and won the 2011 Susan Smith Blackburn Award. This spring (April 24 – June 7, 2015) a world-premiere of Hall’s comedy-drama *The Blood Quilt* will take place at the Arena Stage Kreeger Theater in Washington, D.C. It will be directed by Kamilah Forbes, who assistant directed *The Mountaintop* on Broadway.
The Mountaintop — About the Show

The Mountaintop premiered in 2009 where it met critical acclaim in London and transferred to the Trafalgar Studios in the West End after a selling out at Theatre503. British actors David Harewood and Lorraine Burroughs performed, while James Dacre directed. The production won the Olivier Best New Play Award and received a nomination for Most Promising Playwright in the Evening Standard Awards.

The Broadway premiere took place at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater on October 13 with Samuel L. Jackson playing Dr. King for his Broadway debut and Angela Bassett as his co-star. Critics have praised Hall’s writing, with dialogue that is funny, believable, and attuned to the characters.

The play takes place on April 3, 1968, the night after which Martin Luther King, Jr. has just delivered the legendary “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. As the storm rages and he spends time at his motel, he has conversations with a maid named Camae and begins reflecting on his past and his legacy.
A Sense of History

In 1896 the Supreme Decision on Plessy vs. Ferguson affirmed the rights of the states to enact segregation laws, in what back then was called “separate but equal.” This allowed for racial discrimination to flourish, becoming institutionalized and state-sanctioned throughout the south. In many areas, African Americans could not share a taxi with whites or enter buildings through the same entrance. They drank from separate water fountains, had separate restrooms, attended separate schools, and even were buried in separate cemeteries. They were excluded from restaurants and public libraries and barred from many parks. Southern blacks resisting segregation typically lived in fear of their employers, who threatened to fire them. Voting rights also extended this fear, where some black sharecroppers were evicted in Tennessee by white farmers because they tried to vote. The issue of racism progressed rapidly in the South, to a point where a reign of terror began with the Ku Klux Klan.

In combatting the segregation and racial issues African Americans faced, many key players helped in the journey for equal civil rights. Black churches were important in providing members opportunities to exercise leadership denied to them by society. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prominent clergyman who was a leader of protests and demonstrations, leading him to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Students were important for boycotts, freedom rides, and social movements as well. Eventually federal involvement came into play in impacting the civil rights movement. President Kennedy supported desegregation in schools and public facilities. Attorney General Robert Kennedy brought lawsuits in four states to secure black Americans’ right to vote. President Lyndon Johnson was personally committed and signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
Lorraine Motel

The motel was purchased by Walter Bailey in 1945. He operated the motel as an upscale accommodation that catered to black clientele. In 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis to support workers on strike against low pay and unfair working conditions. He famously met with many people and stayed in room 306.

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” was the last speech delivered by King, who spoke at the Mason Temple the day before he was assassinated. This speech addressed the Memphis Sanitation Strike, where King calls for unity, economic actions, boycotts, and nonviolent protest.

In his speech, King stated: “The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers.” He wanted protestors to avoid engaging in violence for it would distract the public from the issue of injustice, believing that peaceful demonstrations were the only way to guarantee that their push for equal rights would be heard.

Towards the end of his speech, King said that he was not afraid to die. He said to the public:

_I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up 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. 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._
The Assassination

Some people say that King seemed to have foreshadowed his demise, or general death along the journey, in his last speech about seeing the Promised Land and saying “I may not get there with you.” After 6 p.m. the following day, King was standing with his associates on the second-floor balcony of Lorraine Motel where he was struck by a bullet. He was rushed to the hospital but was dead in an hour. The distress from his death sparked rioting in more than 100 cities across the nation. President Lyndon B. Johnson urged Congress to speedily pass the civil rights legislation, which was set for debate in the House of Representatives. On April 11, a week after King was assassinated, Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

While many people mourned King’s passing, the killing sparked a wider rift between black and white Americans – the assassination was seen as a rejection of nonviolent resistance to pursue equality. His murder radicalized many moderate African-American activists, pushing the growth of the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s.

A 2008 documentary short called *The Witness: From the Balcony of Room 306* was created to honor the 40th annual remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The film received a nomination for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. This documentary differs from others on Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement because it comes from the perspective of one of King’s friends, and who is one of the last surviving witnesses to the event – Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles.
Lorraine Motel → National Civil Rights Museum

The Lorraine Motel became part of the National Civil Rights Museum, where buildings surrounding the actual motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Two other buildings, also connected with the assassination, are part of the museum complex which opened in 1991. After renovations, the museum re-opened in 2014 to increase the interactive exhibits with short movies and other media to enhance the experience. The Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation, based in Memphis, Tennessee, owns and operates the museum while the Lorraine Motel is owned and leased by the Tennessee State Museum to the Foundation.

Exhibits at the museum include the unchanged Room 306, the replica sanitation truck from when Dr. King came to Memphis to support the workers’ strike), and the replica of the bus that Rosa Parks sat in in Alabama. Since the 2014 renovations, a new addition includes a replica of the U.S. Supreme Court room used to discuss the case Brown v. Board of Education – the case that ruled segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. Scholars have suggested that the renovations of the museum make it provides some of the best and most recent scholarship regarding civil rights. The museum presentations also stress how the work for civil rights and equality is part of our present as well as the past.
Rhetoric in King’s Speeches

One of the significant parts of King’s speeches is his use of rhetoric. Rhetoric is the “art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing” that is designed to have an impressive effect on the audience. Three aspects of rhetoric are logos, ethos, and pathos. Logos is the side of logic, reason, and proof. Utilizing examples, referring to events, and the logical structure of speech added to the effectiveness of King’s speeches on his audience. Ethos is the credibility and trust, using techniques of personal branding and confidence in delivery, which King effectively accomplished using his background as a minister. Pathos deals with emotions and values. Main techniques include stories, vivid language, and inspirational quotes that garner reactions from the audience. Below is a section of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. As you read it, consider what aspects of rhetoric were used by King. Think about why King was an effective leader in the Civil Rights movement and how he inspired his audience. What literary devices (images, metaphors, anaphora, etc.) does King use to increase the effect of the rhetoric?

“I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. And some of you have come from areas where your quest -- quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."
I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

*My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.*

*Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,*

*From every mountainside, let freedom ring!*

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that:
Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.
From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

*Free at last! Free at last!

*Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*”