The Guide

A theatergoer’s resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

The Mountaintop
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This isn’t the ‘I Have a Dream’ King. This is a more radical King. This is King, the man; not the myth. I want people to see that this extraordinary man – who is actually quite ordinary – achieved something so great that he actually created a fundamental shift in how we, as a people, interact with each other. That’s a beautiful thing. And I want people in the audience to be like, ‘If this man—who is so much a human being—can achieve such great things, then I, as this complicated human being, can create great things too.’

—Katori Hall, playwright

King’s Knock at Midnight
A forward to the play by Michael Eric Dyson

It must be stated as clearly and insistently as possible: Katori Hall’s The Mountaintop is artistic dynamite. It explodes the myths that bury Martin Luther King, Jr.’s humanity and shatters his image as a stoic martyr. The Mountaintop invites us to see King as a flesh-and-blood genius with flaws who worked fiendishly to end black oppression while fi ghting for liberty and justice for all. These pages teem with wisdom about the black, and therefore, the human condition, but it isn’t served up in musty language or reverent grammar. The dialogue pops off the pages in vernacular wit and folk philosophy; its lines are laced with humor, irony, paradox, signifying and magic. It’s not the sort of magic that rescues us from the grip of grief; rather it’s the kind of magic that conquers tragedy by facing it head on. The Mountaintop portrays a man who is much more interesting and useful when his blemishes and virtues are shown together.

One might ask why we would turn to the dramatic arts when the best scholarship on King has already warned against smothering him in fable. Sometimes poetry tells more truth about history than either science or religion. Poetry is Hall’s greatest weapon in her loving war against the lazy deification of Martin Luther King, Jr. Her words snap and jolt, and at times they even pounce in delicious ridicule of the hollow, deadening workshop of King, insisting instead that we take him at his word. Not the immortal words he uttered in public that have won the favor of history, but the words we never got to hear him say, the words that fear pried from his lips, or the words that tumbled from a tongue that depression turned into a staircase of spiraling doubt near the end of his life. That’s a side of King that only his closest compatriots glimpsed. And most of them only saw snapshots of King’s inner turmoil as the movement for justice lurched in seizures of resistance, sputtering and then taking off again as heroic freedom fighters battled evil in some far-flung corner of the black universe. Memphis in March and April of 1968 was such a moment. King had been summoned for the umpteenth time to channel—or truth be told, to catch on to—the resurging spirit of a battered movement.

Hall draws a literary circle around the next-to-last day of King’s bitterly shortened life, a life, like the movement he led, riddled by chaos and transition. How could it be otherwise? All roads for the Nobel prize winning evangelist of hope led to death. The government harassed King to death. White supremacists hounded him to death. His followers loved him to death. And King worked himself to death. When the coroner opened his body after a bullet felled the thirty-nine-year-old prodigy of protest, it was his heart that lodged the greatest resistance: it looked to be that of a sixty-year-old man.

This fact makes its way into Hall’s drama, as do other telling details which are skilfully woven into the narrative: King’s vicious bouts of hiccups, which disappeared when he spoke, and which resumed after his oration was done; King’s chain-smoking; his artful and relentless bending of the elbow (and my God, why not, given what he was up against?); his vanity about being the black leader (so tell all those who compare Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton unfavorably to King that, at least on this score, they’re dead wrong); King sending his wife artificial flowers only once—a few days before his demise, another sign of premonition blooming in his brain; King’s fear of flying and, given how much he flew, a fear that underscores his courage; King’s haunting anxiety near the end of his life of being in rooms with windows that might present his potential assassin clear opportunity; and King’s brutal battle with depression.
Hall may not be a historian, but her art is eerily accurate. She conjures fictional scenes that nourish us with an understanding that dry facts alone starve all of us. Hall’s dramatic license also opens the door to hotly contested truths that range far beyond King’s life and death; the gender of God; how class colors social relations in black life; the belief in an afterlife, and the shape it might take; and the inscrutable ways of God, as Hall’s theatrical meditations amount to a grass roots theodicy of sorts.

Hall peers brilliantly into the shadows of King’s last night on earth and lights briefly on the monumental speech he pulled from the core of his soul. King’s words dripped in death, but Hall convinces us that King wasn’t simply addressing his immediate circumstances, but speaking to the specter of imminent death that dogged him most of his life. That’s entirely plausible since he was being pursued relentlessly by crackpots, and crackshots, across the land. King is seen here begging off the bravery he displayed in his last speech where he declared he wasn’t worried about anything or fearing any man. That doesn’t make him a hypocrite, but a man struggling with his morality. Even Jesus begged God to spare him from drinking of the bitter cup of his destiny, a destiny he had previously proclaimed with full readiness to die. But when the moment of death looms near, words of certainty crumble beneath the tangible threat of non-being.

Still, words uttered in higher, clearer moments provide a touchstone of faith to thwart the doubt that inevitably creeps in when the rubber meets the road, when death swagger gives way to death stagger, at least for a while. Besides, only those who know the transcendent heights to which oratory can take you, not only as a hearer but as a giver of the word, can possibly understand how one can literally speak oneself into courage and vision that are less apparent in mundane moments. This is not simply a matter of being whipped into frenzy or driven to flights of fancy by the power of words. Speech gives individuals and societies a sense of who we are, and what we are capable of; words give life, order existence and clarify destiny. “in the beginning was the Word…”

By spotlighting King’s last night, Hall illumines our nights too: the time of reckoning, the time of wrestling, like Jacob in the Hebrew Bible, with powerful, wounding forces below, only to discover we were wrestling with a messenger from above. Hall magically sweeps us into King’s cramped, pinched, smoky, desolate, and dingy temporary living quarters to show us a picture of a human soul struggling with death—his death, the death of a way of life in the South, the death of personal and vocational hopes and aspirations, and the death of theological certainties and pulpit proclamations. The cussing, smoking and gallows humor are spiritual anesthesia to endure mortal peril—the awareness that one’s life is being snuffed out—and from that mixture rises a truth, or perhaps many of them, that costs one’s life to learn.

King was profoundly familiar with late night. One of his most famous sermons is “A Knock at Midnight”. In it, King says, “you can have some strange experiences at midnight.” Hall proves King right and summons a fateful late-night encounter to imagine her way into his heart and mind as he surrenders his life for a greater purpose. It does no disservice to King, and in fact helps the rest of us, that King’s human side gets the long view here. Only a King who has faced his own fears, nursed his own psychic wounds, stirred in private remorse at his own sins, and yes revealed in defiant mischief, can possibly speak to the masses of folk who will never wear the victor’s crown nor taste the sweet adoration of millions. Only a King who has descended to the depths of hell and stared at his own mortality can possibly inspire the rest of us to overcome our flaws and failures and rise to our best futures. The restoration of King to his complicated humanity is way too much to ask of even a work as poignant as The Mountaintop. But it is a sign of its dramatic genius that, after reading it and witnessing its performance, it makes us believe that the task is necessary, and that this play is as good a place as any to start the journey.

Author of April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Death and How It Changed America
http://www.michaelericdyson.com/april41968/
PF: What was the genesis of The Mountaintop?

KH: My mother grew up one block away from the Lorraine Motel. A 15-year-old mother of two, she had steered clear of Mason Temple on April 3, 1968. Her mother, Big Mama, had warned, “They gone bomb dat church. You know dem folks out to kill him.” It would be the greatest regret of my mother’s life. The ominous presence of death was hard to ignore. Palpable, it was. Everyone knew it was coming. They just didn’t know when. The question of when presented itself on April 4th at 6:01 p.m. King was killed by an assassin’s bullet on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

My mother’s regret along with the reasoning as to why she did not go that night has always stuck with me. A native Memphian, I grew up with this history only a stone’s throw away. It is my bloody heritage. The Mountaintop follows Dr. Martin Luther King on the night after he gives this great, prophetic speech.

PF: What are the challenges of re-imagining a moment in the life a real person who is so revered?

KH: I tried very much to imagine him as a human, not a God. This is the uber-American hero. A Christ-like figure to some. But I was always searching for the King, warts and all. As Michael Eric Dyson said in his recent book “April 4, 1968”, “The wish to worship him into perfection is misled; the desire to deify him tragically misplaced. The scars of his humanity are what makes his achievements all the more remarkable.” It’s let us off the hook to deify him. There is greatness in all of us. We all can carry on his dream.

But as a playwright I just had to imagine, “what would a human being do in those given circumstances?” This was a man whose life was constantly under fire, quite literally. His house had been bombed...he had already been stabbed. He knew he was a marked man. He always talked about his pending death, even joked about it sometimes with his advisers. A lot of people are not privy to this, but King was quite depressed those last few months of his life. He had taken up smoking to deal with the mounting stress and responsibilities of leading a movement. He was heavily criticized for leading a garbage strikers march in Memphis that had unfortunately turned violent, a young 16 year old boy named Larry Payne was killed. He was deeply troubled in a way his colleagues had never seen him after that. He came back to Memphis to do it again.
He was in the midst of planning another march on Washington, his Poor People's Campaign and he was there in Memphis for the garbage strike workers because their quest for a living wage paralleled his quest for a living wage for all Americans.

The given circumstances of his life at the time, provided me with rich material to create an entire man...not the I HAVE A DREAM man, but a man dealing with depression, dissension in his organization, and pending death.

PF: You have a background as both an actor and a playwright. Which came first? How did you make the transition?

KH: That’s the old question, “what came first, the chicken of the egg?” I got my degree in acting first, but I probably started playwriting first, in fact, I’ve always written. I’ve been publishing articles in newspapers since I was 14 years old, so I always knew I was a writer. My first foray into journalism cultivated my storytelling and listening skills. Journalists are forever interviewing people, listening to the cadences and rhythms of authentic speech. I always had a good ear for the best quotes and I’m sure that’s helped me create characters who have a way with words.

Five years ago when I took my first acting class at Columbia, I went up to my teacher and asked, “Do you know of any good scenes from plays that occur between two young black women?” She stood there perplexed. 10 seconds went by...then 20...then 30...a whole minute flew by and she couldn’t come up with one answer. “Gee, Katori, I’m so sorry, but I can’t think of one...I mean, there is a scene in Raisin but the two characters are not young...maybe August Wilson? No...most of his characters are male...I’m sorry, Katori. I just can’t think of one.” She walked away. At that moment I said to myself, “Well, I guess I’ll just have to write some then.” I wrote from an intense need to see myself and my experience reflected honestly onstage. It was quite easy to make the transition.

PF: Do you ever act in your own work, or write plays with the intention that you would perform them?

KH: I haven’t acted in my work yet...only in the performance poetry bits I’ve written. I’ve just started thinking about which of my characters I would love to play. I could play the hell out of some my female roles! They are all little slivers of me mixed up with other folks I know. I’ve toyed around with the idea of writing a one woman show, but I like people, too much. I would hate to be up onstage by myself. Plays remind me of the time I would play make-believe with my sister and my friends reimagining the world as children often do. I like that feeling of creating life--new life--with other people.

PF: What’s up next for you?

KH: I will be back in the Bay (Yah!) doing the Bay Area Playwrights Festival this summer. I’m quite excited about that. My first play, Hoodoo Love is being published by DPS. Please check it out. www.dramatists.com. I was recently commissioned by the Women’s Project with the support of the New York Council of the Arts. I am finishing up an adaptation of Antigone set in post-Katrina New Orleans for Fluid Motion Theater. And I am at Juilliard right now in their playwriting program continuing to grow as a writer, so as you can see I’m busy as all get out!

The Triple Evils of poverty, racism and militarism are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle. They are interrelated, all-inclusive, and stand as barriers to our living in the Beloved Community. When we work to remedy one evil, we affect all evils. To work against the Triple Evils, you must develop a nonviolent frame of mind as described in the “Six Principles of Nonviolence” and use the Kingian model for social action outlined in the “Six Steps for Nonviolent Social Change.” Some contemporary examples of the Triple Evils are listed next to each item:

**Poverty** – unemployment, homelessness, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, infant mortality, slums...

“There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. The time has come for an all-out world war against poverty ... The well off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for the least of these.”

**Racism** – prejudice, apartheid, ethnic conflict, anti-Semitism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, ageism, discrimination against disabled groups, stereotypes...

“Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the out-group.”

**Militarism** – war, imperialism, domestic violence, rape, terrorism, human trafficking, media violence, drugs, child abuse, violent crime...

“A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’ This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

Source: “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
SIX PRINCIPLES OF NONVIOLENCE

Fundamental tenets of Dr. King’s philosophy of nonviolence described in his first book, Stride Toward Freedom. The six principles include:

1. **Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.**
   It is a positive force confronting the forces of injustice, and utilizes the righteous indignation and the spiritual, emotional and intellectual capabilities of people as the vital force for change and reconciliation.

2. **The Beloved Community is the framework for the future.**
   The nonviolent concept is an overall effort to achieve a reconciled world by raising the level of relationships among people to a height where justice prevails and persons attain their full human potential.

3. **Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil.**
   The nonviolent approach helps one analyze the fundamental conditions, policies and practices of the conflict rather than reacting to one’s opponents or their personalities.

4. **Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause to achieve the goal.**
   Self-chosen suffering is redemptive and helps the movement grow in a spiritual as well as a humanitarian dimension. The moral authority of voluntary suffering for a goal communicates the concern to one’s own friends and community as well as to the opponent.

5. **Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external physical violence.**
   The nonviolent attitude permeates all aspects of the campaign. It provides mirror type reflection of the reality of the condition to one’s opponent and the community at large. Specific activities must be designed to help maintain a high level of spirit and morale during a nonviolent campaign.

6. **The universe is on the side of justice.**
   Truth is universal and human society and each human being is oriented to the just sense of order of the universe. The fundamental values in all of the world’s great religious include the concept that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. For the nonviolent practitioner, nonviolence introduces a new moral context in which nonviolence is both the means and the end.

SIX STEPS OF NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

A sequential process of nonviolent conflict-resolution and social change based on Dr. King’s teachings. The Six Steps of Nonviolence developed by The King Center include:

1. **Information Gathering** – The way you determine the facts, the options for change, and the timing of pressure for raising the issue is a collective process.

2. **Education** – The process for developing articulate leaders, who are knowledgeable about the issues. It is directed toward the community through all forms of media about the real issues and human consequences of an unjust situation.

3. **Personal Commitment** – Means looking at your internal and external involvement in the nonviolent campaign and preparing yourself for long-term as well as short-term action.

4. **Negotiation** – Is the art of bringing together your views and those of your opponent to arrive at a just conclusion or clarify the unresolved issues, at which point, the conflict is formalized.

5. **Direct Action** – Occurs when negotiations have broken down or failed to produce a just response to the contested issues and conditions.

6. **Reconciliation** – Is the mandatory closing step of a campaign, when the opponents and proponents celebrate the victory and provide joint leadership to implement change.

http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy
The Lorraine Motel

By Vicki Rozell for Theatreworks

The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee is one of the most famous places to stay in the United States, but for the wrong reasons. It is not known for its view or its accommodations, but as the motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

The motel at 450 Mulberry Street on the south edge of downtown Memphis started its life in the mid 1920s as the Windsor Hotel, a sixteen room, one story hotel six blocks east of the Mississippi River. It then became the Marquette Hotel, and was renamed a final time when Walter Bailey and his wife Loree purchased it in 1945. Bailey named it The Lorraine Motel after his wife and the song “Sweet Lorraine,” added a second floor, and made other changes turning it from a hotel into a motor hotel, or motel.

Although it had started life as an “all white” establishment, during segregation it eventually became an upscale place for African Americans looking for a motel in Memphis. It provided both a place to stay and home-cooked meals. It was very popular with musicians since it was easy walking distance from Beale Street, the center of life for many African Americans in Memphis, and very near Stax Records. That proximity drew patrons including Ray Charles, Otis Redding, Ethel Waters, Cab Colloway, Count Basie, Aretha Franklin, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan, and Nat King Cole. In fact, at least two popular songs were written at the Lorraine, “In the Midnight Hour” and “Knock on Wood.”

When King stepped out on the balcony outside room 306 just before 6 pm on April 4, 1968, he talked with friends in the parking lot below. He told Saxophonist Ben Branch, “Ben, I want you to sing ‘Precious Lord’ for me [at the rally] tonight like you never sung it before. Want you to sing it real pretty.” He then turned back toward the room to finish getting ready for dinner. That is when a bullet ended his life.

Ironically, the woman for whom the motel was named also effectively died that night. Loree Bailey suffered a stroke while on the switchboard and died five days later—the day of King’s funeral.

Walter Bailey continued to run the motel, setting aside rooms 306 and 307 in honor of King. However, Bailey declared bankruptcy in 1982, unable to keep the motel open. It was going to be sold at auction but a “Save the Lorraine” group, part of the Martin Luther King Memorial Foundation, bought it at the last minute for $144,000 in December 1982 with the intent to turn it into a museum.

The final tenant, Jacqueline Smith, who had resided there as a housekeeper since 1973, refused to leave and was forcibly evicted. With that, The Lorraine Motel closed for good on March 2, 1988. It was overhauled to become the National Civil Rights Museum, which was dedicated on July 4, 1991 and officially opened to the public on Sept. 28, 1991.

In 1999 the rooming house across the street, from which Dr. King was shot, was bought and refurbished to become part of the museum. The Foundation that runs the museum is also responsible for the safekeeping of the evidence and files concerning the assassination. These artifacts, including the riffl e and deadly bullet, are on display at the museum.

Also on display is room 306, the so-called “King-Abernathy suite” where King and his friend and colleague Ralph David Abernathy stayed on that trip and many others. It has been meticulously restored to the way it was on the night King died, and can be viewed through a plexiglass window. There is a permanent wreath on the balcony at the spot where King was standing when he was shot, and the cars in the parking lot below are replicas of those in the lot on that fateful day.

https://www.theatreworks.org/media/upload/misc/enewsmountaintop_final.pdf
Further Reading/Watching

More about Katori Hall
http://katorihall.com/

More about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
www.thekingcenter.org
http://www.biography.com/people/martin-luther-king-jr-9365086