



**America: Dreams and Nightmares**  
**The Life and Death of Martin Luther King**  
**Paul Stebbings and Phil Smith**  
**Short Synopsis**

**Act 1**

A black teenager is playing among the audience. The black teenager chooses a white female audience member in the front row and cheekily asks her for a date. Two white men in hoods and armed shoot the black teenager dead.

Martin Luther King, Baptist minister, preaches love. His wife, Coretta asks him to engage with the injustice in Alabama. He says he wishes to but fears the hate that comes from the struggle against injustice.

Work song. Black share croppers at work. A Newsman, Jack, addresses TV cameras about tensions between blacks and their white neighbors. He interviews a cotton farmer who claims there are no such tensions. After the interview Jack is approached by activist Rosa Parks, but Jack refuses to interview her.

On her bus home, Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat for a white man and is arrested. MLK witnesses the results and begins to waver.

A phone rings in the home of Martin Luther King (MLK). Organizers of the bus boycott wish to use MLK's church for a meeting. Ralph Abernathy, another local minister, arrives at the house to persuade MLK to lead the boycott.

MLK speaks at his church. Marchers in the streets are beaten. MLK declares that such violence will be met with love. At the end of the speech people rush to touch MLK, as if his body were magical.

Jack reports on the bus boycott. He interviews the Sheriff who tries to portray MLK as a college-educated outsider. Jack interviews MLK who explains his belief in racial equality for all. In the middle of the interview, MLK is arrested.

MLK in jail, at prayer. Sounds of wood banged on metal. Voices shouting for MLK to be lynched. MLK is set free by the Sheriff. His bail has been paid. After he addresses supporters, MLK's home is bombed. MLK dissuades two black rioters from killing the Sheriff. Abernathy arrives to say that the Supreme Court has ruled in their favour; they have won.

Jack describes the rise of MLK. Off screen Jack tells MLK that he admires his integrity. Jack is impressed, but when left alone, suddenly he is kidnapped by the FBI apprehended, and pressurized to spy on MLK. An Agent shows Jack papers that claim MLK has Communists around him.

Birmingham, Alabama. Abernathy is hit with a stone while addressing a crowd. Sonny, an aide, criticizes MLK for eating steak while others risk their lives. He expresses support for a violent response to attacks. MLK quietly reasserts non-violence. Sonny reports that more radical blacks are accusing MLK of avoiding the struggle. Abernathy and Sonny fight and have to be restrained. Jack arrives and confronts MLK with the accusation of communist infiltration, which MLK powerfully rebuts. MLK tells Jack that he is going to allow himself to be arrested.

Birmingham Jail. MLK is kneeling and chained, writing a letter on toilet paper. In a stylized sequence, the letter is spoken as MLK moves from a chained man to a triumphant man.

A white businessman, losing trade, offers to end the racial segregation in the city's shops.

Jack is with an FBI Agent who complains that Jack is giving too much coverage to MLK. When Jack attacks the Agent he is beaten up in turn.

The death of President John F. Kennedy is announced by Jack.

MLK discusses pressure coming from black radicals like Malcolm X. Sonny persuades them all that organizing black voters is the way forward.

Selma County. Work song. A white farmer patrolling. Mrs. Hamer enters, a sharecropper. The Farmer is furious she has been to register to vote. He dismisses her and her family from the plantation.

Stylized scene of Mrs. Hamer's registration to vote.

Jack commentates on the famous 'I have a dream' speech

Act 2

An urban northern landscape: street hustle, drugs, busts, urban poverty and urban energy. Malcolm X appears, insulting whites as an inferior race. He denounces MLK's policy of non-violence. Malcolm X is gunned down in a hail of bullets.

Hotel room. On TV: riots in Detroit. Abernathy despairs. Despite Sonny's criticisms MLK sticks to his beliefs, though hints that he is becoming more radical. Abernathy reports that a "white chick" has arrived and MLK tidies his appearance in readiness for meeting her. Sonny is disgusted. Abernathy is tolerant.

THE FBI plays tapes to Jack of MLK having sex with a woman who is clearly not his wife, but Jack refuses to expose MLK.

MLK's hotel. Jack arrives, but is challenged by Sonny. Jack confesses to spying on MLK and shows Sonny some of the FBI's evidence. Sonny calls for MLK, but it is the woman who emerges, giving Jack her room key. MLK enters yelling obscenities at the woman. Jack is worried about what MLK's behavior might do to the Civil Rights struggle.

A Memphis bar. Jack is seated; he is drunk and letting slip damaging information about MLK. He is approached by a white thug, trying to get information on which room MLK is staying in, Jack yells at the thug who knocks him out. The thug takes a room key from Jack's pockets.

The cast carry I AM A MAN banners, they are beaten down as racist abuse rings out. When MLK tries to pacify the crowd of garbage workers, he is abused and laughed at. In the bar Jack regains consciousness. He tries and fails to ring a warning to the FBI that is an assassination attempt on MLK is imminent.

Memphis hotel. MLK and Abernathy having a pillow fight. MLK turns serious; unable to fathom the appeal of violence. Meanwhile Jack is racing to warn MLK. MLK goes out on to his room's balcony for a cigarette, and is shot dead by an unseen gunman. Sonny and Abernathy point to where they think the shots came from. Abernathy checks that MLK is dead, then removes the cigarette packet from MLK's hand and throws it away. Sonny dips his hands in MLK's blood and rubs it on his body. He sees Jack and allows him to come forward and do the same - they all raise their hands towards the audience - black and white with Martin

Luther King's blood on their hands. As this image is held there comes the recorded voice of MLK speaking shortly before his murder, his theme: We shall overcome.

**END**

#### DIRECTOR'S NOTE

It has been a privilege and an education to research, write and rehearse this play. This is story more than history, it is surely one of the few examples of how we humans might overcome the demons of race hate, intolerance and almost tribal violence that bedevil our age. The main events and personalities of the Civil Rights movement must speak for themselves. Nothing in this play or production is invented except where fiction represents the truth more eloquently than the mere documentary. That must be the purpose of fiction: to allow us not just to know but to understand and indeed feel the profounder truths. So I have chosen to present a synopsis of the research that informs the play.

Paul Stebbings 2014

#### **Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott**



**Rosa Parks rode at the front of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus on the day the Supreme Court's ban on segregation of the city's buses took effect. A year earlier, she had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus.**

On a cold December evening in 1955, Rosa Parks quietly incited a revolution — by just sitting down. She was tired after spending the day at work as a department store seamstress. She stepped onto the bus for the ride home and sat in the fifth row — the first row of the so called: colored section. In Montgomery, Alabama, when a bus became full, the seats nearer the front were given to white passengers.

Montgomery bus driver James Blake ordered Parks and three other African Americans seated nearby to move ("Move y'all, I want those two seats,") to the back of the bus. Three riders complied; Parks did not.

"Are you going to stand up?" the driver demanded. Rosa Parks looked straight at him and said: "No." Flustered, and not quite sure what to do, Blake retorted, "Well, I'm going to have you arrested." And Parks, still sitting next to the window, replied softly, "You may do that."

After Parks refused to move, she was arrested and fined \$10. The chain of events triggered by her arrest changed the United States.

In 1955, a little-known minister named Martin Luther King Jr. from the Dexter Road Baptist Church in Montgomery organized a campaign against segregation and racial discrimination on city buses. Their demands they made were simple: Black passengers should be treated with courtesy. Seating should be allotted on a first-come-first-serve basis, with white passengers sitting from front to back and black passengers sitting from back to front. And African American drivers should drive routes that primarily serviced African Americans. On Monday, December 5, 1955 the boycott went into effect. This began a chain reaction of similar boycotts throughout the South. In 1956, the Supreme Court voted to end segregated busing.



Martin Luther King addresses the boycott leaders including Rosa Parks and the Rev Ralph Abernathy.



**King in Jail in Birmingham.**

### **Birmingham Campaign, 1963**

Birmingham Alabama had both the largest African-American population and the most segregation of any city in the American South. In 1963 the SCLC, undertook the Birmingham campaign. The carefully planned strategy focused on one goal: The desegregation of Birmingham's downtown merchants.

The movement's efforts were helped by the brutal response of local authorities, in particular Eugene "Bull" Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety. He had long held much political power, but had lost a recent election for mayor to a less rabidly segregationist candidate. Refusing to accept the new mayor's authority, Connor intended to stay in office.

The campaign used a variety of nonviolent methods of confrontation, including sit-ins, kneel-ins at local churches, and a march to the county building to mark the beginning of a drive to register voters. The city, however, obtained an injunction barring all such protests. Convinced that the order was unconstitutional, the campaign defied it and prepared for mass arrests of its supporters. King elected to be among those arrested on April 12, 1963.

While in jail, King wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" on the margins of a newspaper, since he

had not been allowed any writing paper while held in solitary confinement. Supporters appealed to the Kennedy administration, which intervened to obtain King's release. King was allowed to call his wife, who was recuperating at home after the birth of their fourth child, and was released early on April 19.

The campaign, however, faltered as it ran out of demonstrators willing to risk arrest. James Bevel, SCLC's Director of Direct Action and Director of Nonviolent Education, then came up with a bold and controversial alternative: To train high school students to take part in the demonstrations. As a result, in what would be called the Children's Crusade, more than one thousand students skipped school on May 2 to meet at the 16th Street Baptist Church to join the demonstrations. More than six hundred marched out of the church fifty at a time in an attempt to walk to City Hall to speak to Birmingham's mayor about segregation. They were arrested and put into jail.

In this first encounter the police acted with restraint. On the next day, however, another one thousand students gathered at the church. When Bevel started them marching fifty at a time, Bull Connor finally unleashed police dogs on them and then turned the city's fire hoses water streams on the children. National television networks broadcast the scenes of the dogs attacking demonstrators and the water from the fire hoses knocking down the schoolchildren. Widespread public outrage led the Kennedy administration to intervene more forcefully in negotiations between the white business community and the SCLC. On May 10, the parties announced an agreement to desegregate the lunch counters and other public accommodations downtown, to create a committee to eliminate discriminatory hiring practices, to arrange for the release of jailed protesters, and to establish regular means of communication between black and white leaders.

Not everyone in the black community approved of the agreement— the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth was particularly critical, since he was skeptical about the good faith of Birmingham's power structure from his experience in dealing with them. Parts of the white community reacted violently. They bombed the Gaston Motel, which housed the SCLC's unofficial headquarters, and the home of King's brother, the Reverend A. D. King. In response, thousands of blacks rioted, burning numerous buildings and stabbing a police officer.

Kennedy prepared to federalize the Alabama National Guard if the need arose. Four months later, on September 15, a conspiracy of Ku Klux Klan members bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four young girls.



**Birmingham – state violence meets citizens' nonviolence.**



### **Selma Voting Rights Movement and the Voting Rights Act, 1965**

The SNCC had undertaken an ambitious voter registration program in Selma, Alabama, in 1963, but by 1965 had made little headway in the face of opposition from Selma's sheriff, Jim Clark. After local residents asked the SCLC for assistance, King came to Selma to lead several marches, at which he was arrested along with 250 other demonstrators. The marchers continued to meet violent resistance from police. Jimmie Lee Jackson, a resident of nearby Marion, was killed by police at a later march in February 17, 1965. Jackson's death prompted James Bevel, director of the Selma Movement, to initiate a plan to march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital.

On March 7, 1965, acting on Bevel's plan, Hosea Williams of the SCLC and John Lewis of SNCC led a march of 600 people to walk the 54 miles (87 km) from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. Only six blocks into the march, at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, state troopers and local law enforcement, some mounted on horseback, attacked the peaceful demonstrators with billy clubs, tear gas, rubber tubes wrapped in barbed wire, and bull whips. They drove the marchers back into Selma. John Lewis was knocked unconscious and dragged to safety. At least 16 other marchers were hospitalized. Among those gassed and beaten was Amelia Boynton Robinson, who was at the center of civil rights activity at the time. The national broadcast of the news footage of lawmen attacking unresisting marchers' seeking to exercise their constitutional right to vote provoked a national response, as had scenes from Birmingham two years earlier. The marchers were able to obtain a court order permitting them to make the march without incident two weeks later.

After a second march on March 9 to the site of Bloody Sunday, local whites attacked Rev. James Reeb, another voting rights supporter. He died of his injuries in a Birmingham hospital March 11. On March 25, four Klansmen shot and killed Detroit homemaker Viola Liuzzo as she drove marchers back to Selma at night after the successfully completed march to Montgomery.

Eight days after the first march, President Johnson delivered a televised address to support the voting rights bill he had sent to Congress. In it he stated:

But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.

Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on August 6. The 1965 act suspended poll taxes, literacy tests, and other subjective voter registration tests. It authorized Federal supervision of voter registration

in states and individual voting districts where such tests were being used. African Americans who had been barred from registering to vote finally had an alternative to taking suits to local or state courts, which had seldom prosecuted their cases to success. If discrimination in voter registration occurred, the 1965 act authorized the Attorney General of the United States to send federal examiners to replace local registrars. Johnson reportedly told associates of his concern that signing the bill had lost the white South as voters for the Democratic Party for the foreseeable future.

The act had an immediate and positive effect for African Americans. Within months of its passage, 250,000 new black voters had been registered, one third of them by federal examiners. Within four years, voter registration in the South had more than doubled. In 1965, Mississippi had the highest black voter turnout at 74% and led the nation in the number of black public officials elected. In 1969, Tennessee had a 92.1% turnout among black voters; Arkansas, 77.9%; and Texas, 73.1%.

Several whites who had opposed the Voting Rights Act paid a quick price. In 1966 Sheriff Jim Clark of Alabama, infamous for using cattle prods against civil rights marchers, was up for reelection. Although he took off the notorious "Never" pin on his uniform, he was defeated. At the election, Clark lost as blacks voted to get him out of office. Clark later served a prison term for drug dealing.

Blacks' regaining the power to vote changed the political landscape of the South. When Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, only about 100 African Americans held elective office, all in northern states. By 1989, there were more than 7,200 African Americans in office, including more than 4,800 in the South. Nearly every Black Belt county (where populations were majority black) in Alabama had a black sheriff. Southern blacks held top positions in city, county, and state governments.

Atlanta elected a black mayor, Andrew Young, as did Jackson, Mississippi, with Harvey Johnson, Jr., and New Orleans, with Ernest Morial. Black politicians on the national level included Barbara Jordan, elected as a representative from Texas in Congress, and President Jimmy Carter appointed Andrew Young as United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

## **Riot, fragmentation and the struggles of Martin Luther King to enact his wider vision – 1965-1968**

King reached the height of popular acclaim during his life in 1964, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. His career after that point was filled with frustrating challenges. The liberal coalition that had gained passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964[ and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 began to fray.

King was becoming more estranged from the Johnson administration. In 1965 he broke with it by calling for peace negotiations and a halt to the bombing of Vietnam. He moved further left in the following years, speaking of the need for economic justice and thoroughgoing changes in American society. He believed change was needed beyond the civil rights gained by the movement.

King's attempts to broaden the scope of the Civil Rights Movement were halting and largely unsuccessful, however. King made several efforts in 1965 to take the Movement north to address issues of employment and housing discrimination. SCLC's campaign in Chicago publicly failed, as Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley marginalized SCLC's campaign by promising to "study" the city's problems. In 1966, white demonstrators holding "white power" signs in notoriously racist Cicero, a suburb of Chicago, threw stones at marchers demonstrating against housing segregation.



### Race riots

By the end of World War II, more than half of the country's black population lived in Northern and Western industrial cities rather than Southern rural areas. Migrating to those cities for better job opportunities, education and to escape legal segregation, African Americans often found segregation that existed in fact rather than in law.

While after the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was not prevalent; by the 1960s other problems prevailed in northern cities. Beginning in the 1950s, deindustrialization and restructuring of major industries: Railroads and meatpacking, steel industry and car industry, markedly reduced working-class jobs, which had earlier provided middle-class incomes. As the last population to enter the industrial job market, blacks were disadvantaged by its collapse. At the same time, many ethnic whites moved out of the inner cities to newer housing in expanding suburbs. Urban blacks who did not follow the middle class out of the cities became concentrated in the older housing of inner city neighborhoods – effectively black ghettos.

Because jobs in new service areas and parts of the economy were being created in suburbs, unemployment was much higher in many black than in white neighborhoods, and crime was frequent. African Americans rarely owned the stores or businesses where they lived. Many were limited to menial or blue-collar jobs. African Americans often made only enough money to live in dilapidated tenements that were privately owned, or poorly maintained public housing. They also attended schools that were often the worst academically in the city and that had fewer white students than in the decades before WWII.

The racial makeup of most major city police departments, largely ethnic white (especially Irish), was a major factor in adding to racial tensions. Even a black neighborhood such as Harlem had a ratio of one black officer for every six white officers. The majority-black city of Newark, New Jersey had only 145 blacks among its 1322 police officers.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, but the new law had no immediate effect on living conditions for blacks. A few days after the act became law, a riot broke out in the South Central Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts. Like Harlem, Watts was an impoverished neighborhood with very high unemployment. Its residents were supervised by a largely white police department that had a history of abuse against blacks.

While arresting a young man for drunk driving, police officers argued with the suspect's mother before onlookers. The conflict triggered a massive destruction of property through six days of rioting. Thirty-four people were killed and property valued at about \$30 million was destroyed, making the Watts Riots among the most expensive in American history.

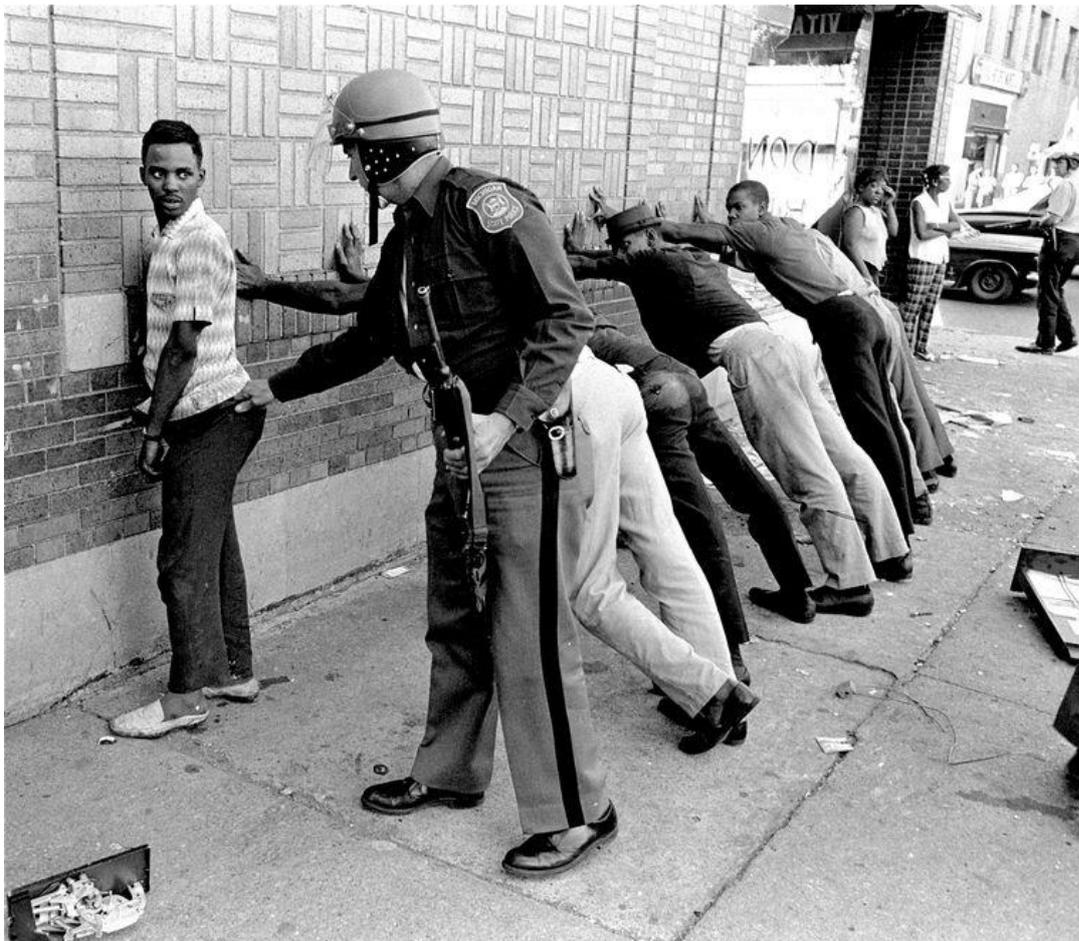
With black militancy on the rise, ghetto residents directed acts of anger at the police. Black residents growing tired of police brutality continued to riot. Some young people joined groups such as the Black Panthers, whose popularity was based in part on their reputation for confronting police officers. Riots among blacks occurred in 1966 and 1967 in cities such as Atlanta, San Francisco, Oakland, Baltimore, Seattle, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Newark, Chicago, New York City (specifically in Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx), and worst of all in Detroit.

In Detroit, a comfortable black middle class had begun to develop among families of blacks who worked at good-paying jobs in the automotive industry. Blacks who had not moved upward were living in much worse conditions, subject to the same problems as blacks in Watts and Harlem. When white police officers shut down an illegal bar on a liquor raid and arrested a large group of patrons during the hot summer, furious residents rioted.

Migrants and immigrants had the older housing in the city. Demonstrating the economic basis of the suburban migration, Detroit lost some of its black middle class as well, as did cities such as Washington, DC and Chicago during the next decades.

As a result of the riots, and migration of jobs and the middle class to the suburbs, formerly prosperous industrial cities, such as Detroit, Newark, and Baltimore, now have less than 40% white population. Changes in industry caused continued job losses, depopulation of middle classes, and concentrated poverty in such cities in the late 20th century.

President Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1967. The commission's final report called for major reforms in employment and public assistance for black communities. It warned that the United States was moving toward separate white and black societies.



**Detroit 1967**

### **Memphis, King Assassination and the Poor People's March, 1968**

Rev. James Lawson invited King to Memphis, Tennessee, in March 1968 to support a sanitation workers' strike. These workers launched a campaign for union representation after two workers were accidentally killed on the job, and King considered their struggle to be a vital part of the Poor People's Campaign he was planning.

A day after delivering his stirring "I've Been to the Mountaintop" sermon, which has become famous for his vision of American society, King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Riots broke out in black neighborhoods in more than 110 cities across the United States in the days that followed, notably in Chicago, Baltimore, and in Washington, D.C. The damage done in many cities destroyed black businesses and homes, and slowed economic development for a generation.

The day before King's funeral, April 8, Coretta Scott King and three of the King children led 20,000 marchers through the streets of Memphis, holding signs that read: "Honor King End Racism" and "Union Justice Now". Armed National Guardsmen lined the streets, sitting on M-48 tanks, to protect the marchers, and helicopters circled overhead. On April 9 Mrs. King led another 150,000 people in a funeral procession through the streets of Atlanta. Her dignity revived courage and hope in many of the Movement's members, cementing her place as the new leader in the struggle for racial equality.

"Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his life for the poor of the world, the garbage workers of Memphis and the peasants of Vietnam. The day that Negro people and others in bondage are truly free, on the day want is abolished, on the day wars are no more, on that day I know my husband will rest in a long-deserved peace."—Coretta King

Rev. Ralph Abernathy succeeded King as the head of the SCLC and attempted to carry forth King's plan for a Poor People's March. It was to unite blacks and whites to campaign for fundamental changes in American society and economic structure. The march went forward under Abernathy's plainspoken leadership but did not achieve its goals.