



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, AN EDUCATED MAN

Art Form: Theatre

Style: Traditional

Culture: American

Technical Needs

- ❑ piano and piano bench
- ❑ conventional stage area with wing space on each side of the stage for changes, entrances & exits
- ❑ electrical outlets
- ❑ three microphones, four if available
- ❑ podium
- ❑ coffee for performers, if available

Meet the Artists

Roots Theatre Ensemble is a group of accomplished actors and musicians formed in 1976 to bring African American history to life for Chicago school children. Dedicated to preserving the African American oral tradition, **Roots Theatre Ensemble** is renowned for skillfully weaving work songs, spirituals and jazz into its performances of plays adapted from historical works or specially written for the company. It is also known for its economy of style: they evoke the spirit of the times through interpretative narratives and music, with minimal reliance on props and scenery. **Roots Theatre Ensemble** has frequently performed for Urban Gateways in the past and has brought such favorites as *Black Voices in American History* and *The Young Harriet* (Tubman) to thousands of Chicago area school children.

About the Performance

This dramatic performance by the **Roots Theatre Ensemble** presents music, songs, theatre and excerpts from Dr. King's inspiring speeches to bring to life the oppression of African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement in the late

1950s and early 60s. The performance begins during King's childhood and continues on past his tragic death and into the 21st century, spreading his message of peaceful protest and equality for all to students of all ages.

Contextual Information

The play opens with eleven year-old Martin's promise to his mother that someday he will have "big words" like the guest speaker at their church. Martin's promise reminds his mother of his father's struggles to be somebody: one of eleven children of a poor, uneducated sharecropper, "Daddy" King worked long years in the fields of Georgia and then as a laborer in Atlanta before becoming the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Martin is an exceptional young boy: a soloist in his father's church choir, model student, athlete and "fast dancer." Martin's concern for the plight of his people and determination to help them comes early in his life. While in elementary school he yearns to be like the great Black heroes, Fredrick Douglas and Booker T. Washington. At Morehouse College, and later at the Crozer Theological Seminary and University of Boston, Martin studies the great figures who will lead him to his philosophy of nonviolence: Thoreau, Gandhi and Christ. When Martin receives his Ph.D. from Boston, he and his new wife, Coretta, face a tough decision. After much soul searching, Martin decides to stay in the South and help his people by becoming a pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Coretta gives up her life-long dream of being a vocalist to help him.

In 1955, Martin begins his first serious work as a civil rights leader. He helps organize the Montgomery bus boycott. He then becomes the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association and, in 1957, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Over the years, Martin teaches civil rights workers the tactics of nonviolent resistance. He leads marches, sit-ins, and other peaceful demonstrations. Martin's work takes him far from home and endangers him and his family; he is jailed many times. But Martin's determination pays off: the Supreme Court declares segregated busing unconstitutional and President Johnson signs the Voting Rights.

Vocabulary

Adaptation: a novel or story turned into a play

Biography: the story of someone's life

Boycott: an organized refusal to buy something (like bus rides or certain food) because protesters think it is unjustly made or arranged

Civil Disobedience: Thoreau's idea of refusing to obey a cruel or unjust law

Civil Rights Movement: A social movement that emerged in the South in the 1950's when many Black began boycotts, marches and protests in order to gain Civil Rights not only in law-books, but also in their daily lives

Civil Rights: personal rights guaranteed everyone under our U.S. Constitution, such as freedom from racial discrimination

Discrimination: treating a group differently (segregating them, perhaps) because they are a minority

Nonviolence: the principle of refusing to answer violence with further violence

Oppression: cruel, unjust use of power to crush a group of people

Prejudice: pre-judging, usually on the basis of race

Segregation: separation of a race or class

Sharecroppers: tenant farmers who cannot leave the land they farm even though they own it, because they owe the owners so much money; Southern plantation owners invented this system to keep slaves even though slavery had been outlawed

Sit-in: occupying the seats in a segregated business (a lunch-counter that only serves whites, for example) with a large crowd so that the business will realize that its rules are wrong