PLAY GUIDE

# Rosa's Children

## A PLAY ABOUT ROSA PARKS, THE MOTHER OF US ALL

BY SYL JONES

## Her Early Life

Rosa Parks is well known as the woman who refused to sit in the back of the bus, thus sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the landmarks in the American Civil Rights movement. But few people know about the life that led a quiet, unassuming, middle-aged woman to that simple but momentous decision.

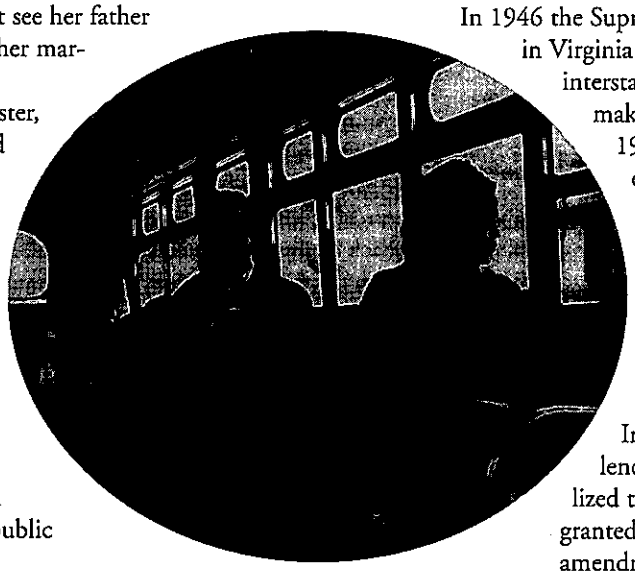
Rosa Parks was born Rosa McCauley on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama, 45 miles east of Montgomery. She was the first child of James and Leona McCauley, a carpenter and a schoolteacher. James wished to seek better employment in the North, but Leona insisted on staying near her family. James sometimes visited and mailed the family money, but Rosa did not see her father from the age of five until after her marriage.

Rosa and her brother, Sylvester, were raised by their mother and maternal grandparents in Pine Level, Alabama. Grandma Rose often told Rosa stories of life during the Civil War, but it was her grandfather who "instilled in me that you don't put up with bad treatment from anybody. It was passed down almost in our genes."

When Rosa graduated from junior high, there was still no public high school for blacks in Montgomery, so she attended the laboratory school of Alabama State College for Negroes. To help pay her tuition, Rosa cleaned houses and did sewing for whites in Montgomery. She received her high school diploma in 1933 at the age of 20.

In the spring of 1931, Rosa had met Raymond Parks, a young man actively raising funds to help the cause of the Scottsboro Boys—nine black teenagers who had been falsely accused of rape. Ray and Rosa were married in December, 1932. Although Ray was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he initially felt that it might be too dangerous for his wife to join the organization. In 1943 Mrs. Parks decided to attend the annual meeting for the election of officers of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, only to find herself the only female among the dozen or so individuals present. She quickly found herself elected to the office of secretary; she later said she was too timid to say no. Mrs. Parks stayed on in the volunteer position for the next 12 years. One of her most important jobs was helping the chapter's president, E. D. Nixon, document every case of racial discrimination and violence against blacks that occurred in Alabama.

Mrs. Parks joined the Civil Rights movement at a crucial time. In 1941 and 1942 the United States Army, Navy, and Marines had admitted blacks for unsegregated training. In 1946 the Supreme Court struck down a law in Virginia that required blacks on an interstate bus to move to the rear to make way for a white passenger. In 1947 Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in big league baseball, becoming the first black in the major leagues.



*Mrs. Parks enjoys a ride at the front of the bus following the triumph of the boycott.*

But all was not progress. The Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866, met in Montgomery to form a national association of six southern states in 1949. Intimidation activities and violence escalated, and blacks mobilized to gain the rights supposedly granted them through constitutional amendment. The landmark Supreme Court case "Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education" brought an end to legal education discrimination in 1954, although many southern states ignored the ruling.

In August 1955, Mrs. Parks attended a workshop on desegregation at the Highlander Folk School. Myles Horton, the school's founder, lectured that "the southern whites are not going to change.... Black people are going to have to force the white people to respect them." Mrs. Parks was deeply inspired by her experience at Highlander. It was just a few months later that Rosa Parks stepped on a public bus and into the history books.

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# Jim Crow Laws

In order to understand the significance of Rosa Parks's refusal to move to the back of the bus, one must understand the society in which she lived. "Jim Crow" is an expression used to describe a system of discriminatory laws and allied practices in the South designed to keep blacks at a disadvantage. The Jim Crow laws were first instituted shortly after the Civil War and continued into the 1960s.

Legal statutes included the segregation of white and black passengers in trains and buses. Blacks and whites did not attend the same schools, drink out of the same public water fountains, use the same public restrooms, or eat in the same restaurants. This enforced separation extended to all public facilities such as waiting rooms, hotels, and movie theatres.

There also existed many unspoken "rules" that Southern blacks were required to adhere to in order to avoid "trouble." Though for the most part not technically law, Jim Crow customs were so strongly enforced and racial prejudice was so violent that breaking these rules could result in anything from a beating to a lynching.

Among these unspoken rules for blacks were the following:

*Never assert or even intimate that a white person may be lying.*

*Never impute dishonorable intentions to a white person.*

*Never suggest that the white is of an inferior class.*

*Never lay claim to, or overtly demonstrate, superior knowledge or intelligence.*

*Never curse a white person.*

*Never laugh derisively at a white person.*

*Never comment upon the attractiveness of a white person of the opposite sex.*

Especially forbidden was physical contact of any kind between a black man and a white woman. Even accidental bumping could lead to a lynching. So stringent was this code that mere proximity to a white woman signed the death warrant of many a nonwhite man.

Interracial etiquette also sought to maintain a master-servant relationship between whites and blacks in segregated territories. While whites always called blacks by their first names, blacks were always required to say "Mr.," "Mrs.," "sir," or "ma'am" to whites, never using their first names.

The Jim Crow system could be as subtle as the way people addressed each other or as brutal as a lynch mob. Every black person in the South was constantly aware of the dangers of violating this code.

# Refusing to Move to the Back

On the evening of December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks had just finished her day as a tailor's assistant at the Montgomery Fair, the town's leading department store, and was on her way home. She boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus, dropped her dime into the box, and found a seat in the first row of the "colored" section. The Jim Crow laws declared that the first 10 seats on the bus were reserved for white passengers only. Even if the back of the bus was full and no whites were on the bus, hard-working blacks were not allowed to sit in the empty seats in the "white" section. If all "white" seats on a bus were taken and whites were left standing, blacks had to give up their seats at the back of the bus. That was the law in Montgomery and the bus drivers, all of them white, had the power to enforce the rules.

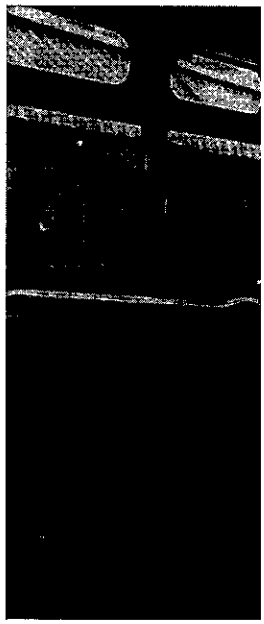
The Cleveland Avenue bus was very crowded. Several black people were already standing in the back when the bus stopped at the Empire Theatre and a few white people boarded. The whites filled up their section and one white man was left standing. When the bus driver noticed that the white man was still standing, he looked at the four blacks sitting in the front row of the "colored" section and said, "Let me have those front seats." A black gentleman was seated next to Mrs. Parks and two black women were seated across the aisle. No one moved.

The bus driver said, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." The segregation laws required that all four give up their seats to accommodate one white man. No black passenger was allowed to sit in the same row as a white passenger.

The man in the window seat next to Mrs. Parks stood and moved to the back of the bus. The two women across the aisle also gave up their seats. Mrs. Parks remained seated, sliding over to the window seat.

The bus driver saw Mrs. Parks and asked her if she was going to stand up. She replied, "No." He informed her that he was going to have her arrested, and she answered politely, "You may do that." A few minutes later, two policemen arrived and arrested Rosa Parks as a violator of the segregation laws.

News spread quickly through the black community. Besides being secretary of the local branch of the NAACP, Mrs. Parks was also very active in her church and other civil organizations. Her reputation was beyond repute. This arrest marked the beginning of a movement that would change the black man's standing in America forever.



*(above) Dr. King addresses his church during the boycott.*

*(right) Without black riders, many of the Montgomery buses were almost empty.*

# The Montgomery Bus Boycott

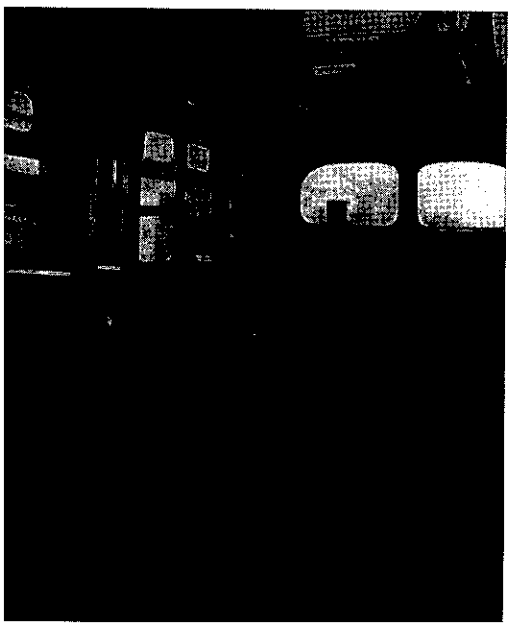
The black community of Montgomery came alive with the news of Rosa Parks's arrest. Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women's Political Council, and E. D. Nixon agreed that Mrs. Parks's action might provide the rallying element they had been seeking. They decided to call a one-day boycott of the buses for Monday, the day of Mrs. Parks's trial.

Mrs. Robinson called on her council members to create a leaflet urging "every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial of Rosa Parks. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday." Students helped distribute some 35,000 leaflets. They rang doorbells and visited homes, schools, shops, bars, and restaurants in the black community.

In the meantime, E. D. Nixon organized a meeting of 50 community leaders at the church of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Among those gathering at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church were ministers, heads of social and political clubs, business men, and teachers. The group laid plans for alternate methods of transportation. They set up car pools and called on the 200 taxicabs owned by blacks.

On Monday, December 5, the whole city of Montgomery watched the big public buses roll down the streets—empty of black riders. The long walk had begun in Montgomery.

Thousands of blacks walked miles to work and school. Others car-pooled. The black taxi companies charged passengers the same 10 cents as the bus. Hundreds of others donated their cars and picked up blacks waiting on corners. "It was a miracle," said Dr. King. "It was the beginning of a new age for an oppressed people," said another minister. The first day of the boycott was a huge success.



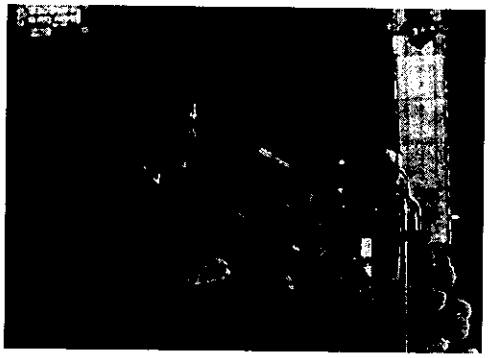
Over 5,000 people gathered at Holt Street Baptist Church to celebrate. Dr. King was called on to be the main speaker. "We are here because we are American citizens.... There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." He called for dignity, for staying united as they stood up for their rights as American citizens. King told the cheering congregation that "right here in Montgomery when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'there lived a race of people, of black people ... of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights.'" After that meeting, the black community was on fire for freedom.

They effectively organized and upheld the boycott for over a year. In the face of police beatings, Ku Klux Klan threats, bombings of churches, and job firings, they continued to stay off the buses. In a trial that lasted less than five minutes, Mrs. Parks herself was found guilty of violating the segregation laws. She was fined $10 and court costs of $400. She appealed the case.

The boycott received international recognition. Money and support for the cause flooded in from all over the world. The boycott received national coverage in almost every newspaper and television newscast. Dr. King spoke at a mass meeting: "We are caught in a great moment of history. It is bigger than Montgomery. The vast majority of the people of the world are colored. We are part of a great movement to be free."

Finally the boycott won a resounding victory. The United States Supreme Court declared Alabama state and city laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional. On December 20, 1956, the written order for desegregation of the buses reached Montgomery. For a total of 381 days, 50,000 black people had waged a great rebellion of non-violence. They won a battle not only over a social system, but over their own fears.

Rosa Parks would say years later, "I don't recall that I felt anything great about it. It didn't feel like a victory, actually. There was still a great deal to do." She was right. This was only the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. In a major challenge to "Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education," Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to allow the integration of Little Rock schools in 1957. It took a presidential proclamation, the 101st Airborne Division, and the state militia to ensure the safe entrance of nine black teenagers to the high school. Many more victories would have to be won in the black man's struggle for civil rights in America.



*Mrs. Parks addresses a church congregation in the 1960s.*

# Her Later Life

In 1957, Rosa, her husband Raymond, and her mother moved to Detroit, where Rosa's brother Sylvester lived. Mrs. Parks found work as a seamstress and continued to travel to speaking engagements. Although women were not allowed much of a role in the 1963 March on Washington (where Martin Luther King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech), Mrs. Parks was introduced at a "Tribute to Women" held in conjunction with the march.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, aimed at ending discrimination against blacks and other minority groups. The law provides measures to ensure equal rights for all Americans to vote, to work, and to use public accommodations, public education, and programs receiving federal funding.

Mrs. Parks worked in the Detroit office of African American Congressman John Conyers from 1965 until he retired in 1988. In 1975, Cleveland Avenue in Montgomery, where Mrs. Parks had been arrested in 1955, was renamed Rosa Parks Boulevard.

Raymond Parks died in 1977, and Rosa's mother in 1979. In 1987 Mrs. Parks founded the Rosa & Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, a community center for youth. Her name returned to the headlines in 1994 when she was attacked and robbed in her own home, fortunately without serious harm.

Today, Rosa Parks continues to travel to her many speaking engagements, though she prefers a quiet life at home. She has come to accept her importance as a symbol of the Civil Rights movement and a continuing inspiration. On her frequent visits to elementary schools, Mrs. Parks always cites the many positive changes that have stemmed from her courageous, solitary act of individual conscience, while at the same time urging the students not to forget the lessons of the past and to always hope for the future. "We are all soldiers," she says, "and we must keep on as long as we can in this battle for freedom and justice for all." ★

# Bringing Rosa's Story to the Stage

BY RISA BRAININ, DIRECTOR

Rosa Parks is such an important figure as the catalyst of the civil rights movement in this country that we at the IRT wanted to honor her contribution with a new play. There are other stage versions of Rosa's story, but none that explore how she became the kind of person who could fulfill this role. In fact, the IRT produced a version several years ago which was focused on the Civil Rights movement itself. We all continue to learn about the movement; but until now no play has addressed the making of the courageous Rosa Parks.

We commissioned Syl Jones, a Minneapolis-based writer who has received many honors for his playwriting as well as being a columnist and published non-fiction writer. His adaptation of George Schuyler's *Black No More* is being produced at the Guthrie Theater and Arena Stage this season. I have worked with Syl on two other plays, and we enjoy a rich collaboration.

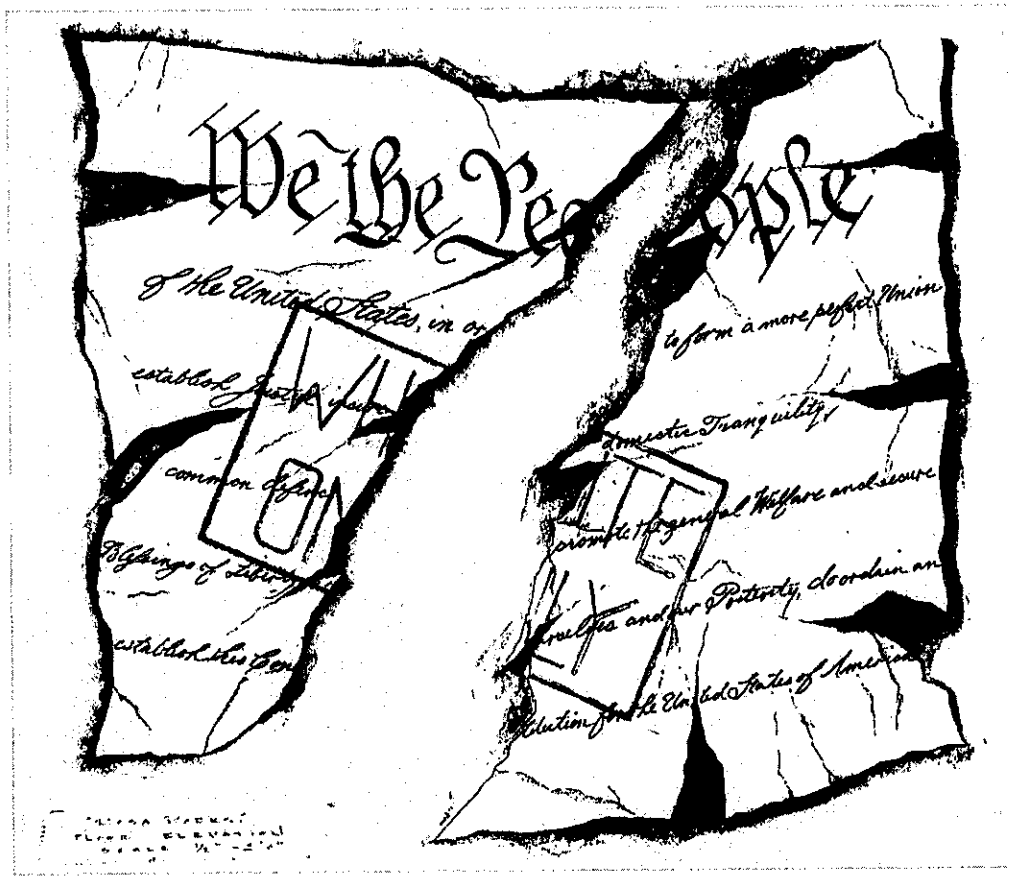
In our design process, Robert Koharchik (scenery), Kathy Jaremski (costumes), Michael Klaers (lighting), and I focused on creating an environment which would reflect both the political climate of the time and Rosa Parks herself. Rosa is a dignified, warm presence infused with what she describes in her own book as "quiet strength." This quiet strength along with the crisis of conscience in America in the 1950s became our central metaphors for the production design.

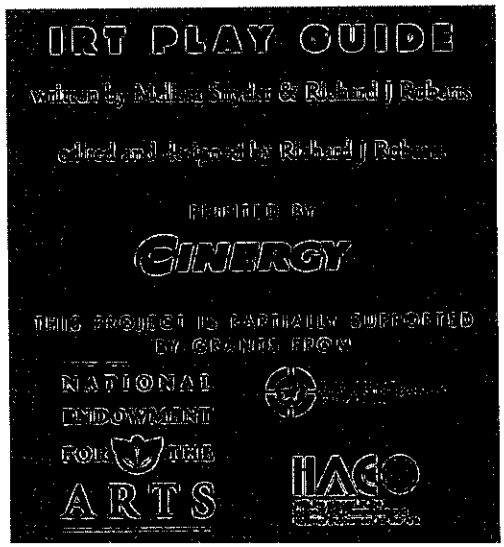
So we have tall, classic pillars in the background which evoke images of southern plantations, halls of justice, pillars of strength, dignity, etc. In the foreground on the floor we have a torn U.S. Constitution with "whites only" stamped into the ripped pieces. Some of the pillars have fallen to the ground and are laying in pieces. These pieces will be used as furniture for the play. There is a balcony marked "colored." All of these images serve to create an environment for Rosa's story. There is something quite arresting about the look of the set, but at the same time it carries the essence of Rosa Parks's "quiet strength."

The costumes reflect many different time periods as the play spans from 1913 through 1994. With the exception of the actor playing Rosa herself and an actor who plays Lieutenant Yeary, all five of the other actors play multiple roles. This is always a tremendous challenge for the costume designer to both disguise the actor and serve the many demands of the individual roles. And of course, there is the obvious problem of quick changes from one role to another. At times, the actor may change costume completely; at other times you may see the same basic costume with different accesories to create a different look.

The play has many locales ranging from a police station in Detroit in 1994 to a southern Alabama plantation in 1913 to an apartment in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. Lighting will play a huge role in helping to take us from one location to another. When working in our Upperstage thrust space, scenery is often minimal, and lighting becomes key to the production.

It is a great thrill for the IRT to present this new work. We hope it gives insight into Rosa Parks as a real person, not just a figurehead for the American Civil Rights movement. ★




*(above center) floor cloth by scenic designer Robert Koharchik.*

*Costume sketches for Rosa (above left) and her grandfather (right) by costume designer Kathi Jaremski.*