



*PRESENTS*

# Walk On: The Story of Rosa Parks



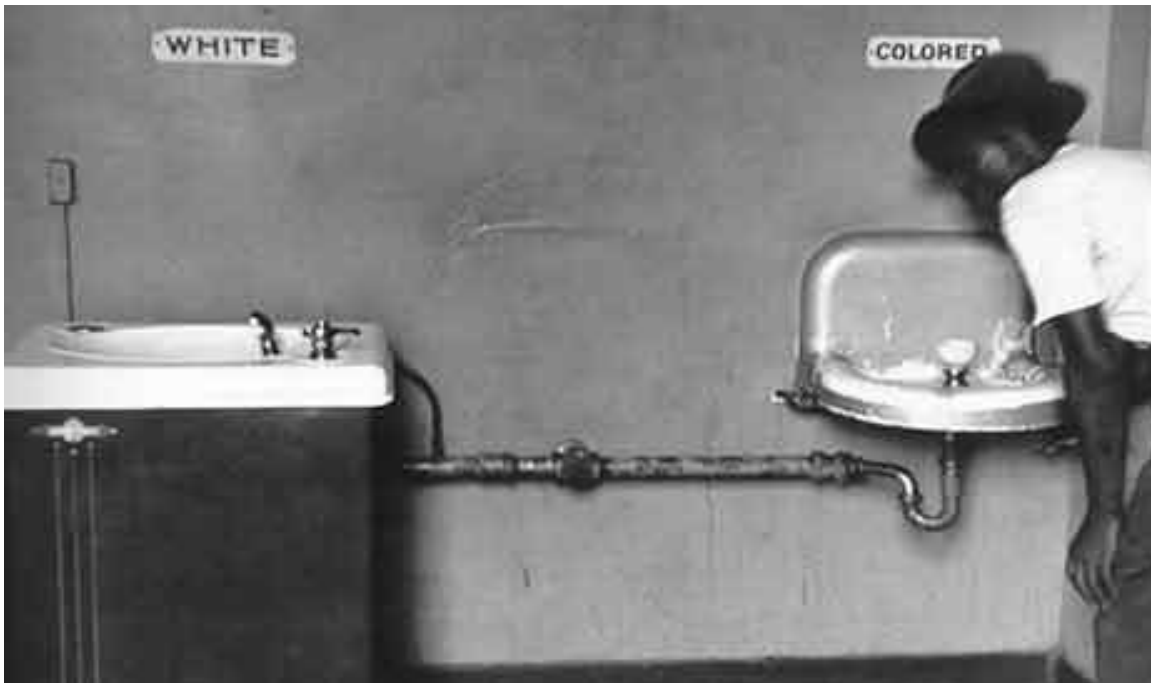
## **STUDY GUIDE**

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Mad River Theater Works PO Box 156 Zanesfield OH 43360 [www.madrivetheater.org](http://www.madrivetheater.org)

## About the Company

Mad River Theater Works is a professional touring theater company based in Zanesfield, Ohio. Our purpose is to craft plays that are both drawn from and produced for the people of the farms and small towns of rural America, and to communicate the concerns and insights of our communities to people everywhere. Since 1978 we have collected stories, molded this material into plays, and performed our work at community centers, schools, colleges, and theaters throughout the United States reaching an annual audience of over 80,000 through over 100 performances. Mad River Theater Works is one of only a handful of professional theaters in the United States based in rural communities. Our unique mission has attracted the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as foundations, corporations, and individuals.



## Synopsis

The play opens at the end of our story on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama, in December of 1955. The audience meets two African-Americans who have just found a flyer laying in the street. We learn that Rosa Parks has been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person and a boycott of city buses is planned to protest her arrest and trial. The cast sings a song about the boycott called "Freedom Calling."

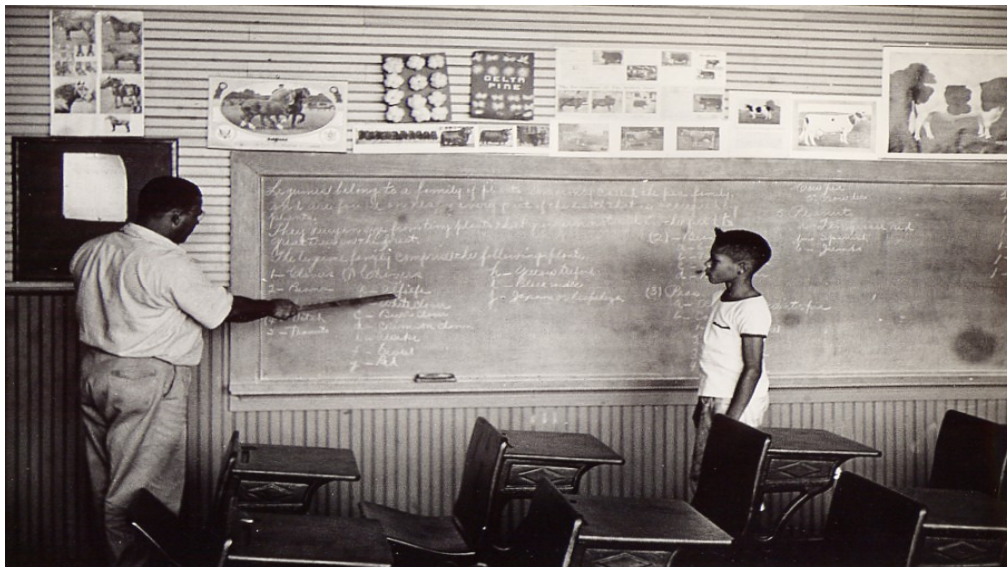
The play then transports the audience back to Pine Level, Alabama, in 1923 where Rosa Parks spent much of her childhood. Rosa jumps rope and sings rhymes with neighborhood kids until she is overheard by Mary Ann, a white girl. Fearful of what the girl will do, Rosa says "It's just a silly little rhyme. I don't mean you do harm..." Mary Ann threatens to tell her father, who is Rosa's father's boss. Rosa pleads with her not to tell. Mary Ann then befriends her. As the girls chat and Rosa is drawn in by Mary Ann's interest in her, she tells her that she likes poetry, especially Paul Lawrence Dunbar. When Rosa tells Mary Ann that Dunbar is African-American, Mary Ann is shocked and turns on Rosa. Rosa threatens Mary Ann if she tells about their conversation but knows that Mary Ann will report their confrontation anyway.



The play transitions to Rosa's grandfather's house and the audience learns that Rosa was born in February, 1913, the daughter of a carpenter and teacher. Rosa arrives to visit her grandfather, Sylvester Edwards, an older African-American, who is light skinned and has often passed for white. He tells her that Mr. Hudson, Mary Ann's father, has stopped by and told Rosa's mother not to let her daughter tease his little girl again. Sylvester warns Rosa not to mess with "Mr. Charlie," his name for white folks and sings a song called "Jump, Mr. Charlie, Jump" about his confrontations with whites.

The next scene takes place as Rosa prepares to start seventh grade. Rosa arrives at Miss White's Industrial School for Girls in Montgomery and is greeted by Miss Evans, a white lady. Rosa says there must be some mistake but Miss Evans reassures her that no indeed, this is a school for colored girls. Rosa tries to leave and says she would rather study in a school with colored teachers. Miss Evans persuades her to stay and give it a try, as she doesn't have much choice if she wants an education. Rosa relents and is then introduced to Jackie, another student at the school. Jackie promises to show how to have fun despite Miss Evans's strict rules. Rosa insists she's just there to study but Jackie says "If you don't know how to shimmy, then you haven't lived."

The play then takes the audience to the end of her eleventh grade year. Rosa must drop out and go home to care for her sick mother. Rosa and Jackie sing "Where I Come From" about responsibility, family and community. Rosa goes to set up house with her family in Montgomery but soon meets Raymond Parks, a barber and one of the founders of the local chapter of the NAACP. The men of the chapter hold a meeting in the Parks' living room, armed with guns to protect themselves. Rosa keeps watch at the door but is adamant that she wants them gone as quickly as possible because she thinks the guns put them all in danger. E.D. Nixon introduces himself to her and asks why she is so upset. Rosa says that she wants to join the NAACP but her husband won't give his permission. Nixon refuses to help Rosa overcome the wishes of her husband.



Rosa decides to take matters into her own hands and goes to the Montgomery County Courthouse to register to vote. There she again meets Miss Evans who now works for the Board of Elections. She also runs into Jackie who has come back to take the required citizenship test for a third time. Jackie gets irate and warns her that the process is rigged

and they don't want to let colored people register to vote. Incensed by this she decides to go against Raymond's wishes and join the NAACP.

Rosa shows up for her first meeting with the NAACP and pays her dues in full for the year saying she doesn't want there to be any doubt about her commitment to the cause. E.D. Nixon ribs Rosa about whether or not she has a sense of humor. Rosa insists she is not always serious and E.D. says he's relieved, "I was beginning to think I was gonna have to wear my funeral suit to meetings from now on." E.D. and Rosa sing "Welcome to the Party" about trying to be happy in spite of the mountain they have to climb.

Rosa finally succeeds in registering to vote but comes to realize that it will take more than elections to abolish segregation. Rosa has become secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and one of her jobs is recording the stories of African-Americans who have faced discrimination. She is confronted with taking her friend Jackie's statement about witnessing a murder.

In the spring of 1955, Rosa attends a Civil Rights workshop at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. Rosa meets Myles Horton who asks how things have been going in Montgomery. He asks her to tell him the troubles on the city buses. Rosa and Myles talk about the struggle for Civil Rights. Myles tells Rosa that the rights of all people, black and white, must be respected for true equality to exist.



Rosa returns to Montgomery. She attends a Bible study group where much to her surprise she is greeted by Miss Evans. Miss Evans takes the opportunity to apologize to Rosa for what she did to her while working at the Courthouse. She says "The way you were treated wasn't right". Miss Evans sings "Forgiveness" and Rosa joins her.

The scene shifts to steps outside the Montgomery County Jail where Rosa tells E.D. and Jackie how she sat down on the crowded bus and decided not to stand up when the bus driver told her to move. Jackie and E.D. chime into the role of the bus driver as Rosa tells the story. The other actors join the scene as narrators and they all sing "I Will Sit Down" Rosa says, "Some people say I was tired that day and that was why I wouldn't give up my seat. But the only tired I was, was tired of giving in. The time had come for someone to make a stand, and that person was me. I wasn't a hero. I was just an ordinary person who decided to sit down and be counted." They all sing "Freedom Calling" and tell of the successful bus boycott which resulted in the desegregation of the buses of Montgomery.

## Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks was an ordinary American citizen who made extraordinary history on December 1, 1955, by refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. Her subsequent arrest and trial for this act of civil disobedience kicked off the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the largest social movements of the 20th century, and launched Martin Luther King, Jr. to the forefront of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.



Rosa Parks was born Rosa McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama, on February 4, 1913, to James and Leona McCauley, respectively a carpenter and a teacher. When her parents separated they moved to Pine Level, Alabama where Rosa lived with her mother, brother and grandparents. She was home-schooled until she was 11 and then enrolled at the Industrial School for Girls in Montgomery where she took vocational and academic courses. She then went on to study at the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes but left before graduating to care for her ailing mother and grandmother.

Parks set up housekeeping in Montgomery, Alabama and soon met Raymond Parks, a barber and one of the founders of the local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Rosa took a number of jobs ranging from domestic worker to hospital aid. At her husband's urging, she finished high school in 1933 at a time when less than 7% of African Americans had a high school diploma. In December 1943, Parks went against her husband's wishes and also joined the NAACP. She served as secretary to the then president, E.D. Nixon. She continued as secretary until 1957. She and her husband were also members of the Voters' League. Parks also worked as a seamstress for a white couple, Virginia and Clifford Durr, who treated her with the same respect afforded to white people. With the Durrs' sponsorship and encouragement, she attended the Highlander Folk School, an education center for workers' rights and equality in Tennessee.



Deeply moved by the brutal murder of Emmett Till in August 1955, Parks attended a mass meeting in Montgomery which focused on this murder and other recent local murders. It was only four days before her historic refusal to give up her seat on the bus. Reflecting on her life many years later, Parks remarked, "People always say I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." Rosa Parks later moved to Detroit and served on the staff of Congressman John Conyers. She died in Detroit in 2005.



## The Montgomery Bus Boycott

Contrary to popular myth, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was not an impromptu reaction to years of segregation and Jim Crow laws by the African-American residents of Montgomery, but a highly organized movement that had been slowly gathering steam, yet waiting for the right moment to burst forth on the public scene. Black activists had begun to build a case around the arrest of a 15-year-old girl, Claudette Colvin. On March 2, 1955, Colvin was handcuffed, arrested and forcibly removed from a public bus when she refused to give up her seat to a white man. At the time, Colvin was active in the NAACP's Youth Council, a group to which Rosa Parks served as Advisor. Parks was raising money for Colvin's defense, but when E.D. Nixon learned that Colvin was pregnant, it was decided that Colvin was an unsuitable symbol for their cause. Strategists believed that the segregationist white press would use Colvin's pregnancy to undermine any boycott. The NAACP also had considered, but rejected, earlier protesters deemed unable or unsuitable to withstand the pressures of cross-examination in a legal challenge to racial segregation laws.

In Montgomery, the first four rows of bus seats were reserved for white people. Buses had "colored" sections for black people—who made up more than 75 % of the bus system's riders—generally in the rear of the bus. These sections were not fixed in size, but were determined by the placement of a movable sign. Then they had to move to seats in the rear, stand, or, if there was no room, leave the bus. The driver also could move the "colored" section sign, or remove it altogether. If white people were already sitting in the front, black people could board to pay the fare, but then had to disembark and reenter through the rear door, if they made it in time before the doors closed.



Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus at around 6 p.m., Thursday, December 1, 1955, in downtown Montgomery. She paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of back seats reserved for blacks in the "colored" section, which was near the middle of the bus. As the bus traveled along its regular route, all of the white-only seats in the bus filled up. The bus reached the third stop in front of the Empire Theater, and several white passengers boarded. In 1900, Montgomery had passed a city ordinance for the purpose of segregating

So, following standard practice, bus driver James F. Blake noted that the front of the bus was filled with white passengers and there were two or three men standing, and thus moved the "colored" section sign behind Parks and demanded that four black people give up their seats in the middle section so that the white passengers could sit.

By Parks' account, Blake said, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." Three of them complied. Parks moved, but toward the window seat; she did not get up to move to the newly repositioned colored section. Blake then said, "Why don't you stand up?" Parks responded, "I don't think I should have to stand up." And he said, "Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have to call the police and have you arrested." I said, "You may do that."

That evening, Nixon conferred with Alabama State College professor Jo Ann Robinson about Parks' arrest and case. Robinson, a member of the Women's Political Council (WPC), stayed up all night mimeographing over 35,000 handbills announcing a bus boycott. The Women's Political Council was the first group to officially endorse the boycott.





On Sunday, December 4, 1955, plans for the Montgomery Bus Boycott were announced at black churches in the area, and a front page article in The Montgomery Advertiser helped spread the word. At a church rally that night, attendees unanimously agreed to continue the boycott until they were treated with the level of courtesy they expected, until black drivers were hired, and until seating in the middle of the bus was handled on a first-come basis.

That Monday night, 50 leaders of the African American community gathered to discuss the proper actions to be taken in response to Parks' arrest. E.D. Nixon said, "My God, look what segregation has put in my hands!" Parks was the ideal plaintiff for a test case against city and state segregation laws. Martin Luther King stated that, "Mrs. Parks...was regarded as one of the finest citizens of Montgomery—not one of the finest Negro citizens, but one of the finest citizens of Montgomery." Parks was securely married and employed, possessed a quiet and dignified demeanor, and was politically savvy. It rained the day of the boycott, but the black community persevered. Some rode in carpools, while others traveled in black-operated cabs that charged the same fare as the bus, 10 cents. Most of the remainder of the 40,000 black commuters walked, some as far as 20 miles. In the end, the boycott lasted for 382 days. Dozens of public buses stood idle for months, severely damaging the bus transit company's finances, until the law requiring segregation on public buses was lifted. The black community's bus boycott marked one of the largest and most successful mass movements against racial segregation. It sparked many other protests, and it catapulted King to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.