

We, TOO, Are AMERICA

*A Tribute for
Black History Month*

by Erin Dealey
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(COMPANY forms two lines, stage left and stage right, with lines facing each other. EACH holds a simple mask behind his/her back. Each mask has one of the following names written clearly and as large as possible. The order is as follows: [NOTE: Females can hold male masks or vice versa, if you do not have the exact ratio of males/females to match the characters. In scenes when gender is preferred, another actor might reappear as the character, holding the appropriate mask. "Actor #1"=mask #1/Matthew Henson.])

Stage Right

1. Matthew Henson
3. Booker T. Washington
5. James P. Beckwourth
7. Ida B. Wells-Barnett
9. Garrett Morgan
11. Phillis Wheatley
13. Sojourner Truth
15. Frederick Augustus Douglass
17. Guion S. Bluford, Jr.
19. Benjamin Banneker
21. Peter Salem
23. Mary Francis Berry
25. Langston Hughes

Stage Left

2. Mary McLeod Bethune
4. William Edward Burghardt DuBois
6. Ira Aldridge
8. Dr. Charles Drew
10. Dr. Carter G. Woodson
12. David Walker
14. Harriet Tubman
16. Dr. Daniel Hale Williams
18. Edmonia Lewis
20. Rosa Parks
22. Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable
24. Elizabeth Eckford

All

(Cheat out so as to face audience, sing, lively tempo)

Go Tell it on the Mountain
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain,
Let my people go.

(COMPANY continues to hum, as ALL turn to face upstage in their lines. ACTORS in both lines continue to move slowly to the upstage position, backs to audience, humming, until it is his/her turn to cross down as follows:)

Actor #1.

(Up right, turns and begins to cross downstage ,diagonally, ending up down left, where (S)HE SPEAKS DISTINCTLY, AND WITH THE DIGNITY EACH NAME DESERVES.)

Matthew Henson.

(Actor #1. holds mask--with name facing the audience--in front of face.)

Actor #2.

(Goes next, crossing diagonally from up left to down right, where (S)HE SPEAKS DISTINCTLY, AND WITH THE DIGNITY EACH NAME DESERVES.)

Mary McLeod Bethune

(#2. holds mask--with name facing the audience--in front of face.)

(This ROLL CALL continues as a litany, in numerical order, with EACH ACTOR speaking one at a time in the downstage position, (odd numbers=down left; even numbers=down right) and then following ACTORS 1.& 2. as they move towards down center, still facing the audience with masks in front of face. The result should

be one line at "curtain line" with ACTORS 1. & 2. at center.

Example:

24,22,20,18,16,14,12,10,8,6,4,2,1,3,5,7,9,11,13,15,17,19,21,23,25

Humming stops.)

Narrator #1

(Enters DL.)

[NOTE: Narrators may be someone new or ACTOR who steps from the line and holds mask behind back.]

These Americans played a great part in the history of the United States.

(Optional: sound of military drums.)

Actor #21

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible. PETER SALEM)

In 1775, The British attacked American positions on Bunker Hill. John Pitcairn, the British commander, shouted,--

Actor #20

(Steps forward, mask behind back, as PITCAIRN, with British accent. Drums stop. To Americans at left.)

Surrender, you rebels! The day is ours!

(Actor #21/PETER SALEM kneels, raises "musket" in downstage hand, "trigger finger" [downstage hand] also holding mask to face.)

Narr. #1

A black soldier fired his musket.

(PETER SALEM; Actor #21 fires "musket". [kettle drum?] PITCAIRN "dies". Actors #24 & 22 carry him out R.)

And Pitcairn fell dead. Peter Salem was an American hero. The American soldiers raised a reward for Peter Salem, and presented him to General George Washington.

(Drums begin again. Actors 23 & 25 hoist PETER SALEM/Actor #21 on their shoulders and THEY exit L. Drums stop.)

Actor #19

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

In 1789, Benjamin Banneker worked closely with French architect Pierre L'Enfant to design our nation's capital. But there was no money to build the city at that time. L'Enfant was so angry with President Washington when he heard this, he returned to France, and took the plans with him. Benjamin Banneker drew a new set of plans, based on the original design, with the streets extending out from the Capitol building like rays of the sun. Banneker's plans were used to build the great city of Washington D.C.

Actor #16

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

Dr. Daniel Hale Williams performed the first open-heart surgery in 1893. Without the help of blood transfusions, or X-rays, he successfully repaired a tear in the tissue around a heart.

Actor # 8

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

Blood transfusions were unheard of until World War II, when Dr. Charles Drew's research in blood preservation was responsible for saving many lives. Dr. Drew's work led to the founding of Blood Banks.

Actor #11

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

Writer Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa, and sold as a slave when she was 8 years old. Her owners discovered she had a talent for writing. George Washington read her poetry. In 1773, she was honored in England at the court of George III.

Actor #17

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

In 1983, Lieutenant Colonel Guion S. Bluford, Jr. was one of 5 crew members aboard the spaceship Challenger's successful mission. He was the first black American to fly in space.

Actor # 18

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

Edmonia Lewis was the first American black woman to be recognized for her work as a sculptor. Her earliest work was exhibited in Chicago in 1870, and Rome, Italy in 1871.

Actor #9

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

In 1923, Garret A. Morgan invented and patented the traffic light.

Actor #1

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

In 1909, Matt Henson was the first man to set foot on the North Pole.

Actor# 6

(Steps forward, lowering mask, with name still visible.)

Actor Ira Aldridge's name is honored in England's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. During his 40 years on stage, he performed Shakespeare to audiences in England, Germany, the United States and Russia.

Narr. #1

Their names may not be as familiar to you as Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, or Michael Jordan--

Narrator #2

(Enters DL, wearing big blue cardboard mailbox.)

OR Politician Shirley Chisholm; Poet Laureate, Maya Angelou, or Whitney Houston--

Narr. #1

(X to C, Trying to carry on as if nothing peculiar has happened.)

--but their contributions are just as important.

(Actors #1,6,8,9,11,16,17,18,19 exit DR and DL, with one last look at Narr. #2, who crosses to C. Remaining COMPANY "fall out" of position, in pairs and groupings, wondering what's going on.)

Narr. #1 (cont'd)

(Stage whisper)

What are you doing in that mailbox?

Narr. #2

(proudly)

You like it? I made it myself! *(To Audience)* In 1891, inventor Phillip Downing of Boston, Massachusetts, designed and patented the big blue mailboxes we use today!

Narr. #1

(Still whispering.)

That's not in the script!

Narr. #2

Well I think it's important!

Stage Manager

(Enters with script DR, not happy. Note: the rest of COMPANY reacts to the following, each in his/her own way.)

What's going on???????

Narr. #2

(narrators BOTH SPEAK AT ONCE WHILE while crossing DR.)

I was just trying to help. There are a whole lot more than these 25 African-Americans who have made important contributions to our lives! They all deserve recognition!

(continues to ad lib until STAGE MANAGER yells "QUIET".)

Narr. #1

We're right in the middle of our opening scene and (S)he walks in wearing a mailbox!! A mailbox! It's not even in the script! This is supposed to be a serious, dignified play for Black History Month and "Mr./Ms. Mailbox" here has ruined it all!

(Ad lib ARGUMENT; until STAGE MANAGER cue: "QUIET!".)

Stage Manager

O.K. o.k.....

(This doesn't work.)

Ummm, the audience is watching....

(ditto)

QUIET!!!!

(This works.)

One at a time.

(BOTH start again.)

HEY!

(BOTH stop. To Narr. #2.)

You first.

Narr. #2

There are so many African Americans who deserve recognition for their contributions to our lives, I--

Narr. #1

You ruined the whole show! So much for a dignified tribute to Black History Month!

Narr. #2

The correct term is "African American".

Stage Manager

ALL RIGHT! THAT'S ENOUGH! (To N.2) You're absolutely right.

Narr. #2

See?

Stage Manager

African Americans have played a major role in our country's development, since the very beginning, but there is no possible way we can include everyone.

Narr. #1

(mimicking)

"See?"

Stage Manager

So could we possibly continue our program the way it was rehearsed?

Narr. #2

Well, sure, I....

Narr. #1

Thank you.

Stage Manager

(exiting)

Good.

(COMPANY: each takes his/her place in line as before.)

Narr.#1

For many years, Americans knew very little about the contributions of Black people--or African-Americans.--

Narr. #2

(To N.1)

Actually, in the early years, the term was Negro.

(N. 1 silences N.2 with a look, and N.2 runs out DR quickly.)

Narr. #1

Dr. Carter G. Woodson wanted to do something about that.

(ACTOR #10 steps forward. ALL COMPANY MEMBERS still in line exit quietly to the closest side.)

He was born in Virginia in 1875. His family was so poor, there wasn't enough money to send him to school regularly...

Actor #10

(WOODSEN /Mask up)

When I was 17, I worked in the coal mines to earn money for my education. It was hard work, but I was determined. I was 22 years old when I graduated from high school. 22 and very proud.

Narr. #1

But he didn't stop there. By 1912, Carter Woodson had a Ph.D. from Harvard, a teaching degree, and had studied for a year in Asia and Europe--including the Sorbonne in Paris, France!

Narr. #2

(Re-enters DR, without mailbox.)

Dr. Carter G. Woodson is often called The Father of Black History. He began the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915. Black History Week was first observed in 1926, to focus on the achievements of African Americans.

Actor #10

(WOODSEN/ Mask up.)

I chose February because of the birth dates of two great Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Feb. 12th, and Frederick Douglass celebrated on Feb. 14th.

Actor #15

(Enters L as FREDERICK DOUGLAS, mask up. Crosses to DLC.)

Like most slaves, I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters--to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell his birthday.¹

¹ Douglass, Frederick; Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Dolphin Books, New York, 1963, p. 1.

Actor #10

(Mask down)

Frederick Augustus Douglass wrote those words in 1845. He was sent to Baltimore to be a servant, where he learned to read and write secretly with the help of his master's wife. His new master found out and stopped his lessons.

Narr. #2

(Crosses DLC, as Douglass' Master, MR. AULD, in Southern accent. Actor # 15 immediately drops to knees, reacting to Auld's words as if he had a whip, sinking lower each time.)

Why, it's unlawful and unsafe to teach a slave to read! Learning would spoil him! He should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do!² (MR. AULD exits.)

Actor #15

(Rising slowly, FREDERICK AUGUSTUS DOUGLASS, in a powerful voice, with controlled anger, mask up.)

I will run away. I will not stand it. I would rather be killed running than die as a slave.³

(Turns, crossing UR, remains facing upstage through the following.)

Narr. #1

At age 21, Douglass borrowed the papers of a free black sailor, dressed in a seaman's outfit, and escaped to New York. There he got in touch with people who worked for the Underground Railroad--a network of hiding places or "stations" for slaves escaping to the North.

² Ibid. p.36.

³ Peck, Jansen and Rosen; American Adventures, Steck-Vaughn Company; Austin, Texas, 1970, p.239.

(Narr.1 crosses UL. Actor 10 crosses to C. All turn and face upstage. Optional: N.1. A.10 & 15--and offstage voices, if desired--hum: "Follow the Drinking Gourd" once through, during the following.)

Actor #14

(Enters down right.)

The people who led the slaves from one station to another were called "conductors". One of the most famous conductors of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman. *(Mask up.)*

Actor #10

(Turns, faces audience. During these lines, Actor #14, as HARRIET TUBMAN, with a haunting, bird-like whistle, motions to Narr. #1, who turns forward--now a frightened escaped slave on the run. N.1 runs down center, then right to A.14, who shields him/her and gives directions to follow her.)

Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery at the age of 25. She made nineteen trips to the South in 10 years, secretly leading over 300 slaves to freedom. There was a reward of \$40,000 dollars offered for her capture. But no one could capture Harriet Tubman.

Actor #14

(HARRIET TUBMAN, faces audience, Mask up; N.1 freezes.)

Liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would have the other, for no man should take me alive.⁴

(A.14 quickly leads N.1 across and out down left, as Harriet Tubman and slave.)

⁴ Terry, Wallace; "Do You Know These Famous Americans?", *Parade Magazine*, Feb. 4, 1990.

Actor #10

(Actor 15 turns, faces forward, crossing down RC.)

The Underground Railroad sent Frederick Douglass to Massachusetts, where, in 1841, he spoke to a convention of the Anti-Slavery Society. He was a powerful speaker.

Actor #15

(FREDERICK DOUGLASS/ mask up)

I wrote the *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, sincerely hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system...⁵

(Actors 10 & 15 exit R.)

Narr. #3

(Enters DL, followed by Actor #13)

Another great leader--and the first black woman to speak out against slavery was Sojourner Truth. She was born a slave in New York but, because of a New York law forbidding slavery, she was freed in 1828.

Actor #13

(SOJOURNER TRUTH/ Mask up)

I was born Isabella Baumfree. I knew I was called to preach the truth. So I gave myself a new name: Sojourner Truth. It means "traveler for truth."

Narr. #3

She travelled through the Midwest and New England, speaking out against slavery. With her deep voice and fiery wit, she too, was a powerful, dramatic speaker.

⁵ Op. Cit., Douglass

Actor #13

(SOJOURNER TRUTH /Mask up.)

I felt so tall within. I felt as if the power of the nation was with me.⁶

Actor #12

(Enters DR, mask down, but still visible.)

David Walker was another important leader in the struggle against slavery. He was born a free man in North Carolina in 1785, but he wanted freedom for all people of his race.

Narr. #3

He wrote and helped distribute *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the United States. In 1829, he published a booklet called An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World.

Actor #12

(DAVID WALKER/ Mask up.)

Fight for your freedom! I urge you to get an education!

Actor #13

Soon after his booklet was published, David Walker died mysteriously. Many people believed he was murdered...

(COMPANY members, masks down, enter from upstage in several rows, singing "O Freedom". THEY stop at C. Narr. 3, Actors 12 & 13 join them. After song, Actors 3 & 4 step forward from COMPANY. #3 stage right, #4 stage left.)

⁶ Op. Cit. ;Terry, Wallace.

Actor #3

(Mask down, but still visible.)

After the Civil War, two of the greatest African-American leaders to work for civil rights were Booker T. Washington--

(Mask up.)

Actor #4

(Mask down, but still visible.)

--and William E. B. DuBois.

(Mask up.)

Actor #3

(BOOKER T. WASHINGTON; Washington's supporters--no more than 1/3 of COMPANY, some with plain side of mask up, others without [Some may use masks as fans.]--begin to gather behind him at L as he speaks, applauding and nodding in agreement.)

We must go slowly...Our people need job skills first. No race can prosper till it learns there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.⁷ We must work hard and make money, and in time, the whites will come to respect us.

Actor #4

(WILLIAM E. DUBOIS; DuBois' supporters--no more than 1/3 of COMPANY, the majority with plain side of mask up--join with him at R as he speaks. THEY are much more vocal in their agreement.)

Be proud of who you are! Stand up for your rights! Demand equality now!

⁷ Op. Cit., Peck, Jansen, & Rosen; p.358.

Actor #2

*(Mask behind back, steps down from remaining "neutral" COMPANY at center.
Actor #3 & 4 and their groups freeze.)*

As you can see, Washington and DuBois shared the same goal, but their approaches were very different. Washington was born a slave. He was 9 years old when a Union soldier told him he was free.

Washington Supporters

(Assign the following lines, said in support of their leader, to different speakers in the WASHINGTON group.)

He worked in the mines before and after school to afford an education!

He worked his way through college and became a teacher.

There was poverty everywhere. And no job skills.

Instead of subjects like Latin, Greek, and Law, Booker T. Washington's school taught practical things such as farming, and carpentry.

Mr. Washington is right! The Negro should work hard and learn a trade. Negroes will be respected more if they have money and own property.

Actor #2

(WASH and supporters freeze again.)

DuBois grew up in poverty also. But he and his parents--a mixture of French, Dutch, and African ancestry--had always been free. Most of DuBois' friends were white and well off.

Actor #4

(WILLIAM E. DUBOIS /Mask up)

One day, a white girl insulted me in school. Then it dawned on me that I was different from the others, shut out from their world by a great veil.⁸

DuBois Supporters

(Assign the following lines, said in support of DuBois, to different speakers in the DUBOIS group.)

He was the top student in his high school.

In 1895, he became the first African-American to earn a PhD from Harvard University.

But no white college would give Dr. DuBois a teaching job. Instead, he began teaching at a small black college.

In 1910, he helped form the NAACP: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

We want the right to vote and we want it now! We want discrimination to end! We want our children educated. Courage brothers! We must not flinch! Above are the everlasting stars!⁹

(Actors 3 & 4 lead their groups out--#3=off right, #4=off left--at the same time. Groups ad lib their support and echo beliefs of their leaders. Center group remains.)

⁸ Ibid. p.359

⁹ Ibid. p.361

(Ad libs (examples)

WASH. group: "The time is not ripe.", "We must move slowly.", etc.

DUBOIS group: "Protest Jim Crow!", "Equality now!", etc.)

Actor #2

(Stepping further DC from GROUP at C. MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE / Mask down but name visible.)

Teacher Mary McLeod Bethune believed in education. Imagine a society where children were not allowed to read or write.

(5 COMPANY members move into a diagonal "school" formation, stage right of Actor #2. I.E., THEY act as Bethune's students, sitting in "rows", backs to the audience, on their knees, some writing, others reading, etc.)

With \$1.50 in her pocket, she started a school with 5 students, in an old building near the dump.

Students

(The following lines should be assigned to different students, each of whom raises his/her hand and is recognized by a nod or a point from Actor #2, mask up--as MISS BETHUNE.

There were wooden crates and boxes for desks and chairs.

She got donations from churches, civic organizations, and clubs.

She even sold sweet potato pies and cakes to help finance her school!

(Remaining COMPANY members take their places as students in the "school". Assign one of the new STUDENTS the following line, which is said standing as "students" take their "seats":)

Her school for five little girls grew to become Bethune College, in Daytona Beach, Florida. Today it is known as Bethune-Cookman College, an outstanding 4-year college. *(S/He sits.)*

Actor #2

(MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE/ Mask up, at center, to audience.)

"Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it might be a diamond in the rough."

(Actor #2 exits left, followed by "STUDENTS".)

Narr. #2

("Gallops" in up left to down right, wearing cowboy hat, plain mask up.)

YeeeeeeHaw!!! Ride 'em, cowboy!!!!

Stage Manager

(Enters down right, stopping N.2)

What are you doing now?

Narr. #2

I'm a cowboy! Yahoo!

Stage Manager

I can see that...

Narr. #2

A lot of people don't know that cowboys like Bose Ikard, rodeo star Bill Pickett, and sharpshooter Nat Love *(shoots imaginary gun)* were African-American. There were hunters and trappers, mountain men--women, too! Mary Fields escaped slavery and moved to Montana, where she became an expert stage coach driver!

(Holds imaginary reins and drives the coach.)

And explorers Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable, or James Beckwourth-

Actor #22

(Running in from left, mask down but visible.)

Hey! That's my part!

Actor #5

(Entering quickly down right, mask down but visible.)

Did I miss my cue?

Narr. #2

(Seeing Du Sable and Beckwourth masks.)

Oh... Sorry.

Actor #22

What's the deal?

Stage Manager

("Escorting" N.2 off stage R.)

My very helpful friend, here, was just about to ride off into the sunset. Weren't you pardner?

Narr. #2

You bet.

(After a pause.)

Actor #22

(Mask down but name is visible.)

Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable founded the city of Chicago. He was born in Haiti, in 1745. When he was 20, he was sent by his father--a rich French merchant--to find new business in America for the family company. He lived among the Potawatomi tribe and became a very successful trader. He built a trading post at a place the Native Americans called "Eschikago". Today we call it Chicago. *(Exits DR, Mask up.)*

Actor # 5

(Mask down but name is visible.)

James P. Beckwourth scouted for John Fremont, rode with Kit Carson, and lived among the Blackfeet and Crow nations. He became a great Crow warrior and chief. He discovered the pass through the Sierra Nevada mountains, known as Beckwourth Pass.

(Exits DR, mask up.)

Actor # 7

(Enters L, mask up, x to C. Then mask down, but name visible.)

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was just as courageous. During the late 1800's, the lynch law ruled the South. Thousands of African-Americans were unfairly accused of crimes such as rape--often for just looking at a white woman--and lynched. In her newspaper, Ms. Wells-Barnett dared to report that these accusations were false. Even when a mob destroyed her office, she did not quit.

(COMPANY members--enough to form "bus" in next scene-- enter from each side, with folding chairs carried inconspicuously in their upstage hands. Chairs remain folded at their side during the song. THEY join Actor #7--mask now behind back-- in several lines at C. ALL sing "We Shall Overcome", first verse.)

Narr. #4

(X DL from COMPANY, mask behind back. Actor #20, ROSA PARKS, enters slowly DR. Mask up.)

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery Alabama, a 42 year old black seamstress named Rosa Parks headed for her bus stop on Cleveland Avenue. She was tired after a long day at work. Her feet hurt.

(COMPANY members form "bus" with chairs, diagonally upstage from far LC white bus driver, white passengers in the "front" section of the bus--where some empty seats remain, and black passengers--ie. plain masks up--in "back" URC. The Black section is full. There are four empty seats in the middle.)

Bus Driver

In those days, city buses were segregated. Whites sat in front. Black people sat in the back. And the middle

(Three Black passengers--masks up--enter from off right, pay fare and board by rear door, sitting in middle section. One empty seat remains in the middle.)

was "no man's land"--blacks could sit there if the white section wasn't full.

Narr.4

(Actor #20 crosses to rear door of bus, boards, and sits in downstage seat of middle section.)

This is where Rosa Parks sat that evening, after paying her fare, and boarding by the rear door.

Passengers

(Assign lines accordingly to those already on bus. Several white passengers enter, masks up, from L, board front door of bus and fill the white section.)

After a few stops, the seats in the white section were filled.

Then we got to the Empire Theatre stop.

(6 more white passengers enter down left, and line up at front entrance.)

Bus Driver

You back there! You know the rules. You four will have to stand so these nice folks can sit down!

Narr. #4

(Three Black Passengers in the middle section stand and move to the back of the bus, holding on to overhead hand rails.)

Three of the Black people gave up their seats. Rosa Parks politely but firmly refused.

Actor #20

(ROSA PARKS) Please. I need to sit down.

Bus Driver

I said you need to get outta that seat. Bus company regulations!

Narr. #4

Mrs. Parks' was tired, but her voice was as solid as steel.

Actor #20

No.

Bus Driver

(Pulls emergency brake, and exits bus, x DL to two policemen, who have just entered DL on their "beat".)

The driver stopped the bus immediately and went to get the police.

(Bus Driver and policemen x to bus and enter. During the following, DRIVER remains near his chair and points to Actor #20/ROSA. OFFICERS x to ROSA and pantomime "ordering" her off the bus. THEY take HER off bus, cross DR to "Police Station" and exit.)

Narr. #4

He was back with two policemen who ordered her off the bus. They took her to the Police station, where she was finger printed and put in jail. Rosa Parks' arrest was the beginning of a decade of protests against segregation.

(Bus passengers drop character, stand and x downstage C of chairs, resuming lines in COMPANY as before. Sing last part of first verse of "We Shall Overcome": "Oh, deep in my heart..."

Narr. #5

(Remains standing with COMPANY members. Several members in the back row--those who will be Administrators/Bystanders in next scene--move chairs quickly and quietly UC, in rows to symbolize Central High. A BENCH is placed DR.)

In 1957, a Federal judge ordered that nine black students were to be admitted to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused, and called out the National Guard to prevent the students from entering.

(Actor #24 steps forward from COMPANY, stage right, mask up.)

Elizabeth Eckford was one of those students. These are her words:

Actor #24

(ELIZABETH ECKFORD; COMPANY members stand C with "bayonets"--possibly masks held at "attention"?--, as National Guard. School--represented by the chairs--is behind them UC. OTHERS in groups at L and DL are bystanders, news reporters, school officials. A smaller group of more sympathetic bystanders are at R.)

"The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had let the white

Actor #24

students in. He too didn't move. When I tried to squeeze past him,

(One GUARDSMAN does this.)

he raised his bayonet."

Company Member

([ie one of the crowd.] GUARDSMEN move downstage, to "close in" around Actor #24. ELIZABETH ECKFORD)

"And then the others guards closed in, and they raised their bayonets."

(Note: Throughout the following, COMPANY members act out the narration.)

Actor #24

(ELIZABETH ECKFORD) "They glared at me with a mean look. I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me."

Company Member

(In group at R.)

"They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling,"

Bystander

"Lynch her! Lynch her!"

Actor #24

(ELIZABETH ECKFORD; Crossing DLC to crowd.)

"I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob--someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face. But when I looked at her again, she spat on me." *(WOMAN LC spits on A.#24, who backs up DC. Part of CROWD at L moves slowly DL, then DLC.)*

"They came closer, shouting--"

Bystander

(In group at DLC.)

"No [black girl] is going to get in our school. Get out of here!"

Actor #24

(ELIZABETH ECKFORD) "I turned back to the guards, but their faces told me I wouldn't get help from them." *(Looks DR.)* "Then I looked down the block and saw a bench at the bus stop. I thought, 'If I can only get there, I will be safe.'" *(X wearily to bench DR.)*
"When I finally got there, I don't think I could have gone another step."

(Sits. SHE is trying not to cry. Small groups at L and LC form "crowd" which crosses DRC in front of "National Guard".)

"I sat down and the mob crowded up and began shouting all over again."

Bystander

"Drag her over to that tree! Let's take care of her!"

Actor #24

(MAN from SYMPATHETIC GROUP at R x down to A. #24, and sits R of her.)

"Just then a white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me, and patted my shoulder. He raised my chin and said,"--

Man

"Don't let them see you cry."

(LADY x DR to L side of bench from GROUP at R.)

Actor #24

"Then a white lady came over too. She spoke to me --all nice--but I don't remember now what she said."

(ALL but LADY and A#24 "fade" out of picture--ie. drop character and back up or move slowly to C forming COMPANY once again, in lines as before. THEY watch the scene attentively, with solemn faces.)

(LADY sits.)

"She put me on the bus and sat next to me...The next thing I remember"

(A #24 stands slowly.)

" I was standing in front of the School for the Blind where Mother works..."

(A #24 X DRC. Point of Focus, "Mother" is at back of audience. Mask is down just enough to see actor's face, name clearly visible.)

"Mother was standing at the window with her head bowed, but she must have sensed I was there because she turned around. She looked as if she had been crying, and I wanted to tell her I was all right. But I couldn't speak."

(Pause, fighting back the tears.)

"She put her arms around me, and I cried."¹⁰

(COMPANY at C all join hands and sing 4th verse of "We Shall Overcome"--ie "We'll walk hand in hand...", crossing DC during song. LADY x to COMPANY and join in. Front row of COMPANY joins hands with Actor #24 when THEY reach her DC.)

Actor #25

(Steps forward, mask down but name is visible. LANGSTON HUGHES)

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.629-630.

Actor #25

They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh.
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,--

I, too, am America.¹¹

Actor #23

(Steps from COMPANY, mask down, but name still visible.)

This poem by Langston Hughes is one of many he wrote in his lifetime. Like Americans everywhere, he believed we are--

¹¹ "Epilogue" by Langston Hughes
The Langston Hughes Reader, Braziller, 1958.
Selected Poems, 1959.

All

(Hands over heart as Flag Salute.)

"...one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Actor #23

In the words of educator Mary Frances Berry, "The time you need to do something is when no one else is willing to do it, when people are saying it can't be done."¹²

All

(Speaking in unison.)

I, too, am America.

(All sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing". Actors 23 &25 rejoin COMPANY.)

The End

We, Too, Are America--a tribute to Black History

Cast: Flexible cast. 30 speaking parts--5 narrators, 25 "masks". Some roles may be combined.

Properties/Costumes:

Masks: Hand held masks-- enlarged photos of actual historical figures with name printed clearly in large bold letters so audience can read it. (Laminate; attach a paint stick as handle--at neck. Optional: Back side of mask can have the character's lines on it.)

Variation: Masks with names only, printed clearly in large bold letters so audience can read it. Combine with power point showing photos of actual historical figures.

¹² The Quotable Woman, Running Press, Philadelphia ,PA, 1991.

Simple costume pieces/props may be added for specific characters, such as hat and purse for Rosa Parks, school books for Elizabeth Eckford, etc. Others may be imagined or pantomimed.

Sound: (Optional) "Military" drums, kettle drum.

Songs*: (Public domain) "We Shall Overcome," "Follow the Drinking Gourd," "O Freedom," *"Lift Every Voice and Sing"*. **Others may certainly be used instead.*