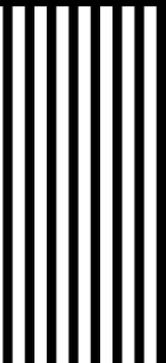


DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI

BY CARLYLE BROWN



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**



DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI
Copyright © 2018, Carlyle Brown

All Rights Reserved

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that performance of DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI is subject to payment of a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including without limitation professional/amateur stage rights, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all other forms of mechanical, electronic and digital reproduction, transmission and distribution, such as CD, DVD, the Internet, private and file-sharing networks, information storage and retrieval systems, photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is placed upon the matter of readings, permission for which must be secured from the Author's agent in writing.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions and Canada for DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI are controlled exclusively by Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 440 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance the written permission of Dramatists Play Service, Inc., and paying the requisite fee.

Inquiries concerning all other rights should be addressed to Bret Adams, Ltd., 448 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036. Attn: Alexis Williams.

SPECIAL NOTE

Anyone receiving permission to produce DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears, including printed or digital materials for advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. Please see your production license for font size and typeface requirements.

Be advised that there may be additional credits required in all programs and promotional material. Such language will be listed under the "Additional Billing" section of production licenses. It is the licensee's responsibility to ensure any and all required billing is included in the requisite places, per the terms of the license.

SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS AND RECORDINGS

Dramatists Play Service, Inc. neither holds the rights to nor grants permission to use any songs or recordings mentioned in the Play. Permission for performances of copyrighted songs, arrangements or recordings mentioned in this Play is not included in our license agreement. The permission of the copyright owner(s) must be obtained for any such use. For any songs and/or recordings mentioned in the Play, other songs, arrangements, or recordings may be substituted provided permission from the copyright owner(s) of such songs, arrangements or recordings is obtained; or songs, arrangements or recordings in the public domain may be substituted.

DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI was developed by the Playwrights' Center and presented by Carlyle Brown & Company at the East Side Freedom Library in March 2017. It was directed by Noël Raymond, the lighting design was by Mike Wangen, the sound design was by C. Andrew Mayer, the costume design was by Clare Brauch, the prop design & installation art were by Kellie Larson, and the stage manager was April Harding. The cast was as follows:

JIMMY Mikell Sapp
JOHN Tony Sarnicki
ELLEN Adelin Phelps
SINGER/FANNY LOU HAMER Mari Harris

DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI was a commission from the Theater Department in the School of Fine Arts and the Center for American and World Cultures, Miami University of Ohio.

CHARACTERS

JIMMY

JOHN

ELLEN

DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI SONGS*

The songs in *Down in Mississippi* are very specific to the times and necessary to the plot, action, and evocation of feelings expressed throughout in the play. These songs were consciously sung to remind Civil Rights activists of their collective purpose, to give them faith, courage, and a mutual bond in the face of mortal dangers.

—Carlyle Brown

*Please see the note on songs/recordings at the back of this volume. All the songs suggested for use in *Down in Mississippi* are suggestions only; rights must be acquired from the copyright holder to use any copyrighted song in your production. Songs in the public domain may be substituted in any instance of a suggested copyrighted song.

“He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our despair, against our will comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”

—Aeschylus

DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI

A song like “Down in Mississippi” plays.

Scene 1

JIMMY. When I was a kid I used to so much admire all those white heroes in the movies and on TV who believed in something so completely that they would die for that cause. Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and the Lone Ranger and his Indian companion Tonto, heroes who were risking their lives for the cause of Freedom and Justice and the American way. ... That was in the fifties and little did I know that I had something close to me like that, as close to me as the color of my skin. There was two things I seen that made me change my mind about who was and who was not a hero. The first was how they killed fourteen-year-old Emmett Till down in Leflore County down there in Mississippi. They showed him right there in *Jet* magazine, his face mangled like an old, dried-up rotten potato 'cause they said that he had whistled at a white woman. Just thinking about that just fills me up with nothing but fear and hate. ... And I don't much like that feeling. That feeling like you've been cut off at the knees and you're just a suspended torso floating in the air where there is no sense of feeling for anything but fear. It's just too overwhelming. I can only fill up with so much fear and so much hate and then I got to fight. Trouble is that any Negro who is ready to fight, on any level, has a very short life span here in these United States of America. So you sit on that fear and you sit on that hate like a steaming volcano just ready to explode. ... I didn't even want to think about it. I just put it right out of my head. I was just glad that I was a nigger in the Big Apple and wasn't a nigger in Mississippi. ... But, then I seen something on the TV, on the news, that made me change my thinking once again. It

was a little girl going to school, a little black girl going to school. It was her first day. She was six years old going to the first grade at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans of all places. But she wasn't just going to school, she was integrating that school, escorted by Federal Marshals no less, and every day all around her there was this mob of red-faced angry crackers yelling at her and jeering at her and threatening her life. And I'm wondering to myself how can she do it? How could she contain all that fear in that little body? How could that little girl possibly put up a wall against all that hate? How could a child so little so young have such mastery over her self? They say her momma told her to pray for them crackers 'cause what they was doing to her was the same thing they did to Jesus. I don't know about all that, but the one thing I do know from watching that little girl on the glow of that TV was that she wasn't just going to that school for herself, she was doing that for me, for all of us, for all Black people. And seeing that little girl going through all her struggles and still standing up, made me suddenly realize that she had just changed my life forever. ...So now I'm going down, down to Mississippi, down in Mississippi where a Negro is lower than a dog, his life ain't worth a nickel, and he better not complain about it. That's what I'm doing out here at Western College in Oxford, Ohio, of all places preparing and training to do that. Training with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Black folks, and we going down to Mississippi to register Negroes to vote no matter what them crackers say. I'm going to prove to myself that there's a light shining in me just like there was in that little girl. The only problem is that our leaders, they say we got to be nonviolent which isn't natural. Why the first law of nature is that most natural and absolute of laws, the law of self-defense. But the SNCC people say if I'm going to be with the program, I got to get with the program. They say I got to learn it, got to practice it like a discipline. Learn it like it was an instinct. 'Cause you can't fake it. It's got to be real. They say, you've got to give up that power within you and surrender it to love.

Lights up on John.

JOHN. Nigger!! Come over here! ...Boy, don't you hear me talking to you I said get your ass over here! Boy! What's your name?

JIMMY. Jimmy Waits sir...

JOHN. Nigger, where you from?

JIMMY. I'm from New York City sir.

JOHN. New York City? You must be lost boy. You must a took a wrong turn in the road, 'cause you a long way from New York City now. This is Mississippi and what the hell you doing here anyhow?

JIMMY. I'm here to help register Mississippi Negroes to vote in the next general election.

JOHN. Register niggers to vote? How old are you nigger?

JIMMY. I'm twenty-one years old sir.

JOHN. Twenty-one years old? Goddamn nigger twenty-one years old barely old enough to register himself, come down here to get other niggers to register to vote. Boy, if I had you over by my way I'd just go on and kill you. Niggers down here don't need to vote. And before I let you goddamned nigger communist son of a bitches come down here and start stirring things up where everything is fine, I'll just kill your black ass. You understand me boy?

JIMMY. Yes sir.

JOHN. If you want to help some niggers, why don't you help them niggers up north where you come from? ...I know what you integrationist niggers really want. It's white women, isn't it? That's what you all is doing all this for is 'cause you want our white women. Well, let me tell you boy white women is going to be the death of you yet.

JIMMY. Yes sir.

JOHN. Besides you can't have do with our white women the way I can have do with your nigger momma.

Jimmy pushes John.

JIMMY. You son of a...

JOHN. Hey Jimmy. What are you doing?

JIMMY. What am I doing? What are you doing, that's what I want to know.

JOHN. We're roleplaying here.

JIMMY. Oh yeah. Well, you're playing your role pretty damn good.

JOHN. What the hell is that suppose to mean?

JIMMY. You know what it means John. You're the one who's saying these words, giving them meaning and feeling. This isn't some script that somebody wrote down for you. You must know something about this.

JOHN. Look Jimmy I'm not even going to get into this with you. I didn't ask for this. I'm just following orders. Folks on the staff say you need your own personal nonviolent training. That you need special treatment, because they say you have some serious anger issues.

JIMMY. I DON'T GOT NO GODDAMN ANGER ISSUES!!!

JOHN. Their point exactly...and another thing... No cussing.

JIMMY. No cussing?

JOHN. No cussing. Profanity is against the law in Mississippi.

JIMMY. Profanity is against the law. How the hell are people going to talk?

JOHN. And it's against the law especially for you. There are lots of things in Mississippi that they can put you in jail for. We don't need our people in jail for profanity when they could be out canvassing and registering voters. Besides Mississippi Negroes are church people they don't like that kind of talk, especially calling the Lord's name in vain. They won't trust you with that kind of talk.

JIMMY. So that's why you here for the cause, is that it.

JOHN. Look Jimmy I know why I am here all right. I'm the SNCC white guy, the lowliest of the low. I'm the one that plays the stand-in for the enemy when the enemy isn't here.

JIMMY. Guilt is that it?

JOHN. Sure there's some of that. Why should I have all the privileges and opportunities just because I'm white? If you're not free then how the hell can I be?

JIMMY. ...As simple as that?

JOHN. No Jimmy not simple, complicated. It's very complicated. Look, I haven't been in SNCC for very long, but I've been to jail, shot at, called a nigger lover. Whatever you think of me I'm here. This isn't about me or you even, this is about the movement. If you can't get with the program you've got to go.

JIMMY. I've got to go!

JOHN. ...Look Jimmy those Mississippi Southerners will smell a guy like you a mile away. Your pride, your sense of dignity, your self-assuredness, they'll kill you for that Jimmy. They can't spread their fear with guys like you walking around. They'll kill you. ...And then we'll have to bury you and have a funeral where we will laud about what a great hero you were for the cause and then we'll have to go back out in the rural communities to try to quiet people's fears and have to start all over again.

JIMMY. I don't get this. You're telling me how violent and vicious these people are and you're saying I've got to be completely passive.

JOHN. It isn't passive it's resistance, passive resistance. It isn't like we're not doing anything. It's action, we're taking action and bit by bit we're making change.

JIMMY. What are you some kind of pacifist?

JOHN. Yeah, I'm a pacifist my family are Quakers.

JIMMY. ...Quakers?

JOHN. Yeah Quakers, I mean what good does killing do?

JIMMY. It means that there's one less of them to brutalize you.

JOHN. And then there're ten more of them to take their place and that only means more black bodies laying dead in the Delta swamps or drowned in a river. Nonviolence is the only way. It's the SNCC way. And it's the only way if you're going to be part of SNCC.

JIMMY. ...The only way?

JOHN. Yes, the only way.

JIMMY. So, what do I have to do?

JOHN. Take the abuse.

JIMMY. And how do I do that?

JOHN. I don't know. That's up to you. It's your choice.

JIMMY. Well you said you've been in SNCC awhile, been jailed, shot at. How do you do it?

JOHN. It's different every time.

JIMMY. So the fear and the anger they never go away?

JOHN. No they never go away.

JIMMY. Well, how does that work?

DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI

by Carlyle Brown

2 men, 1 woman

Three college students—a black man, a white woman, and a white man—travel to the dangerous world of Mississippi in 1964 to register Negro voters. Along the way, they discover that before they can change the world, they will have to change themselves. **DOWN IN MISSISSIPPI** is a celebration of a movement that gave birth to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Also by Carlyle Brown

ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER
BEEN...

BUFFALO HAIR
and others

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

ISBN 978-0-8222-3783-9



9 780822 237839