



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2011

Staying True To The Script: A Dramaturgical Examination of From The Mississippi Delta: Endesha Ida Mae Holland

Margarette Joyner

Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2377>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

COPYRIGHT

© Margarete Joyner – 2011

All Rights Reserved

**STAYING TRUE TO THE SCRIPT: A DRAMATURGICAL EXAMINATION OF
FROM THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: Endesha Ida Mae Holland**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

By Margarete Joyner

BFA – University of South Alabama – 2001

Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

May, 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First, I thank God of allowing me the opportunity to travel on this painfully beautiful journey. I would like to thank Ms. Holland for her honesty in sharing her life with me and the director who introduced me to the script. I would also like to thank the VCU Graduate School for giving me a scholarship to work on this project without the distraction of working a nine to five. And finally, I thank Noreen Barnes for her invaluable guidance, expertise and genuine concern for my well-being.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Beyond the Script	1
Obituary	30
The Script	32
The Staged Reading Process	37
Flyer	41
Actor Responses	42
Reviews	43
Etymology	46
Terms and their Meanings	52
Music	53
Poetry	62
Geography	65
Images	67
Past Productions	68
Bibliography	70
Vita	72

ABSTRACT

STAYING TRUE TO THE SCRIPT: A DRAMATURGICAL EXAMINATION OF FROM THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA: ENDESHA IDA MAE HOLLAND

By Margarett Joyner, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Advisor: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, VCU, Department of Theatre

In 2008, a director called me and asked if I would perform in Endesha Holland's "From the Mississippi Delta," and I was honored. There were two other women cast in the show and at the first read through I could visualize the places and situations we spoke of. Bits and pieces of my own life flashed in my mind as we read and I laughed, understood, sympathized, was angered and cried. When we were done, I knew I had been blessed to be a part of this journey.

Then the rehearsal process started and I quickly realized that something was drastically wrong. When one of the women asked the director what the meaning of several of the words in the script meant, he didn't know and rather than find out, he changed or cut them. Songs, that Ms. Holland specified to be performed in particular places were disregarded, changed or cut completely. Specifically, the opening song, "Trouble in Mind" was replaced with "Precious Lord," which immediately changed the tone of her story. Ms. Holland's journey didn't start out

in the church, it started in the “juke house” where the blues were played and sung. Messages were overlooked or misinterpreted, and the entire 11th scene of the script was taken out. By then I was fully committed as an actress and had to govern myself accordingly, but I was not pleased. We performed the “new” show for three weeks and at the end of it I vowed that one day I would direct the show as it was written.

In 2010, I took Dr. Noreen Barnes,’ (Virginia Commonwealth University) dramaturgy class and then understood why I was so disturbed by the above experience. I realized that before I could direct the script that I fell in love with, I would first have to do the research needed in order to produce it the way it was written. Although I am determined to make teaching my career of choice, I also have found that I am quite fascinated by the “digging” process of dramaturgy. I have been performing and writing for more than three decades and I am a staunch believer in staying true to the script. I believe there is a reason the writer chose the words s/he did and as artists, it is our duty to honor those choices. As directors, it is our job to make the written words of a script come to life as is, not to rewrite it. That is why I have chosen as my thesis project to take the script of *From the Mississippi Delta* and not only complete a dramaturgical analysis of it, but also to produce a staged reading exactly the way it was written, and as I believe Ms. Holland intended it to be done.

After this process, I may come to realize that changes and cuts in a script are necessary in order for the message to be conveyed clearly to an audience. Either way, I look forward to walking in Ms. Holland’s shoes, if only for a little while.

Beyond the Script

Ms. Endesha Ida Mae “Cat” Holland was born in a double shot-gun house, which would be considered a duplex in this day and age; at 114 East Gibb Street in Greenwood, Mississippi. She, her mother, two brothers and a sister all lived on one side and her mother’s “tenants” occupied the other. “Aint Baby“, her mother, rented out some rooms to permanent tenants and others by the hour to supplement her income. “A confused patch of petunias hugged the ground at the end of the front porch” (Holland, Memoirs 19). Endesha, whose birth name was Ida Mae, was the baby of the family so she got to spend more time with her mother than her siblings because they were at school during the day. She described her mother as a large, soft, brown, snuff dipping woman whose gaze was Sphinx-like. She wore glasses and never took them off until it was time to go to bed. She also made a living by taking in insurmountable amounts of ironing for white people and according to Ida Mae, she would get so tired that rather than quit, she would lie on the floor next to the ironing board and continue through the night until the job was done. Her mother told her stories about how white people lived on the other side of Gee Pee, as her neighborhood was called. She described how beautiful the houses were and how the lawns were manicured, unlike the potholed, dead grass neighborhood they lived in. It was a long time though before she actually got to go inside a white person’s house and of course a white person never came into hers. If the negative stigma that came with the area didn’t keep them away the roaches that scattered about the house as if to be other tenants surely would. Ironically, the roaches were the one thing that brought the two races together without incident because black people would catch the roaches and then sell them to white bait shop owners for a penny a piece.

Back then, the women stayed at home while the men worked mostly at the saw mill. While the children were out playing, the whistle would blow at noon time and that was indication that it was lunch time for the men and time for the women to get dinner started. Children with daddies would run to meet them and those that didn't watched the others. Ida Mae didn't have "a" daddy, she had three; a Christmas, Easter and Birthday daddy. Mr. Ethan came during the Christmas season to take them shopping; Mr. Warren, her real daddy, came during Easter to buy her new clothes; and Mr. Goosch came sometime in August and gave her a few dollars. Aint Baby described them all as good for nothing, and told her stories about them. She also told why she left home so that Ida Mae would know how to handle men when she had her own children. Her mother always told her these stories as she sat in her rocking chair on the porch, moving faster and faster as the story got juicier. One extremely sore spot with Aint Baby was whenever she talked about her own stepfather, Cal. She would literally throw up when talking about him because the anger and hurt was so deep. She would describe instances where he would deny them food to eat because he was saving it for the dogs. She talked about how Cal would beat Suaar, Aint Baby's mother, with a bullwhip until her clothes were saturated with blood. "Dose boys, Bruh and Son, act like dey don't see it, but us girls jumped on Cal Conner's back to pull him off's Suaar. Den Cal turn on us - he thowed me 'gainst de wall, hit Annie with' a wood plank, an' he like to beat Sweet to death!" (Holland, Memoirs 26). Many times Aint Baby would drink water to keep her stomach full and to keep from letting Cal know how hungry she was. Once she saw one of her brothers chewing on a piece of wood to take away the hunger pains and that's when she knew she had to get away. Aint Baby got up off her pallet on the floor and decided that she was going to the Delta. She left by herself, in the middle of the night with the moonlight as her guide. She hitched rides here and there but for the most part she walked.

The shotgun house she rented once she reached the Delta developed a bad reputation and so did their family. The amount of men that came in and out of the house to solicit sex had grown to be even more than Gee Pee, as the neighborhood was called, could handle. In spite of its reputation the town had respect for her mother and whenever anyone was in trouble, they came to Aint Baby. Dossie Ree, with her two children, was a permanent renter and could sing about Jesus so hard that one would think He was standing in the room. One day in a jealous rage, her boyfriend hit her in the head with a hammer; she didn't scream or cry out, she just sang "Amazing Grace" as Aint Baby worked to keep her from bleeding to death. Another tenant of Aint Baby's was Easter Mae; who provided sex for men whose wives hired her because they were pregnant or dying and couldn't serve them.

Despite its reputation, Gee Pee had a lot of good people in it. Mrs. Ellen, a white woman who owned the grocery store, would give Aint Baby items on credit whenever her husband wasn't around. Mr. Simon was the embalmer who worked on Emmett Till's body when it was brought in. Ida Mae and some of her friends were playing outside Turner Chapel when they got a peek at young Till's body.

Mr. Matthews was another fine man in the neighborhood who stood up to a white man for wanting to sleep with his wife, but was beaten and had acid poured on him by a mob of white men for doing so. It was during these experiences that Endesha learned that if she was going to be around white people, she'd better learn to stay in her place. She also found that if she wanted to be safe she needed to stay close to home.

In Greenwood, a celebratory parade marked all special occasions; a new preacher, holidays, etc. and her constant dream was to one day lead one of those parades. At nine years

old, she practiced daily, marching and throwing her makeshift baton that her brother Bud made for her out of an old broomstick. Nothing could stop her from practicing in the street every day; until she got hit by a car that nearly destroyed her leg. It was during her recovery time that she got to spend hours on end talking with but mostly listening to Aint Baby. She'd watch as Aint Baby would play act the stories she would tell while Ida Mae ate fruit and nuts that the white lady brought as consolation for running her over. Two of Aint Baby's favorite stories were talking about how proud everybody was going to be when she finally got her permit to practice being a midwife; and Ida Mae going to college. That way they could really be somebody. During that time, it was unthinkable that a black woman who couldn't read or write should have dreams but Aint Baby insisted that she not only dream, but to dream big, letting nothing get in the way.

Ida Mae's childhood best friend was Everlena Hoskins who lived in a shotgun house in Gritney, another neighboring community. They often played hooky from school, opting instead to hang out smoking cigarettes and talking "grown." But more than anything, storytelling and play-acting was the entertainment of the day; especially for those who couldn't afford to go to the Walthall picture show. "I never missed these sessions, and took every opportunity to perform. It was there that I began to learn what worked for an audience and what didn't." (Holland, Memoirs 62) It was after thunderous applause from her community and a quarter from Mr. Buckhannon, a local sugar daddy, that she realized she had a new dream; talking and getting paid for it was what she wanted to do. One day, Ida Mae and Evelena were forced to go to school because Evelena's mother stayed home from work and they had nowhere else to hang out. It was on that day the two girls discovered that desegregation was about to happen to their all black school. The town wanted to "bus" the black children into white schools because it was

believed that the black children weren't learning anything. An assembly was held at the all-white Stone Street High School with the town officials, the school board, a few parents and students from the all black Broad Street High School in attendance. The idea was to have the best reader from Broad Street High read a random story to prove that the black students were indeed learning. They chose a popular, light skinned girl, ironically named Queen, to represent them even though Ida Mae knew she could out recite her any day of the week. The assembly was led by the Greenwood Colored Marching Band and the little light girl was escorted to the auditorium by the finest driver in the colored side of town. She was then escorted into the auditorium and onto the stage by the captain of the football team. After the preliminary speakers were done, Queen Oliphant stepped up to the podium, opened the book and froze. The band played another tune to give the girl a chance to get herself together, but it didn't help. Murmuring broke out over the crowd, the principal was wiping his brow with a handkerchief, and Queen's mother was sobbing. Then Queen started crying and said she couldn't do it and ran out of the room. Ida Mae heard a voice telling her that Queen might not be able to do it but she could. She walked to the stage with teachers telling her to sit down and the principal waving his hand for someone to stop her, but Ida Mae kept walking. She went up to the stage while her heart pounded, picked up the book, opened it to a story called "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest Thayer and began to read. Once her confidence grew and she could see that she had the audience, she went into her play-acting mode just the way Aint Baby did. She had them waiting with baited breath as she dramatically brought the story to an end. The applause was thunderous and the children were not sent to other schools. The captain of the football team escorted Ida Mae off the stage and back to her seat; she truly felt like a queen. The whole town talked about

her with great pride for months. Even the white ladies sewing circle heard about it, which is how she came to be noticed by Miss Lawrence.

She had been to Miss Lawrence's house with Aint Baby a few times when Miss Victoria, who Aint Baby worked for, loaned her out on occasion. Mr. Lawrence was an invalid so Ida Mae never saw him because she was confined to the back porch or the kitchen. On one particular Saturday, Ida Mae would go by herself to babysit the Lawrence's granddaughter. When they arrived at the house, Miss Lawrence went inside and left the children outside playing. Little Miss Becky Ann would throw the ball as hard as she could causing bruises to form on Ida Mae's legs and stomach, even though Ida Mae would softly toss the ball to her. It was Ida Mae's eleventh birthday and Miss Lawrence came to the front door summoning her to come upstairs because Mr. Lawrence wanted to wish her a happy birthday. When she went up to Mr. Lawrence, he pulled the covers down to reveal his nakedness and the filth he laid in. Before she could react, Miss Lawrence picked her up and put her on the bed while Mr. Lawrence pulled her shorts and panties off. Suddenly she was on top of him. "I beat my hands against the wall, grabbing and pushing at the same time, looking for something to hold on to... Now he was on top of me. I wondered when it would end, it seemed like a lifetime to me. I began to think I was dying." (Holland, Memoirs 84) "Folks used to tell how, in the South, no white man wanted to die without having sex with a black woman. It was just seen as a part of life, and if you were white, there was so much on this earth in between the birthing and the dying. Only God had power over your life. But if you were black, you were always at the mercy of white people, and all you had in life was the hope of heaven. If you were white, dream and desire were possibilities, not madness or fantasy like they were for black people. And what was the white man's great dream, his burning desire? Have sex with a colored woman." (Holland, Memoirs

85) When Mr. Lawrence finished he wished her a happy birthday, threw her five dollars, and Miss Lawrence took her home never acknowledging the brutal act. Ida Mae kept her ordeal to herself vowing that if this was what it was like to have a birthday, she never wanted another one.

Aint Baby is the one who taught Ida Mae about Jesus. For a long time Ida Mae thought Jesus was in the house somewhere above the tar paper ceiling because Aint Baby would always lift her head up to the ceiling when she prayed. Only her prayers meant nothing to Ida Mae because all the pictures she saw of Jesus had him white. So no matter how many times Aint Baby lectured her about making something out of herself, life had beat her down so much that all she could think about was smoking, drinking and having a good time. At around fourteen, she had grown into a woman's body and now knew that she had something to use that would keep her off welfare and out of the cotton fields. Her first trick was with one of her brother's friends who paid her five dollars. The next was a white truck farmer who paid her ten dollars. She invested her money in new clothes to make herself look better. Her thought, if the "bull was going to throw you," as rape was called, you might as well get paid for it. But the lifestyle wasn't as easy as she let on. The better she looked on the outside, the worst she felt on the inside. Nonetheless, she fell in with the wrong crowd and did whatever she had to do to get attention. That is until Trick, the neighborhood bad boy, almost beat her to death just for fun. Ida Mae turned back to the church.

By now, Aint Baby had become well known for the miracles she would perform when it came to birthing babies. News was all over town about how she had saved many of the babies in town and how she had miraculously turned Miss Magnolia's baby around while it was still in the womb to keep her from being born breech. Between what she could do with her hands, the nature sack and the spirits she called upon, Aint Baby quickly received her midwife certificate

and became known as the Second Doctor Lady. When the doctors could do no more with a patient, she would be the second one they would call.

Ida Mae's reputation had gotten a little better after joining the church, but she still didn't fit in because she felt as though she was far older than her years. At fourteen she'd started seeing an older man, Clyde Jones, a local gambler who had a room above Dillard's Café. It was there that she witnessed the death of Son Boy Brown and that got her to thinking about how final death was. She hadn't gone back to school since being expelled and her Mama fussed at her all time, constantly reminding her that she had to want to be somebody more than just a used woman. She thought long and hard about that and decided she wanted to go up North and become a famous singer like the ladies she'd seen on the posters. She knew the Silas Green and Rabbit Foot Minstrel show was coming to town so she and other dropouts planned to go and see what it was all about. They snuck in and that's where she knew she needed to be; in front of a crowd accepting her applause because of the great performance she had given, just like the one she gave at the school assembly. She got a meeting with the manager by way of his brother, who got her that meeting after giving her a dollar for sex. Unfortunately, the manager was not impressed and sent her on her way. She then waited for the carnival to come to town which is where she met Miss Candy Quick, the featured exotic dancer. She watched Miss Quick's performance and waited for her after the show. She convinced her that she was a dancer and wanted to join her. For weeks, Miss Quick privately trained her and on the last night of the show, Ida Mae got her chance to shine. "I lay back on my haunches, real sexy-like, waving my arms like branches in a storm, then leaned forward and took a drag on the Camel (cigarette). I opened my thighs and pulled back the little patch of fabric that covered my privates... Carefully, I pushed that cigarette half its length into my vagina. As Candy taught me, I tightened my stomach until the red ash

glowed. Then I relaxed, and a blue cloud billowed... I puffed a few more times; then constricted my whole abdomen. I plucked out the cigarette with two fingers, lay back again on my haunches, spread my legs even wider, then relaxed and tightened my muscles in pulses. Magically, perfect little ovals of smoke emerged.” (Holland, Memoirs 139) The applause were thunderous and Miss Candy told her how proud of her she was. They readied themselves to get on the road, but just before leaving, her brother Bud showed up. He spoke with the manager and told him she was under age and couldn’t sign a contract. The owner threw her five dollars and ordered them both off the premises. Before leaving she went back to Miss Candy’s tent. No one looked at her, they all just continued packing and going about their business. All except Miss Candy; who hugged her and wished her well. Bud slapped her and then took her home to Aint Baby. “Mama’s eyes were as red as Bud’s, but from crying, not from whiskey. ‘Thank you Bud,’ she said solemnly, as he slammed out the house. ‘Mama just sat there looking at me, crying that silent cry... I waited awhile for her to come in and whup me or cuss me or do something, but she never did. Instead that big old woman just shuffled up to the light cord and said, ‘Good night, Ida Mae. We talk ‘bout dis in de morning.’” (Holland, Memoirs, 143)

The next morning, her mother whipped her every time she thought about what her daughter had done. With tears streaming down her face, she belittled her and told her she had become common and that she was ashamed of her. The town treated her no better. The boys gyrated their hips at her; the girls turned up their noses and the grown folks no longer looked at her but rather looked past her. She had wanted to be famous but not like that. She spent a lot of time alone and her favorite pass time became drinking RC cola and reading Perry Mason novels at the juke house, which was the only place, anybody treated her decently. On one particular Saturday, the place was packed with sharecroppers and wage hands. They kept the music going

with their hard earned nickels and dimes; blues being their favorite because it is said the blues started from field hollering. The locals were shooting dice, sipping whiskey and dancing to the delight of the country folks. “Miss Crying Shame, an actress who always made ‘mirations over me, play-liked she was the Queen of Sheba. ‘Dis here young’un jest wants to be in show business,’ she said as she patted my cheek. I was enjoying myself so much, it seemed to me if only I had some popcorn; everything would be perfect.” (Holland, Memoirs 146) Ida Mae decided to go uptown to get that popcorn from the “whites only” popcorn stand; blacks could be served but they had to wait outside. Black girls seldom went uptown because of the harassment of the white men who would jeer at them and feel them up if they got close enough. She didn’t mind them feeling on her, she just didn’t want them feeling for free. She got her popcorn and on the way back to the juke house, she noticed a crowd of people surrounding a black soldier. Everyone had seen soldiers before but they had never seen a black Master Sergeant fully decorated with ribbons, cords and boots shining brighter than anything they’d seen. He was only five feet tall but his pride made him much, much taller. “Cat,” as Ida Mae was nicknamed, locked eyes with the soldier and they connected instantly; she saw wedding bells. They visited a few other juke joints; talked a lot about the army and then made love under the stars. He promised her he would be back the next day; she told her girlfriends that she was going to get engaged. He did come back and she wanted to introduce him to her mother, but he kept making excuses as to why he didn’t think that was such a good idea. Nonetheless they dated and the Master Sergeant treated her like a lady. The juke house crowd even gave her an engagement party, even though she didn’t have a ring. A few weeks after dating, she had finally convinced him to get her a ring. Her mother had told her that the man was up to no good and that he was lying to her the whole time, but Ida Mae didn’t want to believe it. She thought if she couldn’t be

somebody like her mother, then maybe she could marry a man that was somebody. She and two of her friends waited on the porch until midnight for him to come by and present the ring but he never showed up. One of the older women went to the army recruiting office to find out what may have happened to him and they laughed at her. “We ain’t got no nigger Master Sergeant at any post round here,” one of them told her. (Holland, Memoirs 150)

Embarrassment kept Ida Mae in the house for a month before she got up enough nerve to come out again. She went back to the juke house and to her amazement; they welcomed her back with open arms. They even insisted that she give her famous rendition of Casey at the Bat, which she did, but knew that it would be the last time she recited it because it was time for a new inspiration. That night she made her way to another club that was a little more upscale than the juke house and that’s where she met Ike. They talked throughout the night and rode the town with two of Ike’s friends. When the car they were in swerved to miss a pot hole, she was thrown into Ike’s lap and he kissed her. Every weekend after that, they took long rides and talked about everything. He treated her with respect, was kind to her, but mostly seemed honest. He promised to pick her up one evening to take her on a real date and once again she and her friends waited on the porch for him to show up. It was all she and her friends could do to contain themselves when his long, green Chevy pulled up in front of her house. He smiled wide at her and gave her Mama a bag filled with RC colas. They were inseparable and Ike told her he loved her and didn’t care what she had done in the past. She didn’t have to turn tricks anymore because Ike was giving her money every two weeks, but her “sugar daddy,” Charlie, didn’t want to let go. He was an old man who only wanted to “dry hump” her for hours until he cried. Then he would give her fifty dollars or so and some food to tide her over until the next time he needed her. She decided that since he had been so nice to her, she needed to let him know that she was a

new person now and didn't do that anymore. She went to see him and while talking with Charlie, a neighbor invited her over to eat dinner with her and her daughter, Eva Mae, who had a gentle disposition and quickly became a good friend to Ida Mae.

One morning Ida Mae was on the porch throwing up her breakfast and Aint Baby knew she had finally gotten pregnant. Her mother was extremely disappointed in her. She wanted more for her than that; she wanted her to go college. This would be the second time she had heard her mother make those gurgling sounds and tears streamed down her face. Aint Baby wanted more for her daughter than her daughter wanted for herself and that hurt her terribly; she summoned Ike. Ida Marie thought when she told Ike about the baby, he would let her down like everyone else had done but he didn't. He was elated at the fact that he was going to be a daddy. He and Aint Baby had a long, private talk; then he and Bud had a long, private talk. After that, Ike was at her house every weekend taking her out or just simply washing his car. He became the most visible man any of them in the community had ever seen and he was Ida Mae's. One would think that it was just what she wanted and it was, but it also meant that she would not be leaving the Delta, which was her ultimate dream.

Ida Mae had now started to "show" and the more her stomach grew, the less she'd see of Ike and when he did come around he was distant and cold to her. She started going to Miss Gert's every day, crying to her and Miss Gert would cry with her assuring her that everything would be okay. Even Charlie, the dry humper, felt sorry for her and started sending vegetables over to the house to be sure she was eating. She'd heard that Ike was dating someone else and it once again made her long for attention so she became a thief. Her sister and others taught her how to do it and since she felt like she had been robbed herself, she was a fast and eager student. Miss Tillie Mae was the main teacher rationalizing that they were only taking back what

belonged to them in the first place. She even quoted bible scriptures to back it up. She taught them how one was to distract the salesperson while the other did the stealing. They did this for several weeks at stores in the colored area, stealing clothing and jewelry. On the third Saturday, they decided to go the maternity store in the white area of town. Two of them distracted the white salesperson while Ida Mae and Miss Tillie hid stolen loot under their skirts. They left the store and were bragging about what they had gotten away with, when a patrol car pulled up beside them. The saleslady was sitting in the car and pointed them out to the police officer. After they were booked at the police station, Jean and Ida Mae were taken home in handcuffs. The police officers ransacked the house and found all the merchandise they had stolen, including the jewelry, which meant they would be charged with grand larceny. Aint Baby cried loudly and begged them not to put her baby girl in jail, especially since she was going to have a baby herself, but they didn't care. They lead the girls back out to the car through the gauntlet of neighbors that had gathered in the front yard. Ida Mae thought to herself that if she was going to go out, at least she was going out in parade style.

They should've gotten more time but she and her friends were sentenced to thirty days in the Leflore County Penal Farm, because the judge was one of Aint Baby's ironing customers and he wanted his shirts to remain pristine. Her sister Jean was terrified at the thought of being at the workhouse, but Ida was okay with it. She did get a little scared when the first set of doors opened and Captain Arterberry stepped out and stood before them holding back a leashed dog that was half the size of him. They also had heard stories about the place, but both their brothers had done time there and assured them that it wouldn't be as bad as people let on. "Since I was pregnant, I got a nice lower bunk at the center of the dormitory, close to the bathroom." (Holland, Memoirs 165) For the place to be a prison, Ida Mae was taken good care of by the

woman who ran the kitchen, but L.C., a male prisoner, was another story. He was the right hand man of Captain Arterberry which meant that he got special privileges. He was one of two men who were allowed in the women's part of the prison and he took advantage of that privilege every chance he got. He had a special fondness for large women and often made Jean the victim of searches for stolen property just so he could feel her up. However, karma came and got L.C. when one day, while out hunting with the Captain and Frisk, the Captain's dog, a terrible accident happened. Frisk had cornered a raccoon that was on one side of the railroad tracks and Frisk on the other, neither would back down and when the train came barreling down, they both were cut in half. When they got back to the compound, the Captain was so distraught that he brutally whipped L.C., and called out Frisk's name with every blow. "So you sow,' Miss Laurel said in a low voice, 'so you reap.'" (Holland, Memoirs 170)

Jean and Ida had done their thirty days, but had not gotten up enough money to pay the fine. Aint Baby had tracked down Ike and told him what happened, but still nobody had that kind of money just lying around; so their thirty days turned into sixty. The next month would be harder because the Captain had gotten it into his head that pregnant women could make a garden grow, so Ida was assigned to tend his. After six weeks, Jean's husband had gotten up enough money to pay her fine to get her out but she decided to stay and help her sister since she had not been there for her in the past. When Ida was hurting and couldn't finish her chores, Jean did them for her and would protect her if anybody had anything to say about her or her baby. It would be at the workhouse that Jean became a real sister to Ida Mae and she vowed to never forget it.

Ida Mae served her time and although Ike had visited on occasion, she decided that she was going to have and take care of her baby on her own. She didn't realize how precious

freedom was until she'd lost it. "When we pulled up in front of our house on Gibb Street, I was surprised to see how much Mama had aged, and how unkempt she looked." (Holland, Memoirs 171) "But her face broke into a big smile, and for the third time in my life I heard her cry. Dossie Ree and Miss Susie brought plates of food covered with white cloths, and May Liza and Pearlie brought some of their old maternity clothes. Some of the church folks came and prayed and sang." (Holland, Memoirs 172)

"Jean came inside and the three of us held each other and cried. Jean kept saying over and over again, 'I look out for li'l Cat, Mama.' 'She sho' did, Mama!' I said. 'My gals done come home,' Mama said. 'Thank you, Lawd Jesus Christ!' ...I curled up beside Mama in her big iron bed and slept like I hadn't slept in over two months. Later that night, Bud staggered in drunk, kissed my forehead, and promptly passed out." (Holland, Memoirs 172)

On July 10, 1961 Ida Mae went into labor. She wished she could be back on the dance floor or anywhere but feeling the pain she was experiencing. She thought of Ike and how she'd heard he was dating two women and could hear Bud's trembling voice saying that Ike should be there. Several of the neighbors stopped by to wish her luck and offer a helping hand. Ida Mae was hollering something awful, calling on the Lord to help her, but Aint Baby told her she ought to be calling on the man that got her pregnant; it was her way of trying to make Ida Mae's fears turn to anger. The men in the neighborhood had gathered at the back door to comfort Bud who tried to act calm but was more like a helpless puppy. A sharp pain hit Ida high in the stomach and another hit her between her legs and instead of lying down, she took off toward the back door. "Stop dat crazy gal!" Mama yelled. 'Ida Mae, gal, you c'mon back in dis house 'fore you hurt dat baby!'" (Holland, Memoirs 176) She was half way down Gibb Street when the men took chase after her. Somehow she lost them and ending up and the nearest white woman's

house she could find. In her irrational state, she thought that if she could have a white woman take her to the hospital she could get a bed and lots of doctors and nurses would be there to take care of her and make the pain go away. Instead Miss Clara wrapped her in a clean sheet and took her back to her house. The next thing she knew she was flat on her back and could hear Aint Baby's strong voice telling her to bear down, but something was wrong. Moments later, Aint Baby went to the kitchen and started clanging two pots together and wailing to the Lord to help her child. Miss Clara bowed her head in prayer as Aint Baby continued her ritual and commanded Ida Mae to catch her breath and get ready for the next pain. Suddenly, she felt herself relax and saw her mother between her legs. She was reassured that it would hurt, but that it wouldn't kill her. She heard herself scream over and over again, but could feel Aint Baby's large hands on her hips and heard her voice saying she could see the baby's head. She commanded her again to push and Ida Mae screamed again and pushed with all her might. "You gots a fine baby boy," she announced, "An' he gots all his fangers an' toes." (Holland, Memoirs 178) "He had a tiny, round face, a head shaped like a noble African, and a happy, hungry mouth. 'Dis here boy, he gone be Somebody,' I heard myself say. My arms felt strong as trees. The heat from his little body radiated like rays from the morning sun. Like every other mother before or since, I knew I had just given birth to the world." (Holland, Memoirs 179) Just about the time she had decided on the baby's name, Cedric, a car squealed and honked its horn; Ike was there and she smiled even though she hadn't planned on it.

After the birth of the baby, Ida Mae and Ike were inseparable, even though they fought constantly because of Ike's jealousy. It had gotten to the point where they would fight at the juke houses every weekend, but they stayed in love and Ike took very good care of them. After a year of togetherness they decided to get a place of their own. By now Aint Baby's legs had

created a mind of their own and she could no longer go when called to deliver somebody's baby. It seems the 'dropsy' was an affliction that her mother and grandmother suffered from and now it had gotten Aint Baby.

By now the novelty of being a daddy had worn off and Ike was once again cheating on Ida Mae. One night she caught him coming out of a mutual friend's house and confronted him about it. He lied his way out of it, but she caught the young lady one day at a store by herself and knocked her out. Aint Baby heard the news and was beside herself. She reminded Ida Mae that Ike had only been good to her when it was convenient for him and thought surely she could find something better to do with her time than worrying about what or who he was doing. It was at that moment she realized how neglectful she had been to the mother who had always been there for her. Aint Baby's dropsy had her wheelchair bound and sores had begun to form on the back of her thighs and under her breasts. Ida Mae knew she had to make a change; but before she could make that change a police officer knocked on the door and she was arrested for assault and battery. She got thirty days and a one hundred dollar fine. She wished Ike were at the trial, but as usual he was nowhere to be found and she was on her way back to the workhouse. Once again she had to serve two months, but this time it wouldn't be as bad since she was the only prisoner in the women's camp. She and Miss Laurel talked, cried, and laughed way into the night and became quite close. Her crime this time was not as shameful, so she had a lot of visitors; in particular, her cousin T.C. who kept her abreast of what was happening in town, in the movies and with blues singers. "It was from him I'd first heard about the Freedom Riders, 'not here in Miss'ippi' he'd told me, 'but dey be ridin' for us!'" (Holland, Memoirs 189) After serving thirty days, Ike finally showed up with excuses as to why he didn't come to court, hadn't been to visit and why he hadn't paid her fine. She knew he was lying but needed time to think.

Finally, her workhouse stay was over and Buddy Boy came to pick her up in his broken down cab. On the way home, they passed a crowd of people and Buddy Boy told her they were the Freedom Riders who had set up an office in Greenwood. She was intrigued but quickly put them out of her mind when she saw the well-wishers who had gathered in front of Aint Baby's house to welcome her home. There was a banquet style buffet set up in her honor and all of her friends and neighbors gathered to give her a warm hug or a friendly piece of advice. Her greatest disappointment would be that Ike didn't show up. After everybody had gone and everything was cleaned up, she gathered her things and Cedric so that they could go home to wait for Ike. But Aint Baby had to tell her that Ike had brought her things and moved in with another woman while she was gone.

Now that she was back at home and Aint Baby was bound to a wheelchair, the rent was her responsibility so she did the only thing she knew how to do; she went back to prostituting. She charged white men ten dollars and black men five dollars although she wasn't getting much business from the white men anymore because she had to pull her razor out on one of them. On one occasion after a long night of tricking, she spotted a Freedom Rider while riding home in Buddy Boy's cab. She ordered Buddy Boy to let her out and followed the gentleman, walking her walk, trying to get his attention. Her rent was short that month and since he was obviously from the north, surely he had money and Cat was determined to get it. "Our long walk ended at a modest brick building surrounded by shacks. The front door, shaded by a brick arch, bore a sign showing two clasped hands, one white, one black, and the words "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee." (Holland, Memoirs 202) The whole town had heard about this organization and were afraid of have anything to do with them. Even Aint Baby had warned her to stay away from them. But curiosity got the best of Ida Mae and she asked Miss Nottie what

was going on. Miss Nottie told her that the SNCC was taking names of people to register them to vote and giving out grocery bags to the poor people in town because the Ku Klux Klan had locked up the government rations they would normally get, in an effort to get the riders to leave town. The handsome stranger she had followed stepped into the doorway and asked if there was anyone in the crowd that could read and write. Miss Nonnie yelled out to him that Ida Mae could and pushed her forward. Knowing when to take the stage, she went inside the office building with the man who turned out to be Bob Moses, Director of the Council of Federated Organizations' (COFO) voter registration drive. The organization targeted areas where the voter registration of African Americans was low and Greenwood, Mississippi had only 2% of its black citizens registered. Their job however would not be easy. Angry white men cursed them, spat in their faces, and used firebombs, shotguns blasts and beatings to discourage their presence. They burned crosses, left dynamite filled shoeboxes and lit rags on fire while in the mouths of the workers they'd caught. The black town became deathly afraid of the Riders and quickly began to turn their backs on them in front of white people. But the SNCC workers refused to leave and every now and then more of them would come. Ida was welcomed with open arms and given her own desk; and they immediately included her as part of the organization with comments that began with, "here's what we've got to do." (Holland Memoirs 209) She stayed all day long and processed and provisioned every hungry person that came through the door. What impressed her most was the fact that every citizen was treated with respect and kindness by the black and white workers. She was also impressed that none of the men were interested in her body, all they wanted was freedom. All Aint Baby wanted was to keep her daughter alive.

Despite the fear in Aint Baby, Ida Mae continued to work with the riders, teaching her neighbors how to read and write. Although most of the folks in Greenwood were afraid, once

they became a part of the movement, there was no turning back. At the meetings, which were usually held at the church, speakers like Sam Block and others, encouraged blacks to understand that they had rights just like any other citizen. They fervently sang freedom songs and old negro spirituals and it was hard not to want to be a part of it but still, most black people were afraid and kept their involvement a secret. Not only were they afraid of the angry white people in town, they were also being betrayed by their family and friends who either thought they were protecting their family or on occasion for a reward. Ida Mae however, was not afraid because she was now a part of something that was bigger than her. In her small town, she was an outsider just like the riders were and being a part of them gave her a sense of belonging. There were always those that would try to discourage her and remind her of who she really was, but she was determined not to let anything or anyone deter her. The organization continued to grow and was gaining national recognition; mainly because the white people who assisted them in their efforts were being harassed and arrested, which drew media attention to the little town of Greenwood. What it didn't do though was stop the angry white mobs, police dogs, beatings, bombs or arrests. The workers had to be trained on how to protect themselves without violence. If they were attacked by a police dog they were to throw cayenne pepper in its face or hit him in the nose to disorient him. They learned how to fall and tighten their bodies into a ball, covering their heads with articles of clothing to soften the blows of the billy-club. Never were they to travel anywhere alone or sleep in the same place more than two nights and they were never to fight back no matter what was being done to them. That part was a bit hard for Ida Mae, but she complied and was soon promoted to field secretary at a pay rate of ten dollars a week. It wasn't much but it did help her to make ends meet and kept her from having to turn tricks, which she occasionally still had to do in order to take care of the household. Ike was contributing regularly

with grocery and a few dollars; and she got a few dollars from some of her past customers who helped her out because of what she was doing with SNCC. It was hard but nothing in her life every felt as rewarding or made her feel like she was somebody until now.

In September, on election-day, despite all their hard work and efforts, only fifty new black voters had been registered because of the red tape each registrar was put through. Still, they continued to hold mass meetings, protest marches and continued to get arrested. “Over the next two years I saw beatings, burnings, and shootings as we kept canvassing and singing freedom songs and going to the courthouse.” (Holland, Memoirs 235) The most violent time Ida Mae experienced was at a peaceful march in downtown Greenwood. The large crowd of protesters once again marched two by two toward the courthouse to register to vote. They marched two by two because it was now law that if three black people walked side by side down the street they were arrested for marching without a permit to parade. They were met with the usual police force in riot gear, police dogs and news media, however this time there was an addition; fire trucks. Political officials ordered them to disperse; the protesters knelt down on the hard pavement to pray; the firemen stepped forward and turned on the hoses. The blasts knocked grown men back like they were rag dolls and hit Ida Mae so hard it threw her off the pavement and into the side of a garbage dumpster. Then they let the dogs loose on them; arrested them and took them to the workhouse without going before a judge.

Finally SNCC was able to get the women released and Ida Mae was back at home with her son and Aint Baby. That night she dreamed the recurring dream about seeing her mother rolling in flames. She woke up to sweat, urine and a fierce knocking on the door. It was one of her neighbors bringing her the news that Medgar Evers, a civil rights leader, had been killed. It was on that day that she discovered a new respect for Greenwood. Aint Baby talked to Ida Mae

and the neighbor while the white men celebrated their accomplishment outside. She informed them that wanting freedom didn't start with SNCC; a lot of the black citizens secretly belonged to the NAACP. She told them how many of the black men in their neighborhood were still alive because Dossie Ree slept with one of the white mob members because he talked in his sleep and would tell their plans without knowing it. Ida Mae lay in her mother's lap and wept for Dossie Ree, Medgar Evers and all those swollen, bruised faces she had seen on the Freedom Riders.

After Medgar's death, the town took on a new tone, more and more blacks who were afraid before now marched alongside them. They offered their homes for them to have places to sleep and introduced their tongues to the food of the south. Even Aint Baby had agreed to let them use her place to sleep in, roaches and all. By now, people had started to treat Ida Mae differently, she was becoming a leader. "For the first time in my life, I had committed myself to a cause greater than myself; one that I was willing to fight, even die for, and it showed." (Holland, Memoirs 253) During the course of two years, Ida Mae was arrested thirteen times on various charges relating to the movement which gave her a reputation of bravery. She was always one of the first to be arrested and the last to be released because her unofficial job was to be there for the other women to get them through the ordeal. The biggest problem with that however, was that her now three year old son didn't know her.

After being arrested and this time taken to Parchment Prison for thirty-three days to do hard time, Ida Mae was exhausted and sick. They had been treated harshly, improperly fed, were bug ridden and had their heads shaved. Still, she continued on for the movement which had now attracted some 90,000 blacks and in the summer of 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would be coming to Greenwood. On the day of his arrival Ida Mae was as always at the front of the parade of people there to greet him. It had been planned that Dr. King would go into the

neighborhoods and talk with the people who couldn't or wouldn't get to the mass meetings. "Dr. King began to talk to me as if I belonged at his side. Clipboard in hand, I briefed the leaders on the names of local people who came out to introduce themselves and their families. ... You could see that behind the oratory and the headlines, Dr. King was a preacher first. ... After greeting a couple of neighbors, we eased to the south side of the street and Dr. King climbed the steps. He was in shirtsleeves now, his jacket thrown over his shoulder. He extended his hand to Mama. 'How do you feel today Miss Ida Mae?'" (Holland, Memoirs 270-271) Dr. King had asked about Aint Baby so he sent one of his workers to the store to get her a RC Cola and a jar of snuff. Aint Baby was beside herself! Then she invited him onto the porch to rest while she told him and the crowd about Dossie Ree and all the other blacks, including women, who had been secretly fighting for freedom long before any of them got there. Dr. King's response, "Women have always been the leaders in our Movement." (Holland, Memoirs 272) On the ride back to the airport, Ida Mae found herself in the car with Dr. King. The driver knew him from their Morehouse college days and proceeded to tell him all about Ida Mae, including every wrong thing she had ever done. When he was finished Dr. King told the driver that she would now do better. Ida Mae lifted her head and assured him that she was going to be somebody and he said in so many words that he was looking forward to hearing about it.

In the summer of 1964, Ida Mae was asked to go on tour as a speaker to help raise money for the movement. She was finally going to get out of the Delta with the first stop being Chicago. She spoke at churches, schools, homes, and community centers, mostly to welcoming audiences, but there were some blacks in the north that had their own racial problems and weren't interested in what was going on in the south. At least not until the three bodies of the missing civil rights workers had been found in a dam with their bodies filled with gunshots.

Segregationists in the south had raised the stakes and were not only lynching ordinary black folks, but were now killing black officials and the white people who supported them. Ida Mae acquired a new urgency to her speeches because almost every day, she heard of some new atrocity that was taking place in her hometown.

Her next stop was New York, where she experienced moving stairs and underground trains. She ate her first steak, went to the dentist for the first time in her life and lived with her first interracial couple; a black woman married to a white man. It was also the first time she would see a professional theatrical production which is where she first came up with the idea of putting her own life on stage. She went to see “The Dutchman” and got to meet the playwright after the show. She told him about her idea of telling her life story and LeRoi Jones, now known as Amiri Baraka encouraged her to read as many plays as she could and to write down everything that had happened to her. Later that night she was introduced to Lorraine Hansberry and invited out with them all, but unfortunately she never fully recovered from her injuries from Parchman Prison which often times made her feel weak and sick, so she could not go.

Her speaking engagement took her to Boston, Maine and finally Minnesota, which she fell in love with because of its cleanliness and because the university straddled the same river that ran through the Delta a thousand miles away. While standing there looking at the sprawling campus, she decided that it was where she wanted to go to school to continue her education. She never got back to high school after being expelled but she did get her GED while working for SNCC. But then she thought about Aint Baby and her son, who by now didn't see her as his mother, just some lady who stopped by every now and then to nurse Aint Baby's sores. She wasn't there to wipe his tears, feed him or put him to bed; it was Aint Baby who did that. That night she gave the speech of her life and set a new record for SNCC fundraising. Upon leaving,

her hosts told her that if she came back, they would help her get into college. When she arrived home she knew she was a changed person.

Greenwood, Mississippi had also changed while she was gone; it looked like a city under siege. The town was littered with Highway Patrol and white men from the north, east and west. Black people walked with a new pride down the streets of white districts, were eagerly learning to read and write and openly dated white girls. The white northerners addressed them as Mr. and Miss and often reminded them that they were due just as much respect as anyone else. Aint Baby was especially proud of the work Ida Mae was doing with the movement and bragged about it whenever she had an audience. She was not pleased however in the way Ida Mae was not raising her son.

By the end of Freedom Summer, thirty-seven churches had burned, eighty civil rights workers had been beaten and they still had made little headway in the right to vote. “After that, the Movement and black people generally saw no other road to take but increased militancy. Whereas we began 1964 with integration and equality as our goal... we ended it with the Movement slipping more and more into the hands of charismatic radicals like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown.” (Holland, Memoir 290) Greenwood slowly began to slip back into the state it had begun. In what seemed like overnight, it looked like a room after the party and everyone had gone home to rest. With the exception of a few who tried to carry on the good fight, it got relatively quiet. Then one day Aint Baby woke Ida Mae up to go and see about Frisgo, her dog, who was barking strangely to her. She checked on him and made sure he was chained tightly to the shed and reassured her mother that all was well. But something didn't feel right; she just didn't know what it was. All she knew was that she had a big day ahead of her; a few of the local workers had decided to go and integrate a white lunch counter. She dressed and

on the way out heard Aint Baby fussing about her going down there when she should be home taking care of her son. Halfway to her destination, Ida May heard what sounded like an explosion. She turned, looked back toward the way she had come and saw a black ball of smoke billowing from her house. Someone helped her unfreeze her legs and she ran in what seemed like slow motion back to her blazing house.

“I skidded out the mouth of the alley to East Gibb Street and saw a ball of fire floating across our yard toward the rose bush by the concrete steps. The ball rolled over and turned into Mama. I jumped forward, calling, commanding the outstretched hands of those around her to roll her on the ground and put out the fire. The faster I ran, the slower time moved. As I got closer, I saw that all Mama’s skin and hair had burned off, leaving charred flesh and pink muscle. I was just about to grab her when the strong arms of Paul and a neighbor man hooked my waist and yanked me back. ‘You can’t do nothing’, Cat!’ A woman shouted, ‘I got your boy, Cat, Cedric he be safe!’ But my eyes were fixed on Mama. Other men turned over her smoldering body, leaving flesh on the dirt and grass. Somebody brought a sheet and covered her. Neighbors dashed around, yammering and wailing, holding their noses with one hand and patting out flames with the other. Someone pointed to Frisgo’s barbecued body dangling by a blackened iron chain from the charred post of the wood house. Our old house was a gutted ruin, its frame burning greedily like a stove full of crackling wood. My eyes rolled up and my lungs shut down, stopped taking in the stinking air. I slumped over the arms that held me.” (Holland, Memoirs 295)

When Ida Mae’s head cleared, Aint Baby was being loaded into an ambulance and amazingly was still alive. They rushed her to the hospital and luckily the one black doctor they had was on duty and he came immediately to see about Aint Baby. The next time Ida Mae saw

Aint Baby she was covered in bandages from head to toe. One palm of hand was the only part of her that wasn't burned; that's what Ida Mae gently held until her sister Jean got there, who was of no comfort to her. For a week her mother lived under a tent with her exposed skin without any indication of awareness whatsoever. Then out of the blue, she opened her eyes, trying to speak. Ida Mae got closer and bent down to hear what she was trying to say and finally heard her, "Tote me t' vote, gal." "I burst into tears. I couldn't hug her, so I just clutched the edge of the bed and squeezed till my knuckles turned white. A few days later, with Jean by her side, she died." (Holland, Memoirs 298) While waiting for the her body to be taken to the funeral home, Ida Mae pulled the cover from over face and saw that she was at rest. She hugged her and promised her that she was going to be somebody. Then as clear as day, she heard Aint Baby whisper, "gwine see, thank de Lawd." "Funny thing is, I continued to hear her voice every now and again after that, and at the funniest times: fussing at Cedric, when I was about to do something stupid, waiting to go to sleep; waiting to get up. Sometimes it made me cry, but it never made me sad or angry. I have heard it, off and on, for the past thirty-odd years." (Holland, Memoirs 299)

Soon after her mother's funeral, she and Ike started dating again and got married. She wished her mother could be there to see how happy she was. Unfortunately, that happiness didn't last; Ike had not changed and continued to cheat on her with the only difference being that he now cheated openly. The Movement workers gathered occasionally but were pretty much defunct, so Ida Mae once again set her mind on getting out of the Delta. As for Cedric, Ike's mother took over from where Aint Baby left off in raising him. One day, after seeing Ike and his girlfriend together, she wrote the people in Minnesota and they sent her train fare. She left

Cedric with her mother-in-law and didn't look back because she didn't want to see his tears or him to see hers.

In 1965, she turned twenty-one and had enrolled in the University of Minnesota. It wasn't as great as she thought it would be and soon became discouraged at having to move from one host household to another. Her grades dropped and although she still did work for the Movement, she quickly found her way back to the street life; minus the prostitution. She got married a couple of times, once to a black man and once to a white man; each time quitting school to become a full time wife. They lasted for a while, but soon withered and died. It took her thirteen years to get her Bachelor's degree in black studies and another five to get her Master's in American studies. She also got Cedric back in 1971 and in 1985 received her Doctoral degree. "On May 25, 1985, twenty years after I'd left the Delta, I marched down the University of Minnesota mall, the only black face among all the black-robed doctoral candidates. I hadn't made much fuss over my bachelor's and master's commencements, but this time I had invited everyone I knew, from both sides of the river, from the Movement, and from home, to come and share my triumph." (Holland, Memoirs 308)

Ida Mae Endesha Holland, (Endesha being given to her by Kwanzaa creator Dr. Maulana Karenga) had come a long way from the dirt roads of Greenwood, Mississippi. She had made great accomplishments and the southern drawl she used to have had faded away with time; but deep down inside she missed her hometown. Then the mayor of Greenwood declared October 18, 1991 as Dr. Endesha Ida Mae "Cat" Holland Day; and she was going home.

When she arrived she found Greenwood a completely different place. It was modern, machines had replaced laborers and there were hundreds of black elected officials. Dressed in

her African garb, she presented her doctoral degree to the city and rode as Grand Marshal in the high school's homecoming parade to the steps of city hall. "There, before its scrolled and fluted brick facade, where I had been arrested, dragged, and kicked on my way to jail, I receive a commendation signed by the governor of Mississippi, Ray Mabus, and a key to the city from Greenwood's mayor, Louis E. Fancher. ...That evening, after the hoopla and merriment and memorializing were over I sat alone and took a look at the certificate signed by Governor Mabus. It said, 'Her history has served as a model for all people and shows how, with determination, we can overcome obstacles for a better life.' Amen to that, I thought." (Holland, Memoirs 312)

Endesha Ida Mae Holland, 61, Dies; 'Mississippi Delta' Writer

By Margalit Fox

Published: February 1, 2006

Endesha Ida Mae Holland, a noted scholar and dramatist whose best-known play, "From the Mississippi Delta," chronicled her journey from poverty and prostitution in the Jim Crow South to civil rights activism, a Ph.D. and an academic career, died on Jan. 25 at a nursing home in Santa Monica, Calif. She was 61.

Forum: Book News and Reviews

The cause was complications of ataxia, a degenerative neurological condition, according to the University of Southern California, where she was an emeritus professor of theater. Professor Holland; who retired from U.S.C. in 2003, previously taught in the American studies department at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

Partly financed by Oprah Winfrey, the Off Broadway production of "From the Mississippi Delta" opened in 1991 at the Circle in the Square Downtown. Directed by Jonathan Wilson, it starred Cheryl Lynn Bruce, Sybil Walker and Jacqueline Williams in the principal role, which depicted the author at various stages of her life.

Though it ran for 218 performances, the production received a mixed reception from critics. Few, however, disputed the hypnotic pull of Professor Holland's story. Ida Mae Holland — she added Endesha as an adult — was born on Aug. 29, 1944, in the Delta town of Greenwood, Miss. She was reared along with several siblings in a wooden shack, its walls plastered with newspapers. She never knew her father; her mother, an esteemed rural midwife, sometimes took in local prostitutes as boarders to make ends meet.

When Ida Mae was 11, in an incident she often recounted afterward, she was raped by a white man who employed her as a baby sitter. When it was over, he handed her \$5. "I knew I was a woman then," Professor Holland told *Ebony* magazine in 1992. "And since I didn't want to go to the cotton fields and work all day, I figured this was a way that I could make money. And I started turning tricks." The going rate, she said, was \$5 for black men, \$10 for white.

By her late teens, she had been arrested many times for street fighting, shoplifting and prostitution. One day, looking for a customer, she followed a young man to his office. He turned out to be a volunteer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which had come to Greenwood to register black voters.

"I saw and heard things in that office I had never seen or heard before," Professor Holland told *Ebony*. "I had never seen black people sitting down using typewriters or heard black people talking about civil rights or voter registration."

She became involved with the organization, marching, speaking and registering voters, and was jailed 13 times for her activities. In 1965, a suspicious fire broke out in her family's home, killing her mother. Professor Holland said afterward that she believed the Ku Klux Klan had firebombed the house in retaliation for her civil rights work.

Encouraged by colleagues in the movement, Ida Mae obtained a high school equivalency diploma and enrolled at the University of Minnesota. She earned a bachelor's degree in African-American studies there in 1979, followed by a master's in American Studies in 1984 and a Ph.D., also in American studies, in 1986. Professor Holland taught at Buffalo from 1985 to 1993.

The author of a half-dozen plays, Professor Holland remained famous for "From the Mississippi Delta," which has been performed by the Negro Ensemble Company, at the Goodman Theater in Chicago and at the Young Vic in London. She wrote a memoir of the same name, published by Simon & Schuster in 1997.

Professor Holland's three marriages ended in divorce. She is survived by a sister, Jean Beasley; a brother, Charlie Nellums; a son, Cedric; and a granddaughter, according to the University of Southern California.

Script

Characters as assigned by the script (All Women Sing)

Woman One

Phelia, Miss Joanne, Little Miss Becky Ann, White Woman, Magnolia, Big Jim, Mr. Big Red Parker, Delie, Bro Pastor, Old Miss Martha

Woman Two

Phelia, Warren, Man Son, Mr. Johnson, Magnolia, Child, Son Boy Brown, Manager Assistant, Local Man, The Boss Man, Miss Lizzie Bell

Woman Three

Aint Baby, Miss Lawrence, Miss Rosebud, Big Dick Freddie, Tent Manager, Local Man, Miss Candy Quick, The Barker, Bro Pastor

Scene 1: Memories

“The region of the country where I was born and raised, the Mississippi Delta, is a testament to African-American inferiority. My region is famous for the infamous “wolf-whistle.” In the mid-1950s, a young boy Emmett Till walked into a store and said, “Goodbye, baby,” to a white woman. Later that night, several white men took the black Chicago youth to the river. They put a millstone around his neck, they cut his penis off and stuck it in his mouth; and then they lowered him into his watery grave. That’s the region I’m from. I remember that my mama used to tell my two brothers each morning before they left home: “Bud, Simon Junior, don’t yall look in no white ‘oman’s face, cause all she got to say is dat yall look like yall wants to rape her.” My brothers to this day don’t know one white woman from the other by her facial features. This is the region where I was born and grew up in. In my Delta town, some black folks aspire to become the woman, the mistress of some wealthy white man. For those girls who were light enough, it was a fairly simple process. But the darker ones, like me, could make it by going to the cotton fields, working from sun to sun, for just about three dollars a day. This is the region where I was born and grew up.” (Holland, script 8)

Scene 2: Aint Baby



Ida Mae Holland, late 1950s

Scene 3: Calm, Balmy Days

“Miss Lawrence caught my hand and led me into de room... Mr. Lawrence was laying there in de big bed. The kivers on de bed looked so soft and silky. I wished Aint Baby had a bedspread like this... Miss Lawrence pushed me over to the bed... The bull threw me... A little later I stumbled down the stairs; the widest steps I ever saw.” (Holland, script 18)



Endesha at age nine

Scene 4: Second Doctor Lady

“Aint Baby delivered many of the black babies in our county. She was even called in to the county horsepital to “assist” the white doctors with the white womens - when they couldn’t birth their babies... She could reach inside a woman’s body and do all sorts of thangs with her hands - thangs even Dr. Feinberg couldn’t do.” (Holland, script 22)

Scene 5: The Water Meter

“Miss Rosebud had come to Greenwood about the same time Mama had, at the beginning of the Great Migration of rural blacks to the North. Her husband died during World War II, when the big green John Deere tractor flipped over on Mr. Ludlow’s plantation. Since then, Miss Rosebud had seldom left her porch or her window, let alone her house. Her main occupation was sitting in her window or on her porch, day after day, night after night, watching her water meter. She had a stack of bricks by her chair that she flung down on any intruder foolish enough to invade her territory. That was the object of her vigilance: to keep children, drunks, sinners, and strangers from using her water meter as a toy. Of course, the water meter belonged to the city. The supervisor of the city workers was Mr. Big Jim Smith. Miss Rosebud had been Mr. Big Jim’s mammy, and his mother’s before him. He was the one who put the bug in Miss Rosebud’s ear about keeping folks off her meter. One day he said to her, “So you watch out now, Aintie Rosebud. Don’t let none of these colored folks step on your meter or your water bill gonna go ski-high!” Then he threw back his head and laughed and laughed, nudging the man closes to him with his nub arm.”

“It had started like a game but all of Gee Pee knew Miss Rosebud never played it with a full deck. So one night when Son Boy Brown, who had gone back on the bottle, came weaving back and forth toward her house, her left hand went for a brick. Then, like a torpedo, Son Boy went straight for that meter and clanked it with his foot. Before the second foot could follow, his head split open and a big glob of brains flopped forward onto his shirt. He hit the pavement hard, along with the first gush of blood and Miss Rosebud’s spent brick. Gee Pee buried Son Boy two Sundays later, in Potter’s Field. After the funeral, Miss Tut Vaughn went up to Whitfield, where Miss Rosebud was confined in the mental institution. She reported that Miss Rosebud was doing real fine and had asked about her water meter. Mama told Dossie Ree that white folks had given poor Rosebud the wherewithal to throw those bricks; a crime; given the old woman’s brains were addled to begin with.” (Holland, Memoirs 123-128)

Scene 6: The Delta Queen

“The summer after I became a woman, I decided that I wanted to get out of the Delta. I plotted and planned and tried to make me a chance. When the Silas Green and Rabbit Foot Minstrel Shows came to town, I went, with all due speed to the playground where their tents was set. I told them that I wanted to travel with them as a member of the show and that I wouldn’t cause them no trouble... Finally, my night to dance rolled round... She danced ever so beautifully. Then, just as Miss Candy had taught her, she knelt down on the earth floor and took out a Camel cigarette from underneath the pretty scarf. Then, ever so gently, she pushed the cigarette twixt her wide-spread thighs; she lad here on de grassy mat and blew smoke rings outa her vagina dat Miss Candy wished she could blow! ...Mr. Cornell went and tole my mama and the next thing I knew, my brothers, drunk and armed with their razors, came to the fairground. The boss wouldn’t let me sign the contract. He thoed my five-dollar bill at my footes and

walked away. I knew that white man wasn't afraid of my brothers; maybe they didn't want me round cause I had out smoked Miss Candy Quick. The fair left town without the Delta Queen." (Holland, script 38)

Scene 7: The Whole Towns Talking

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (pronounced "snik") was the turning point in the life of Phelia. In the play *Woman One* states, "SNCC came to my town that day. Now the whole town had somebody else to talk bout... The whole town was talking bout the civil rights workers and me. The whole town started seeing me different. The folks was looking into my face, into my eyes. Aint Baby was even now proud, even if she was afraid." (Holland, script 44)

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was one of the primary institutions of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. It emerged in April of 1960 from student meetings led by Ella Baker held at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. SNCC began with an \$800 grant from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Some of the original student members were organizers of sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in the southern United States. Its purpose then was to coordinate the use of nonviolent direct action to attack segregation and other forms of racism. SNCC played a leading role in the Freedom Riders, the 1963 March on Washington, Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party over the next few years. In the later part of the 1960s, led by fiery leaders like Stokely Carmichael, SNCC focused on Black Power, and then fighting against the Vietnam War. In 1969, SNCC officially changed its name to the Student National Coordinating Committee to reflect the broadening of its strategies. (Wordiq.com)

"The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), pronounced "snick" by movement regulars, had been formed a few years earlier in North Carolina after black students there had staged a sit-in at the lunch counter of a local five-and-dime. They thought our older self-help organizations like the NAACP and CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, had grown too fat and lazy in their old age. SNCC provided younger blood and new energy to fight a war the Kennedy administration said was just beginning to wipe out Jim Crow, starting at the ballot box and courthouse. To bring together all the various black groups that had a finger in this pie into one powerful fist, the leaders of SNCC, the SCLC, the NAACP, and CORE founded the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a kind of United Nations of black America. And white America, at least in the South, didn't like that one bit." (Holland, *Memoirs* 205)

Scene 8: The Funeral

"I took Aint Baby's hand and looked outa the back window of Mr. Sonny's wine-colored ammulance. I could see the whole town standing round talking and shaking their heads and moaning, near the curb, in front of where our house useta stand, where Aint Baby's charred skin

with the dogs sniffing at it, was laying there on the sidewalk, for the whole town to talk about.” (Holland, script 46)

“The funeral-home folks was just gitting ready to lower Aint Baby’s casket into the ground. It was taking a long time to bury her cause last night her shallow grave was filled up with rainwater... Seems like dese mens coulda done better by Aint Baby, her, laying here in her sharpshooter casket.” (Holland, script 47)

Scene 9: From the Mississippi Delta

“Right after Aint Baby’s funeral, I got Buddy Boy to take me to Winona to catch the train... I was going up North, to Minnesota. Some of the white folks I met on my last fundraising trip had sent my fare. They’re going to help me get into the university so that I can make something outa myself and make Aint Baby proud.” (Holland, script 51)

Scene 10: A Permit to Parade



Graduation Day, I accept my PhD from the University of Minnesota

From the Mississippi Delta Memoirs: Courtesy of Holland Family Archives

Scene 11: Letter to Alice Walker: A Request from the Mississippi Delta

This scene is not only about the recognition of the accomplishments of Aint Baby, but also a debt of gratitude to all those who paved the way and made sacrifices for her to finally become somebody.

The Staged Reading Process

After doing the research for this play, I came to the conclusion that Woman One and Woman Two, for a major part of the play were acting as the same character (Ida Mae). So I had a preconceived notion in my head that I would cast the show with two women with similar looks to be sure the audience got it. Fortunately it did not work out that way because when I heard the various voices of the eleven women who auditioned, I realized that I didn't need to guide the audience, the words were strong enough to stand on their own. The richness of Tiffany Byrd's voice immediately captured my attention, the sultry aura of Jazmin Foster's personality was uncontainable and the intensity of Olivia Luna made me know that these were the women I needed to present this story. After casting them, they were given a script and I asked them to read it several times so that they would get a feel for the show and to be prepared to work fast and furious. As with any staged reading, the rehearsal process was quick. I had already blocked the show before our first meeting so I was able to give the ladies the blocking in one day. During the process, there were times when I would sit with the ladies and discuss the language or anything they were unclear of. We rehearsed for four evenings and were ready to present. That would not have happened however, if it were not for the dedication of these three women. They took directions well, and from the moment they began, I knew they had done their homework. They performed as if there was no script in their hands; they were fearless in their choices totally embodying the various characters each one of them portrayed.

It wasn't until after the staged reading did I discover that in this particular instance, it indeed is of the utmost importance to stay completely true to the script. In changing the beginning blues song "Trouble in Mind" to anything else completely changes the tone of the piece. We opened the show with the gospel song "Precious Lord" that put the audience in a religious setting which is not where Ms. Holland's life began. Mississippi is the birthplace of the blues and this song as most blues songs do, speaks to the endurance of hardships and the dream of better things to come. This song alone tells the story of what Ms. Holland's life was before a single word of the text is spoken. The music is extremely important because it was always a part of her life. When Ida Mae was a baby, Suaar, her grandmother, would sing to her all the time; and later on Dossie Ree, one of the tenants in Aint Baby's rooming house would sing "Amazing Grace," as opposed to crying out after being hit in the head with a hammer by a jealous boyfriend. After quitting school, Ida Mae would spend most of her time in the juke houses listening and dancing to the blues. She would periodically gravitate to the church, but for the most part she was most comfortable with the street crowd.

I now understand why it disturbed me so much when the director of the show that I performed, cut the 11th scene. It was such an injustice that it now makes me want to weep because it is literally the heart of the show. While the script is a first-hand account of the life of Endesha Ida Mae "Cat" Holland, it is also a tribute to the life of her mother who physically saved the lives of many in the community, in particularly hers. The letter to Mrs. Walker is a plea for her and the world to add Ida Mae "Aint Baby" Holland's name to the list of great African American women in our history. She's asking that all the black women who sang, cooked and sacrificed so much of their lives, if for no other reason than to bring a smile to someone's face, never be forgotten.

I was and am extremely proud of my cast and the work we created as a team. If they would put that much effort into a reading, I have no doubt that a full production with them would be breathtaking.

My “Aint Baby” was the late, great Aint Early, as I called her, who was born in 1915 and grew up in Georgia where she picked cotton until she was a teenager. She carried and lost a baby when she was just sixteen years old. She carried him to term but lost him because she was not married when she got pregnant and out of fear and shame wrapped her stomach so tight to hide the pregnancy that she, without realizing it, suffocated him. She also ruined herself as she birthed him alone and “lay in the bed crying until a lady came to help me.” (McGill letter) I still possess the letter and her prayer cloth she received from Reverend Ike thirty-nine years ago when she finally wrote him about her baby boy. Shortly after the birth and death, she met and fell in love with “Jim.” He, according her was the love of her life, even though he was married with children. She took care of him for twenty years, “especially when he took sick and his wife didn’t want him no more,” and upon his death, “they wouldn’t even now let me say goodbye to him. They closed the casket in my face.” (Personal account) No one would ever take his place; instead she gave her life to God, me and my siblings. For as long as I can remember she was always there for me whenever I needed her. Her strong but loving hands would nurse my wounds when my mother would take her frustrations with the world out on me; they would reach into her bosom to get her handkerchief of change and secretly give me a dime for penny candy when I felt better. She’s the one who listened and wiped my tears as I tried to figure out why my mother hated me so. It was her soft, soothing voice that stopped me from trembling when I barely escaped the hands of one of the men folk in the family that wanted to “show me something.” She’s who taught me how to cook with a pinch of this and a touch of that. It was

her that I watched read the bible faithfully and get on her knees to pray every night; who invited me to join her even though I didn't know who or why. Everything I know about being patient, a lady, graceful, and kind hearted, I learned from her. It was for her sacrifices, I named my only child Earlie. And so I would also like to ask Mrs. Walker, like Endesha, to also make room for Early Mae McGill amongst her revolutionary petunias because it was she, by the grace of God, who saved my life.

A Celebration of Black Playwrights

Produced by Margarete Joyner, Graduate Student

Proudly present a staged reading of

“From the Mississippi Delta”

By Endesha Ida Mae Holland

Directed by Margarete Joyner



Starring: Tiffany Byrd, Jazelle Foster, Olivia Luna

When: February 23, 2011 at 7:00 p.m.

Where: Shafer Street Playhouse Room 302

Admission: FREE!!!

All are welcome!

Actor Responses

Jazmin Foster (Woman 1)

1. The process of my first staged reading was amazing and I really enjoyed it. Putting something on its feet that quick was totally different for me.
2. The discovery I made as an actor was bigger and stronger choices are better.
3. If I could do it over again I would've tried to commit some of my lines to memory so that I'd be able to connect with the audience more. I also would have used the opportunity to get closer with my cast.

Olivia Luna (Woman 2)

1. The process of my first staged reading was a lot more fun and amusing than I had originally thought it would be. This play has such a powerful meaning and story behind it, but it is not all tears and anger as certain groups of people would expect from a "black play". It is expressed through so many moments of laughter, song and dance with some very lovable characters that go through the full range of human emotion.
2. The discovery I made as an actor was essentially how to let the text speak for itself. In a normal stage production of this show, it's possible for the movement and blocking to get far more complicated than it needs to be. I found the simpler the movement, the more power it gave to the stories being told. The audience has the gift of seeing the stories within their own imaginations, rather than what we want them to see.
3. If I could do it over again, I would change or rather further evolve the different characters I came up with. Because we only had such a short amount of time to get the play onto its feet, my characters immediately fell to what I believe are just basic archetypal characters, like "the angry black man" or the "strong black mother". It would be interesting to see how much further these characters, especially the two main characters, could go if more time were allotted for rehearsals.

Tiffany Byrd (Woman 3)

1. The process of my first staged reading was a "becoming" one. I feel as though my character had very little time to mature with me, so to speak, and therefore, I had to mature in the process of being a character. In even plainer words, I am a lot more confident in portraying a character that I have time to work on because I've done so effectively with little to no time at all.
2. The discovery I made as an actor was that acting on impulse is usually the correct choice. There were many times where I would edit my first idea, because I thought that was "too over-the-top" or not realistic. But if I'm committed to my choice go full-out on all of them, then the

words on a page just naturally come out authentic. I'm not focused on my lines as much as I am in conveying the story.

3. If I could do it over again, I would change the amount of time I spent worrying about little things. I would even go so far as to encourage my fellow actors and me to push the energy and build it all the way to the final scene. I, in particular, felt like there were some scenes I was more committed to than others. But in reminding myself to sustain throughout--it makes a lot more of a compelling story.

Reviews

I thoroughly enjoyed the stage reading of "From the Mississippi Delta". I liked the variety of women in the casting (vocal and physical differences), the harmonies of their voices, the transformational aspects of the characterizations. In addition, I feel as if my imagination had the opportunity to create all of the various worlds of the play. This was very important.

The theme of the play grabbed my spirit. Emotionally I was carried on the waves of change throughout the piece....the highs were my highs, the pain was my pain, the sense of accomplishment and pride was mine, too. I left the evening with a profound sense of hope for all man and womankind....in spite of the dangers and horrors of the Civil Rights movement. I had and have the sense that we are moving forward to freedom and equality for all although we are certainly not there yet. The play reminds us that nothing moves in a straight line when it comes to change.

Congratulations, Margarete. One last thing, I also enjoyed watching your joy and hearing your laughter as you watched the play.

**- Janet B. Rodgers, Professor of Theatre, VCU
Head of Performance/Voice and Speech Training**

What I found most engaging about the piece was the storytelling. I loved the way the monologues and larger pieces of the text were shared between two actors - and the way they mirrored one another in the action and telling of the story. I found that even though the characters switched back and forth, it was very easy to follow and it gave the sense of the

personal story being more universal to the struggle.

I also thought the a cappella singing was rousing - I almost wished that we, the audience, could have sung along with the actors at the end. It felt very celebratory and I wanted to join in at the end.

Finally, for a staged reading it was very well blocked with the simple use of the mats as screens to cross behind. If anything, I wish we were just a bit closer. The intimate feel of the piece made me want to get even closer to the action.

- Lorraine Ressegger, VCU Graduate Student

Hey Margarete,

First I'll preface by saying, as I've mentioned before, that working on a production of *From the Mississippi Delta* in 1998 was the first job I ever had in theater that got me a paycheck. (I filled in for the stage manager halfway through the run.) So the play has always had a fondness in my heart.

I'm happy to say it does even more now. Here's what I enjoyed about your reading. It might be round about by way of anecdote, so bear with me...

When *Henry V* was in tech a couple months ago, I asked Kerry how it was going, and she was humble enough to say that it was, after all, undergraduate students doing Shakespeare— so there's that— but that what she hoped audiences would keep in mind was that it's most importantly an educational process for the students, for them to discover what kind of potential they may have available. (The show was terrific, by the way.)

When I saw the play *Eryn* directed in the fall, I was so taken with what she was able to get out of her actors and do with the production overall— that it made it so clear what kind of potential there can be. Okay, so often when we say things “have potential,” that's negative, but I mean it in the sense of revealing what's possible in the department.

So that's why I fell in love with your reading. (Of course you were humble enough to preface it by saying you and the actors only had a couple rehearsals!) For the exact same thing you said at Ipanema last night— just a text, some actors and maybe some boxes. I'm most interested in developing new plays, so that stripped down model really appeals to me because it's so easy to put together (relatively, of course!), without scenery, lights, costumes, selling tickets,

etc. And it reveals as much about the play as could a “full” production. (And it’s utterly persuaded me to put together my own readings and not worry about a full Shafer show.)

So I think that’s where your reading hit the mark, that it was able to do full justice to Holland’s play (and more importantly, to her story!), even though it was on-book, under fluorescents, with gym mats and chairs. I’m sure I’m not the only one whose favorite scene was the birth scene because the reading of it and the simple staging made the pain and the humor so very clear and (coming from a man without children!) probably helped universalize it. I think the fact that you showed us how we could laugh WITH the play might be the most profound thing about the reading.

The reading made it clear that there’s a way to get at the heart of the play just by using the play itself, and by showing it cleanly and simply. And that’s some serious potential!

Thanks for asking for my thoughts, thanks for doing the reading, and congratulations!

Yours,

planting petunias,

Matthew DiCinto, VCU Graduate Student

Congratulations on a beautifully executed staged reading of “Mississippi Delta.” You and your performers gave it such life and respected/honored the material. You found incredibly talented women who obviously enjoyed their work with you! So that part of your thesis is passed with great success!

- Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies

Virginia Commonwealth University

Etymology

It was not necessary for me to research the interpretation of the dialect used in the script because it's a language I grew up with and have heard all my life. For example Aint Sally and Unca Howad, as I called them endearingly; called me Mawgrit; as opposed to Aunt Sally and Uncle Howard and Margaret. I and everyone I knew spoke this way in our little town of Abbeville, Georgia, where I spent the first six years of my life.

Aint – Aunt

Ah'm - I'm

Alshoots - Oh shoot

Ammulance - ambulance

Biggity – superior

Bout - about

Braggedy – bragging

Brang - bring

Catty-corner - diagonally

Chullin – children

Chunk - throw

Coathouse - courthouse

Cullards - colored people

Cucker-burr - nappy

Dats – that's

De – the

Deday – today

Dem – them

Demorrow - tomorrow

Den - then

De near bout – the almost

Dere/Yonder – there

Dese – these

Dey – they

Dey's – they are

Dis mawning – this morning

Doncha - don't you

Done done – have done

Doe – door

Drank – drink

'er – her

Everthang - everything

Elufindated - illuminated

F'n - if

Footes – feet

Fore – before

Fount - found

Gainst - against

Garry – porch

Gie – give

Gieing - giving

Git – get

Gone do – going to do

Gonna – going to

Grandgirl - granddaughter

Gwine – going

Gurl - girl

Hit's a lotta – there are a lot of

Hongry - hungry

Horsepital - hospital

I'd – I would

Jest – just

Ketch - catch

Kin – can

Kinda – kind of

Kivers - covers

Knowed – knew

Lawd – Lord

'lected - elected

'leven - eleven

Lone - alone

Longside - alongside

Lotta – lot of

Members – remember

Mere - here

Middy - midruff

Minnesody - Minnesota

Moe - more

Nawth – north

Noway – anyway

Nuff/'nought - enough

O'er/ober – over

Off'n - off of

'oman - woman

Onliest - only

Outdoe - outdoor

Outa - out of

Oughta - ought to

Pances – pants

Pore - poor

Plan'ation – plantation

Pasteboard – cardboard

Plum dee – sure enough

Prettish - prettiest

'ppointment – appointment

Puccon - pumpkin

Rat - right

Retched - reached

Round – around

Sandmich - sandwich

Saddity - Saturday

S'cound - scoundrel

Set - sit

Show nuff – sure enough

Skeered - scared

Slop jar – jar for spit

Somethang - something

Stead'a - instead of

Steady-like - regularly

Strang - string

Sturring - stirring

Suaar - Sugar

Suster - sister

'taintion - attention

Teet – to eat

Tempertude - temperature

Termination - determination

Till - until

Thang – thing

Thanking - thinking

Thoe-up - throw up

Tooken - taken

Tote - carry

Twixt - between

Wader - water

Winnins - winnings

Wit- with

Ya - you

Yas'm - yes ma'am

Yaself - yourself

Yassir - yes sir

Yawl - you all

Terms and their meanings

Picking in high cotton – looking real good

Dead cat on the line - something is going to go wrong

Git us in de pigeon drop - Get us caught in some trouble, like the pigeon being caught by the dropping of the door of the cage.

Buck dancing - The history of Buck dancing is a pre-tap dance routine and was done by Minstrel and Vaudeville performers in the mid-nineteenth century portraying the African American males, known as “Bucks.” The term “buck” is traced to the West Indies where Africans used the words po’bockorau (Buccaneer). Ship captains would have the men dance on the ships (dancing the slaves) to try to keep the morale up as well as a form of exercise. Emphasizes percussive rhythms with a greater use of the heel and toe. A buck dancer keeps his weight on the balls of the feet. The heel and toe movements produce clicks, which some people describes a “patter” sound. The style uses a greater bent leg position that distinguishes it from “shuffle” clogging.

Shotgun House - A typical shotgun house is long and narrow and often doesn’t have windows on the sides because of the houses extremely close proximity to one another. The first shotgun houses were erected in New Orleans; built by Haitian refugees fleeing the revolt led by Toussaint L’Ouverture.

I have always been told that a shotgun house was a house where you could shoot through the front door and out the back door without hitting a wall.

Wolf Whistle - Whistle in which fingers are inserted in the mouth to produce a louder and more penetrating tone. (This is the same whistle Emmett Till was accused of using which ultimately resulted in his brutal and fatal beating).

Sugar Daddy - An older, financially stable man who dates and takes care of a much younger woman.

Music

The key ingredient of a great blues song is the fact that it tells a compelling story; stories that begin by speaking of the everyday lives of country folks. I believe in this case, the song “Trouble in Mind” was chosen to accompany this piece of literature because it echoes the sentiment of Aint Baby when she consistently reminded Ida Mae that she needed to want more. It speaks about the struggles this family went through on a day to day basis, but that dreams of better days were always prevalent in their minds.

The freedom songs were standards that were sung throughout the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the spiritual songs are what we all grew up on regardless to what part of the country we are from. We were always told about God no matter what the circumstances were in our lives, and it was instilled in us that “trouble don’t last always.”

Trouble in Mind

Richard M. Jones, 1926

Trouble in mind, I'm blue
But I won't be blue always,
'Cause the sun's gonna shine
In my backdoor someday.
I'm all alone at midnight
And my lamp is burnin' low
Aint never had so much
Trouble in my life before.

Trouble in mind, that's true
I have almost lost my mind,
Life ain't worth livin',
Sometimes I feel like dyin'.
Goin' down to the river
Gonna take my ol' rockin' chair
And if the blues don't leave me
I'll rock away from there.
You been a hard-hearted mama
Great God! You been unkind
Gonna be a cold, cold papa
Cause you to lose your mind.
I'm gonna lay my head down
On some lonesome railroad line
And let the two nineteen
Pacify my mind.
Well it's trouble, oh trouble
Trouble on my worried mind,
When you see me laughin'
I'm laughin' just to keep from cryin'.

Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child

J. W. Johnson, J. R. Johnson, 1926

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child

A long ways from home
A long ways from home
True believer
A long ways from home
Along ways from home
Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almos' gone
Way up in de heab'nly land
Way up in de heab'nly land
True believer
Way up in de heab'nly land
Way up in de heab'nly land
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long ways from home
There's praying everywhere

Aint Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around

The Freedom Singers, 1961

Aint gonna let nobody turn me around...
turn me around...
turn me around...
Aint gonna let nobody turn me around...
Keep on a-walkin'
Keep on a-talkin'

Gonna build a brand new world.

Aint gonna let the administration turn me around...

turn me around...

turn me around...

Aint gonna let the administration turn me around...

Keep on a-walkin'

Keep on a-talkin'

Gonna build a brand new world.

Aint gonna let no first-strike policy turn me around...

turn me around...

turn me around...

Aint gonna let no first-strike policy turn me around...

Keep on a-walkin'

Keep on a-talkin'

Gonna build a brand new world.

Aint gonna let nobody turn me around...

turn me around...

turn me around...

Aint gonna let nobody turn me around...

Keep on a-swingin'

Keep on a-singin'

Gonna build a brand new world.

Oh Freedom

(Song can be dated back to the post-Civil War era. No specific author is known).

First recorded by Odetta, 1956

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me

And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

No more mourning, no more mourning, no more mourning over me

And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

No more crying, no more crying, no more crying over me

And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me

And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

There'll be singin', there'll be singin', there'll be singin' over me

And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me

And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

We Shall Over Come

Silphia Horton, who learned it from tobacco field workers

We shall overcome,

We shall overcome,

We shall overcome someday.

Chorus:

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We shall overcome someday.

We shall overcome,

We shall overcome,

We shall overcome someday.

This Little Light of Mine

John Lomax, 1939

This little light of mine

I'm gonna let it shine;

This little light of mine

I'm gonna let it shine;

This little light of mine

I'm gonna let it shine;

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Everywhere I go,

I'm gonna let it shine.

Everywhere I go,

I'm gonna let it shine.
Everywhere I go,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.
I've got the light of freedom,
I'm gonna let it shine.
I've got the light of freedom,
I'm gonna let it shine.
I've got the light of freedom,
I'm gonna let it shine.
I've got the light of freedom,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Will the Circle Be Unbroken

Ada R. Habershon, 1907

I was standing by my window
On a cold and cloudy day
When I saw the hearse come rollin'
For to take my mother away.
Will the circle be unbroken?
By and by lord, by and by,
There's a better home a-waitin'
In the sky lord, in the sky.
I told the undertaker:
"undertaker, please drive slow,
For this body you are haulin'

Lord, I hate to see her go".

Will the circle be unbroken?

By and by lord, by and by,

There's a better home a-waitin'

In the sky lord, in the sky.

Well I followed close behind her,

Tried to hold up and be brave,

But I could not hide my sorrow

When they laid her in the grave

Will the circle be unbroken?

By and by lord, by and by,

There's a better home a-waitin'

In the sky lord, in the sky.

I went back home, my home was lonesome,

Missed my mother she was gone.

All my brothers and sisters crying

In our home so sad and alone.

Will the circle be unbroken?

By and by lord, by and by,

There's a better home a-waitin'

In the sky lord, in the sky.

We sang the songs of childhood,

Hymns of faith that made us strong,

Ones that our mother had taught us,

Hear the angels sing along

Will the circle be unbroken?
By and by lord, by and by,
There's a better home a-waitin'
In the sky lord, in the sky.

Precious Lord

Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932

Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am warn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on, to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord, and lead me home.
When my way is unclear, precious Lord, linger near
When my time it is almost gone.
Hear my prayer, hear my call
Take my hand, lest I fall
Take my hand, precious Lord, and lead me home.
Precious Lord, I love your name
When I look back from whence I came
Sometimes I'm lame, sometimes falling, sometimes alone;
Friends and loved ones I love so dear
They're gone, but still I'm here
Take my hand, Precious Lord, and lead me home.

Poetry

Revolutionary Petunias

“These poems are about revolutionaries and lovers about how, both in revolution and in love, loss of trust and compassion robs us of hope. They are also about (and for) those few embattled souls who remain painfully committed to beauty and to love even while facing the firing squad.” - Alice Walker

Casey at the Bat

by Ernest Lawrence Thayer ©

Published: The Examiner (06-03-1888)

The Outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day:
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.
A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;
They thought, if only Casey could get but a whack at that -
We'd put up even money, now, with Casey at the bat.
But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,
And the former was a lulu and the latter was a cake;
So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,
For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.
But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,

And Blake, the much despised, tore the cover off the ball;
And when the dust had lifted, and the men saw what had occurred,
There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.
Then from 5,000 throats and more there rose a lusty yell;
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;
It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,
For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.
There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face.
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.
Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.
Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.
And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped-
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire said.
From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand;
And it's likely they'd a-killed him had not Casey raised his hand.
With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;

He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid flew;
But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two."
"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered fraud;
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.
The sneer is gone from Casey's lip, his teeth are clenched in hate;
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.
Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out.

Geography

If south is a perspective as well as a direction, then the Mississippi Delta may well be the most southern place on earth.”

Ol’ Man River had touched all the other points of the compass: north, near the Great Lakes; east, in the fertile valleys of Ohio; west, the Great Plains - he’d come from all these places. Now he was headed south. He rolled and rushed, ebbbed and flowed in eternal migration to destination and destiny. Where he crossed Yazoo, he cut her, but soft. And where he cut, Delta was born.

It was baptism, Ol’ Man pushed her down, tried to hold her beneath his rushing waters but couldn’t. Delta rose, she floated. Ol’ Man claimed her as kin, gave her his rightful name, Mississippi Delta.

She was fertile, Miss Delta, giving birth to a paradise where deer, bear, panther, wildcat, raccoon, peacock, and flamingo roamed wild and free until the settlers came. White folks from the southern colonies, now states, came greedily and in increasing numbers to steal from the Delta, down to her very ground. What they couldn’t steal, they slaughtered, including the Choctaws, Chickasaw, and Yazoo who had mostly been relocated there by treaty in the first place.

Stealing from Delta wasn’t easy. So the white man brought people he had enslaved, my ancestors, to do the hard work. With chains around our necks, we were forced to clear the land he claimed, to build his levees, to work his plantations. We were forced to plant his cotton, our hands scarred by the boll’s spurs, our bodies scarred by the boss man’s whip, our souls scarred by the white man’s cruelty. Our men were castrated and lynched, our women formed to bear the white man’s lust and oftentimes his children.

We were Africans who knew nothing of Guinea, Senegal, Nigeria, or Ghana. We were Caribes who had never seen the sun set on Montego Bay. Yet we remembered home.

After the Civil War we were made citizens of the land we’d helped to build. Citizens, just like our former masters, and we were promised...

But by then it was too late for promises. Mississippi Delta had given birth to something that was neither a paradise nor its promise. Mississippi Delta remained a world apart, another country, another time, she refused to rejoin the Union that had “saved” us.

Saved? No, we had not been saved. The rules remained the same as before, only the names had changed. Now we were called “sharecroppers,” cropping for shares to pay back loans at prices set by the plantation masters (only now they were called “lantation owners” or “planters”). We had swapped the chains of slavery for the bonds of debt. And what did we own at so steep a price? Nothing but miserable shacks and weedy gardens that could never bear enough fruit to fill a belly.

The Jim Crow caste laws that kept slavery alive after its so-called death did more than preserve America’s “peculiar institution” well into the twentieth century. They kept our black lives medieval. In my hometown of Greenwood, in Leflore County, Mississippi, whites had sworn since before Reconstruction that we blacks would not only know our place but stay in it forever. They celebrated as a holiday the Leflore County Massacre of 1889, in which three thousand blacks seeking political rights had been slaughtered by white posses. Here, in this paradise lost, black people could take nothing for granted, not life, not liberty, not “the pursuit of happiness.”

Into this magnolia jungle, on August 29, 1944, I was dragged, kicking and screaming, from Mama’s womb.

From the Mississippi Delta Memoirs. Endesha Ida Mae Holland, PhD Simon & Schuster. New York, New York, 1997

Images



Manning a mock polling place with other civil rights activists, Greenwood, 1963



Bud - Endesha's brother/cousin



Easter Mae - Aint Baby's tenant that "served" the community

Past Productions



Kellita Wooten (from left), Sharalyn Bailey and Margarette Joyner in the African American Repertory Theatre's production of "From the Mississippi Delta."

Richmond Times Dispatch, 2008

By SUSAN HAUBENSTOCK SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Published: February 11, 2008

As its entry in the Acts of Faith Festival, African American Repertory Theatre has chosen "From the Mississippi Delta," Endesha Ida Mae Holland's inspiring dramatization of her own life story.

Holland suffered poverty, discrimination and rape. She joined the civil-rights movement in the 1960s, earned a high school equivalency diploma and went on to earn bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees at the University of Minnesota. She became a respected professor and an award-winning playwright; she died in 2006 at the age of 61.

The play, which opened off-Broadway in 1991, fits in the "good for you" category that AART artistic director Derome Scott Smith appears to prefer. Actors don't take on single characters and have them interact in scenes; instead stories are told in mostly narrative form, with three actresses flowing in and out of different roles. The main character, Phelia, is played sometimes by one actress, sometimes by another, occasionally by two at once. The effect is certainly dramatic and involving, but there is a sense, too, of receiving a lesson.

Smith also has a disturbing habit of tinkering with scripts. Here he has altered the many songs threaded through the work. It seems disrespectful to the playwright, the person being held up as a role model.

But there is no doubt that this works as theater, particularly because the three women onstage give courageous and thrilling performances, bringing 32 characters to life. All three are marvelous singers as well as actresses.

Sharalyn Bailey can be strong, shy, angry, endearing; Kellita Wooten is heartbreaking as an 11-year-old rape victim and credible as a male barfly. Above all, Margarett Joyner is the treasure of this production, spending most of her time portraying Aint Baby, Phelia's mother, a sometime prostitute and respected midwife. Joyner is incredibly powerful and magnetic. When she takes on the character of Bro Pastor and presides over Aint Baby's funeral, she delivers an old-time sermon with raucous energy. She even designed the show's costumes.

AART's production includes a simple and elegant set by Smith, including slide projections between scenes. There is an interesting sound design that is hampered by a loud buzz in the sound system. Gino Brantley's lighting is substandard, leaving annoying shadows where they shouldn't be. But Joyner's costumes and the work of movement consultant Lawanda Raines enhance the theatricality of the piece, helping Holland's story to thrill the heart.

A Very Long Way From the Mississippi Delta, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, Ph.D., Open

10/13/97

Since early childhood, it's been a life touched by poverty, racism and violence. But civil rights, education and love of family changed the direction of this extraordinary woman's life, and we are all the richer for it.

Melissa Payton, University of Southern California

The 'M' Ensembles Mastery

From the Mississippi Delta: Written by Endesha Ida Mae Holland. Directed by Jerry Maple Jr. Starring Carey Hart, Brandi Edwards, and Carolyn Johnson. Through May 11. The M Ensemble, 12320 W. Dixie Hwy., North Miami; 305-895-8955

We're getting to this one a few weeks late, and that's wrong. There isn't a single person in eyeshot of this newspaper who couldn't benefit from "From the Mississippi Delta"—a play so bighearted, so sassily smart, so emotionally tempestuous, so spiritually gratifying, and so LMAO funny that it's a damn crime to leave you but a single weekend to rearrange your plans, make your reservations, and get your ass to The M Ensemble to see it. But you will manage. Because you must.

Bibliography

Books

Holland, Endesha Ida Mae, Ph.D. *From The Mississippi Delta: A Memoir*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997

Dierenfield, Bruce J. *The Civil Rights Movement: United Kingdom*: Harlow England Pearson Education Limited, 2004

Walker, Alice. *Revolutionary Petunias*: Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1973

Hillman, Christopher. Middleton, Roy. Veelo, Hennievan. Richard M. Jones, *Forgotten Man of Jazz*. Portland: Cygnet Productions, 1997

Encyclopedia & Dictionary

Houghton Mifflin Company: "Wolf Whistle." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Fourth Edition. 2000

Magazine & Newspaper Articles

Bond, Julian. "SNCC: What We Did. 'Like the Dew, A Journal of Southern Culture and Politics'" *Monthly Review* 2010

Thorp, Brandon K. "The 'M' Ensembles Mastery" *Miami NewTimes, Arts* 8 May 2008 Arts p.1 8 May 2008

Haubenstock, Susan "Fluid Acting Carries Inspiring Tale." *Richmond Times Dispatch, Entertainment* 11 Feb 2008

Payton, Melissa "A Very Long Way From the Mississippi Delta, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, Ph.D, Open" *University of Southern California USC News* 13 Oct 1997

Website

Watson, Sonny. "Dance Archives." *Buck & Wing*
<<http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/23buckwl.htm>> 19 Mar 2010

Clark, Josh. "What's a shotgun house?" 19 May 2009. HowStuffWorks.com.
<<http://home.howstuffworks.com/home-improvement/construction/planning/shotgun-house.htm>> 08 April 2011

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Music in the Civil Rights Movement." American Experience. Eyes on the Prize Blackside

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/reflect/r03_music.html> 23 Aug 2006

Ruehl, Kim. "Oh Freedom, History of an American Folk Song." About.com Folk Music

<<http://folkmusic.about.com/od/folksongs/qt/OhFreedom.htm>> 1996

Library of Congress "African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship." Sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and Demonstrations, We Shall overcome 21 Mar 2008

<<http://international.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart9b.html>> 21 Mar 2008

Mikkelson, Barbara and David P. "Urban Legends Reference Page" Snopes.com

<<http://sonopes.com/music/songs/precious.asp>> 11 Mar 2009

"SNCC Definition." wordiQ.com <<http://www.wordiq.com/definition/SNCC>> 2010

Vita

Margarette Joyner is currently completing all requirements to receive her Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University and will graduate on May 21, 2011. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of South Alabama. She was born on November 20, 1958 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, raised in Abbeville, Georgia and Miami, Florida. She served a three year tour of duty in the United States Marine Corps and spent most of that tour at Camp Pendleton, California. Upon graduating from VCU, she will reside in Manteo, N.C. where she will teach and retire.