Arts & Humanities

Tell It on the Mountain

The young playwright Katori Hall '03CC unlocks her voice in a controversial play about Martin Luther King Jr.

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Bruce Davidson / Magnum Photos

On a sunny Sunday morning in mid-October, thousands of people are gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC, for the dedication of a memorial to the

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It is the first memorial on the Mall for a nonpresident and the first for an African-American. Dignitaries are everywhere. King's close friends in the civil-rights movement, including the ministers Joseph Lowery and Jesse Jackson, share remembrances. Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin perform. President Barack Obama '83CC, the embodiment of King's vision of equality, gives the keynote address.

The podium for the ceremony stands at the site's portal, a massive granite boulder cleft into three parts, the stone's center wedge thrust forward. Carved out of this midsection is a thirty-foot-high image of King, his arms folded, gaze steady, stance strong. On one side of the monument is a phrase taken from King's "I Have a Dream" speech, given in 1963 on the steps of the neighboring Lincoln Memorial: "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

That same afternoon in New York City, hundreds of theatergoers are seated inside the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre, watching one of the first Broadway performances of *The Mountaintop*, a fantastical, often humorously irreverent account of the night before King was assassinated on the balcony of Memphis's Lorraine Motel. This Dr. King, as written by thirty-year-old playwright Katori Hall '03CC and portrayed by Samuel L. Jackson, is a sometimes paranoid, sometimes playful chain-smoking womanizer with holes in his socks who nervously checks to see if his phone is tapped and flies into paroxysms of panic with every clap of thunder outside his motel window. The audience sees him drink and hears him urinate and curse and cry, childlike, in fear.

"I really wanted to deconstruct and humanize King," says Hall over lunch at New York's Café Luxembourg before an afternoon rehearsal back in September. "Before he gave that final speech in Memphis, everybody and their mama was like, 'Don't go to the church; they gonna bomb it.' I thought, Well, if the people who were just in the neighborhood, passing by the church, didn't want to go into it, I bet he didn't want to go into it. And it led me to the most amazing research, looking at wiretaps from the FBI and first-person accounts of people who were there at the speech.

"There's so much information out there, but there's nothing that cuts to the core of how you deal with knowing that there's a bullet waiting for you. I wanted to dramatically represent that in a way that could affect people, could move people, and, maybe, could change people's lives. This man stepped up, *in spite of*. This man

changed the world, *in spite of*. What could I do?

“There was no grand plan to snatch him off the pedestal,” she adds, a little defensively, “like, ‘Ooh, I’m gonna make a name for myself.’”

Intentional or not, that’s what Hall has done. Described by some as a cross between a Tony Kushner play and a Tyler Perry movie, *The Mountaintop*, which premiered in London and won the Olivier Award for the best new play of 2010, has met with both cheers and controversy in America. It has polarized not only critics but the black community as well — specifically, the older generation of African-Americans who experienced the civil-rights era of the 1950s and 1960s firsthand and canonize King for his inspirational leadership.

“A lot of black families in the South have on their wall what they call the Trinity,” says Hall, who was raised in Memphis and now lives in New York. “They’ll have pictures of King, Jesus, and Kennedy. In their eyes, I’m disrupting so many things. I’m an Uncle Tom; I’m a traitor to my race because I’ve decided to do my job and be a dramatist and put a human being on stage and not an idea.”

Not only does Hall place a very human King at the Lorraine, but she brazenly gives him a motel-room companion: a young, pretty, and sassy angel disguised as a hotel maid named Camae, who is sent by God (a black woman) to chaperone King to the other side. Played in the Broadway production by Angela Bassett, Camae is modeled after Hall’s mother, Carrie Mae, whom she credits as the inspiration for *The Mountaintop*.

“I don’t remember when my mother first told me this story,” Hall says, “but she told it to me over and over again, every year on King’s birthday or the day that he died. She’d say, ‘You know, when I was fifteen I tried to go hear him speak, but I couldn’t because Big Mama said that I couldn’t — she heard that they was gonna bomb the church. So I decided to stay my ass at home. And I am so sorry I did, because I just never heard the man speak.’ This story that she passed down to me, just by speaking it, became 3-D and real and alive. I decided that I needed to put it down on the page.”

Camae may be based on Hall’s mother, but there’s plenty of the daughter in her as well. Whip-smart, funny, and attractive, with a ready smile, bubbly personality, and forthright manner, Hall exhibits a self-possession that belies her youth and a tough-girl defiance and an impolitic lack of self-censorship that confirm it. The Camae who

calls the revered King a “bougie negro” to his face has much in common with the playwright, who has no qualms about yelling at her Tony-nominated director, Kenny Leon, or telling one of the highest-grossing movie stars in history, who has a penchant for ad-libbing, “not to mess with my award-winning play.” (Jackson responded with an opening-night card that read, “Thank you for the belligerence.”)

Also like Camae, Hall seems comfortable with crude language — although she’s quick to downplay how much she curses. “I got into a little tiff with Michael Schulman about that,” she says with a laugh, referring to the author of a *New Yorker* profile of her that had recently appeared. “He spent five days with me in Memphis, and the only quotes he used were the ones I said ‘fucking’ in!”

Hall’s audacity stems more from experience than recklessness. When Hall was in kindergarten, her parents — her father is a factory worker, her mother a phlebotomist — moved from a cramped apartment to a house in Raleigh, an almost exclusively white neighborhood in Memphis, hoping to provide their four daughters with a better life and their precocious youngest with greater educational opportunities. After being tested, Hall was accepted into the school system’s program for gifted children. She was the only black student in some of her classes.

“I had a lot of white friends in school,” says Hall, “but it can still be very isolating internally when you feel like people don’t understand you. So you overperform whiteness in some way, whether by only having white friends or speaking in a very certain way, in order to be accepted by the community as a ‘safe Negro.’ But then sometimes you feel cast away from your kinship ties with black people, and even your blackness. That’s why some people would call me Oreo and say, ‘You think you better than us,’ because I spoke in grammatically correct sentences — which I don’t always. It was an interesting line that I had to walk at an early age, one that a lot of post–civil rights black kids have had to walk. It can become an identity crisis if you let it. Or it can be a source of strength.”

Samuel L. Jackson as Martin Luther King Jr. (Joan Marcus)

For Hall, it was the latter. A talented student, she became the first black valedictorian at her high school, a goal she had set for herself in the sixth grade. When it came time for her to graduate, though, the school changed the usual procession order. Instead of the valedictorian leading the way, students were told to line up alphabetically.

“I don’t think it was a fluke,” she says. “In the school’s entire history, they’d always had the valedictorian go first. It was also weird that there was no mention of the fact that I was the first black woman valedictorian at the school in the newspapers or anywhere. If it wasn’t blatant racism, it was something subconscious. People were still struggling to see everybody as equals, and that extended to the educational system.”

Hall was accepted to Columbia on a full scholarship. Coming from a home where vivid storytelling about the day’s events was a dinner-table ritual (“My parents are very dramatic people,” says Hall; “I learned from the best”), she decided to join Columbia’s theater department, which was housed at Barnard. Hall soon discovered that life in the “liberal” North would bring further racial challenges and identity struggles.

“I was in my second acting class at Barnard,” she says, “and my teacher told us to go to the library and find a play that had a scene for your type. My acting partner happened to be another black woman, and we really struggled to find a play embraced by the canon that had a scene for *two* young black women. So we went back to our instructor and said, ‘Please give us some suggestions,’ and she couldn’t think of *anything*. In that moment I thought, I’m going to have to write some plays with scenes for two young black women.”

To Hall, all her encounters at Barnard felt racially charged. In her first playwriting class, she says, her professor told her that she wasn’t a good playwright. “The other students thought I was bad, too,” she says. “All my characters were black, and I noticed that all the other characters were ethnic, too, but Jewish — most of the girls in my class were Jewish New Yorkers — and so each of them understood what the others were talking about. But when I would write about what I went through culturally, being in the South and being a black person, they would kind of not get it, and would say things like, ‘Oh, this doesn’t work.’”

The stage seemed as unwelcoming as the classroom. In the fall of 2001, Hall auditioned for a highly competitive senior-thesis production of Chekhov’s Three Sisters. Only a junior at the time, she was cast in a minor part; although that production included a black student in a leading role, Hall firmly believes that race was a factor in the decision. “I wasn’t the only person this happened to,” she contends. “People of color never got the prominent roles.” Already feeling isolated within the department, as well as in her new home of New York City on the heels of

9/11, Hall broke from the theater department completely, switching her major to African-American studies.

“I felt like I didn’t belong there,” she recalls, “that I was made to feel as if I didn’t belong there. I needed to learn more about myself, my culture, my heritage. In a weird way,” she adds, “it piqued a renaissance in me, in my interest in who I was and where I came from.”

Hall went to South Africa for the spring semester to study the arts and social change. “It was a country in transition, and living in the South, I had always felt I was living in a country in transition. I wanted to learn a lot more about that kind of black-and-white divide.” During that trip, she wrote Freedom Train, a performance-poetry piece about the oppression that can exist within activist movements, and she began to find her voice as a writer. “They gave me my own mike, and I performed my poetry with a band in front of a very open and embracing audience,” she says. “It was a life-changing experience: I began to see myself as a storyteller.”

Back in New York, Hall continued her acting outside of Columbia at the Harlem School of the Arts and also enrolled in the College’s creative-writing program. In her senior-year playwriting seminar, she was asked to write a scene about people fighting over an object. Hall, who was then reading Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, chose mojo. This time, her black characters worked.

“I finally realized that, in that first class, I was trying to write black characters but making them sound white,” she says. “Once I figured it out and stopped doing that, it just broke open for me.”

Out of that scene grew Hall’s first full-length play, *Hoodoo Love*, an unsentimental, sexually brutal story about a young blues singer in the 1930s who runs away to Memphis, falls in love unrequitedly, and enlists the help of an elderly former slave skilled in the African-American folk magic of hoodoo to win her heart’s desire.

“She could speak as well as any seminar student,” recalls Austin Flint, her playwriting professor, “but she hadn’t lost the language of her Memphis background, hadn’t forgotten how her grandmother and older relatives spoke. So she retained a very vibrant, genuine language with its own rhythms. To me, that good ear is one of the best predictors of who will become a professional playwright.”

After graduating from Columbia, Hall continued on her acting path, studying with director Robert Woodruff at Cambridge's American Repertory Theater (ART), and receiving her MFA in 2005. During the two-year program, she revised and completed *Hoodoo Love* and discovered not only that playwriting was her passion but that it could be a professional possibility.

"It was at the ART that I was introduced to the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage," she says. "I knew they were out there, but now I was learning the lines and seeing inside the worlds that they'd created. I ate it up. Because I saw these two young black women — who had locks like mine — writing plays, I thought maybe I could really do this."

Hall returned to New York after graduating, hoping to find acting work. (She won some small roles, including Woman Number Two in an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.) At the same time, she sent *Hoodoo Love* to the Cherry Lane Theatre Mentor Project, which matches three up-and-coming playwrights with three established dramatists and then stages the finished plays near the end of the season. Lynn Nottage was one of the mentors for 2006; she chose Hall's play.

"I had moved back to New York with nothing, no money in my bank account," Hall says. "I was walking down 42nd Street when I got the call, and started screaming. People probably thought, Oh, someone just died in her family. But I was finally being validated by somebody who was a writing idol to me."

Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett in "The Mountaintop." (Joan Marcus)

Like Flint, Nottage was taken with Hall’s command of Southern African-American vernacular. “I was struck by how she was able to define a vocabulary that was evocative of the period,” Nottage says. “It immediately transported me back to that bluesy era, and the characters really leapt off the page for me. I knew exactly who they were. One of the difficulties many young writers have is bringing characters fully to life. That’s something Katori very successfully did.”

Following her critically lauded off-Broadway premiere at Cherry Lane, Hall was accepted to Juilliard’s playwriting program and received a Playwrights of New York

Fellowship at the Lark Play Development Center, where The Mountaintop was first workshopped in 2009.

“It’s a very ambitious play,” says Nottage. “Katori was brave to take on an icon such as Martin Luther King and handle her exploration of him as a man in an incredibly irreverent way. She’s not writing ‘living room’ or ‘kitchen’ plays. She’s really tackling enormous issues.”

“Lynn helped me understand what it was to be more than just a writer but to be an activist with your work,” says Hall. “That your work is an extension of you, and the words you put on the page have to mean something — particularly since as women of color we don’t get many opportunities to be on stage. So when we’re given the opportunity, we gotta make it count.”

For Hall, at least, the opportunities keep coming. Her latest play, *Hurt Village*, about a housing project in Memphis, receives its world premiere at New York’s Signature Theatre in February. Set in 2002, Hurt Village is based on life in an actual development that has since been torn down; in her research, Hall discovered a forum on Facebook for former residents.

“They were all white,” she says, “and from my own Facebook page it’s obvious that I’m this little black girl. So I was like, ‘I’m writing this play, and I would love to hear about how hurtful it was when you lived there.’ These former residents lived there before 1968, right before King was shot. Everybody was giving me these idyllic memories of the project, how they would walk down to the store, how they would see Elvis . . . I call it racist Southern nostalgia. It’s like, ‘The South was so perfect, the South was amazing before the 1960s, before freedom came for them.’”

Then one day, Hall found a message in her personal Facebook inbox. “This woman said something like, ‘I actually have to tell you that these people are really racist, and on the day that King was shot we had a barbecue, and everyone remembers that. When I commented on the fact that we had this celebration after King’s murder, they kicked me off the page.’ So they weren’t honest with me about their political opinions.

“I thought it was interesting,” she continues, “that this woman, very discreetly, sent me a sign through my Facebook message box. I feel like, down South, they’re still not willing to have the conversation across color lines, except maybe in a space where they feel safe, like in front of a computer screen. I’m still trying to deconstruct

it.”

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon in mid-November, Katori Hall is lunching at Nizza, a favorite spot between Hell’s Kitchen and the Theater District, before auditions for *Hurt Village*. *The Mountaintop*, despite a mixed reception from the press and doubtless aided by its star power and provocative buzz, continues to see strong ticket sales and had its run extended until late January.

After dozens of Broadway curtains and interviews, Hall appears more polished and professional than she had only two months before. She is still racially reactive — she refers to the “Lily-White Way,” even though she is one of three African-American women playwrights debuting on Broadway this season — but is now more diplomatic and contemplative. Regardless of whether she had intended to court controversy, Hall has assumed the mantle of responsibility that comes with it.

“I don’t know why the play has gotten the response it has,” she says. “I haven’t, oddly, thought about it too much. I don’t read reviews, though I hear little bits here and there from people who are arguing around me, like friends who send me e-mails saying, ‘Fuck the white man’ and stuff like that. So I can’t say I have a defense, or a response to the critics.”

Yet when asked whether she feels that the lyricism of her language has been obfuscated by what some critics have labeled a miscast and heavy-handed production, Hall cautiously speculates on the reasoning behind the more negative reviews. “In London,” she says, “it was a very understated production. We didn’t have all the pomp and circumstance because we had no money. I wonder: are people responding to the play, or are they responding to choices made surrounding the play?”

She pauses thoughtfully, as if weighing the possibilities, and then tactfully changes course. “My work has a very different aesthetic, and what I’m gathering is that people were very surprised that it wasn’t historical and super serious. Not only was I putting King in a room with a woman and giving him stinky feet, but the play has humorous undertones. I think that really threw people for a loop and made some people angry.”

Hall wonders whether some theatergoers also felt alienated by her magical-realist approach to a relatively recent historical event, especially one so powerfully ingrained in America’s collective consciousness.

“For some people, *The Mountaintop* isn’t magic realism, it’s supernatural,” she says. “Not everybody believes in angels. I know I do, even though I’m not very religious. I do believe in heaven and earth being on the same plane, and spirits being able to speak to us. My mama’s seen ghosts, you know, and so maybe that’s why that way of approaching theater is alive in me.

“Or maybe it has something to do with being African-American, with that being part of my blood memory, where there’s hoodoo and magic and roots. Other people might think it’s hokey. All right,” Hall says with an arch smile, “let my grandma put a hex on you, and let’s see what you think in a year.”

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