

Dinner for Dr King

A Play in One Act

Based on the book, "Eating Dr. Kings Dinner, A Memoir of the Movement" By Chuck Fager, Kimo Press 2005

Characters in order of Appearance:

Narrator

First Inmate

Second Inmate

First Guard

Assistant to the Warden/ Sheriff

Warden

Sheriff Clark

Safety office Wilson Baker

Dr King

White Quaker

Act one Scene One;

As the curtain raises the audience finds itself in the kitchen of the Dallas County Jail in Selma, Alabama. There is (muffled) noise and sights of a busy kitchen in the background as the inmates have just finished their evening meal and the plates and kitchen utensils are being returned. In the front right of the stage is an inmate who seems to be in a daze, unaware of the frenzied activity behind him. He is simply playing with the dishwater. The scene continues unchanged until another inmate excitedly skips across the stage, retrieving the first inmate from his oblivion.

First Inmate:

What in the world has you dancing around like a crazy man?

Second inmate:

I am not sure I can get it out of my mouth. In all my years behind bars: every day being exactly the same as the day before, finally in all my years coming in and out of this place something big, really big is going to happen right here in the Dallas County Jail we so often call home.

First Inmate:

Well, if you would just take a deep breath and collect yourself. Maybe you can explain how this man who just drags himself in and out of here every day; the man I been washing dishes with every day, the man that has never smiled, not even once, is now jumping up and down and cannot find words enough to tell me how he got those ants in his pants.

Second Inmate: (*Calming himself, and in a whisper*)

I just now heard the guards talking about the news that, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. will be coming out of Browns Chapel and Marching down Sylvan Street, tomorrow with hundreds of demonstrators who plan to take over the jail by being arrested. and if, if, (*word repeated for emphasis*) the cities newly hired, "City Safety Director" somebody they called, "Baker" cannot talk them out of marching in the street like a parade and instead walk on the sidewalk like everyone else., Sheriff Clark plans on beating the hell out of them and then arresting them; and you know what that means, (*his voice falls off*)

First Inmate:

What?

Second inmate:

Sometimes it becomes clear to me why you're in here. You moron, that means that if he is successful, Doctor Martin Luther King will be in our jail. He will be in here just like one of us, right here in this noisy all-metal house we call home. That's just fantastic. (Shaking his head)

First Inmate:

Do you think we will get to see him?

Second inmate:

Who knows, an important guy like that, maybe they will treat him good maybe they will treat him bad, He is a black man in Alabama who is making trouble. To us and to Mr. Lewis it may be "good trouble" but to the men with the guns and nightsticks this is 1964 and that ain't how they want us black folk behaving. Especially if their trying to make it easier for black folk to vote. Lord knows maybe he won't even make it here, maybe sheriff Clark makes sure he goes straight from Sylvan Street to the hospital.

First inmate:

Or worse than that. I heard that Mr. Cronkite say on TV that there are threats on his life every day and they come from all over. They say that they have already stopped people from trying to kill him. They say he even says out loud sometimes that he won't die peacefully. He thinks he will be shot like that Mr. Kennedy; he even said it just that way.

Second inmate:

And here he is, walking tall and proud in Selma Alabama. Of course, his body guards stay so close to him so nobody can get a clear shot at him like there was with Mr. Kennedy; and what is with that white dude that I have seen walking right in front of him. Is he nuts or what? He is the only one in that march that is going to be held in suspicion by the black and the white folks. I gotta hand it to him, he is either very committed or a lunatic. Just how is he protecting Dr King? I'm sure there are plenty of white guys who wouldn't care if a bullet went right through him on his way to Dr. Kings heart.

Suddenly the kitchen becomes quiet. The warden has walked into the kitchen. Because a kitchen needs knives and other potential weapons to do its job the kitchen was staffed by prisoners who were considered "trustworthy." Because they always towed the prison line and were not considered dangerous, they enjoyed a freedom of mobility other prisoners did not have. The prisoners seem confused. It is apparent none of them had ever seen the warden before and they are curious about this person in a suit they didn't know came in their kitchen and is talking to the guards. It is apparent that there is excitement in the air and prisons don't like excitement.

After the warden leaves the guards briefly huddle until one of them came forward and says in a loud voice so all can hear..

First guard:

All right you worthless losers there's nothing to see here. I want all of you back to work this minute or tomorrow you'll be working for 11 cents an hour swinging a ten-pound sledge making little rocks out of big ones. Do you hear me clearly?

Scene Two:

As the curtain falls two desks appear, one at either end of the stage. There are men in business suits sitting at each of them. The one on the left has a telephone in his hand. A voice from behind the curtain calls out.

Assistant to the Warden:
Sheriff Clark on line one.

Warden:
Hello Sheriff I was expecting your call. I assume you are calling to advise me that I should be receiving guests tomorrow. Mostly colored guests.

Sheriff Clark:
Cut the crap warden you know as well as I do these are not visitors that are invading our town. These are professional black agitators who are infesting the entire south and today Warden; today, (*repeated for emphasis*) is the day we will stop them in their tracks.

Well, I'm sure you have heard about this idiot Wilson Baker, our former home appliance salesman turned mayor, Mr. Smitherman hired to clean up the towns "image." He is planning on "suggesting" to out of town troublemakers that they should walk on the sidewalk like everyone else so as not to start trouble. That jackass hasn't figured out that trouble is why they are here. There ain't gonna be any "peaceful demonstration" This guy King and I agree on that.

Sheriff Clark continues

Now, they tell me they are leaving from the Browns Chapel and fixing to start marching down Sylvan Street towards the Courthouse as early in the morning just as soon as they can organize themselves. Our esteemed City Safety Director has agreed to block off the street with his cops right away.

When that coward's approach fails, I have a posse of a hundred volunteers, most of them Klan, and with the help of baseball bats and cattle prods I will to deliver no less than two hundred and fifty of those black (expletive) to your jail by 4:00 in the afternoon. Are you prepared for that when it happens?

Warden:
Yes, sir we don't have room for them in the City jail downstairs but upstairs in the county jail we have removed everything from the dayroom that isn't bolted down. I hope you're not planning to hold a lot of them for a long time because my regular clientele is not happy about losing the dayroom and I don't want their

hurt feelings to get out of control. By the way you should know that with my budget I cannot feed that many people. You need to have most of them cleared out of here by noon tomorrow or I'll be hearing from that damn Federal judge again about, "conditions."

Sheriff Clark:

I'll have the judge call you as soon as I can, good bye and for God's sake do not coddle these, troublemakers. We need to send a message.

Warden:

I hear you quite clearly Sheriff Clark, good bye.

The warden and sheriff Clark hang up the phone and instantly a voice from behind the curtain declares,

Assistant to the Warden:

City Safety Officer Baker on line one

City Safety Officer, Wilson Baker:

Good morning Warden, I don't think we have met. My name is Wilson Baker and I was hired by the City to clean up its unfortunate image as a hotbed of racial animus and replace it with the more accurate image of the peacefully segregated community we all know it is. Now sheriff Clark believes that the only way to deal with these people is by brute force which will only serve to confirm that sordid reputation. Now that's not what you want for our city's future is it Warden?

But I must tell you sir if my approach fails and Sheriff Clark has his way, I expect you to make the trouble end there. By that I mean I speak for the Mayor when I say the protestors will be treated kindly and there will be no complaints regarding the behavior of your guards. We won't give all of those damn TV and newspaper people anything to tell the folks back home. Do you understand me?

Scene three:

The curtain rises and there are a number of Black men stage left. There are four men in the front of the line; one of which appears to be Dr King, another man is assumed to be Ralph Abernathy, a third unidentified man and a fourth whose whiteness seems to stand out.

Stage right are uniformed Policemen. There is a man in a business suit and a fedora hat standing in front of them.

*It is apparent that words are exchanged. The man in the suit walks toward the audience then turns a sharp left and leaves the stage. The police line advances
The curtain falls and once again and on stage right, the two inmates are at their post as dishwashers.*

Scene One:

First Inmate:

He is here, he is here, Dr Martin Luther King Junior, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, the Black Moses, the most famous man in the world is right here under our roof.

Second Inmate:

He sure is, have you heard all the singing and preaching going on up on the Third floor? The guards are complaining about it. The guards said that they asked Dr King to preach but he said he was hoarse and tired, he decided that they should have a Quaker Meeting type Service. Dr King said he learned to appreciate the Quakers when they sent him to India to learn about non-violence from somebody named Ghandi. I think that white man who stands so close to Dr King he is probably one of those Quakers, at least he might think so; he must love the Lord, why else would a white guy help Dr. King?

First Inmate:

Laughs I'm going with he is nuts?

Followed by laughter. The two continue to appear to return to their dishwashing duties when the second inmate as if in a dream speaks.

Second inmate:

I sure wish I could find a way to do something nice for Reverend King.

First Inmate:

Well, you can bet that if anyone is caught doing anything special for the Reverend, they will find themselves on highway duty.

Second Inmate:

I know, in fact no one knows better than me what that's like. I did highway duty off and on for four years before I got too old and they gave me this job. But we are talking about Martin Luther King! For you and me and people who look like us he is the most important man on God's good earth. Many of our brothers and sisters would lay down their life for him. Just like that white guy who walks in front of him all the time. I will bet that all he gets for risking his life all the time is a promise that Dr. King will speak at his funeral.

The inmates laugh briefly.

We got to do something good for the Reverend and I think I know what it is. I don't really care what they do to me as long as I can do something for Dr. King.

The curtain comes down and we return to scene two, the Sheriff is at his desk stage left and the Warden is sitting at his desk stage right. From behind the curtain, once again is the voice of the Warden's assistant.

Scene Two: (repeated)

Sheriff's Assistant:

Sheriff Clark on line one

Warden:

And what else can I do for our towns Sheriff this late in this busy day?

Sheriff Clark:

I want you to separate out the leadership of these (expletive) so I want you to bring King, Abernathy and his two body guards' downstairs to the City Jail. By the way, who is that white guy marching with these negros anyway?

Warden,

His name is Chuck something, 21 years old, he is from Atlanta, went to school in Colorado. An army brat, he seems harmless he just doesn't seem to like the way black folks are treated, I guess. The kid seems like one of those Quaker people to me. We got him on Unlawful assembly, just like the rest. If he's got bail, he will be out by lunch tomorrow and by that time he will be ready. Far as I know none of them have had anything to eat since they woke up this morning.

Scene four:

The desks at either end of the stage are removed and to stage left the desk is replaced by what appears to be the shadow of a prison cell. Within these shadows are two cold and uncomfortable looking steel bunkbeds. The three black men appear to be exhausted and in unison they flop down on the beds. The fourth, the white person suspected of being a Quaker is pacing back and forth in the cell. After a few moments Inmate Two enters from stage right. He is dressed in kitchen whites that have seen better days and is pushing a loudly squeaking food cart.

Second Inmate

Dr King, Oh Dr King, I got dinner for Dr King. Looky here I got fresh steamed collard greens. You like collard greens don't you Dr King?

Dr King rises from his bunk and puts his hands thru the bars to shake the inmate's hand and says;

Dr King:

How ya doing?

For a few seconds Dr King and inmate two talk in muffled tones until Dr King speaks; as if to conclude his statement

Dr King:

And that is why I cannot eat your greens

Second Inmate:

Say what?

Dr King continues,

You see, while Reverend Abernathy and I were learning about nonviolence from Gandhi we also observed that he had gone to jail many times and one of these times he decided it was important to make the time count for something. For example, he worked to educate the prisoners and he found ways to make peace; like preaching from the Hindu scriptures as well as from the Koran. But most of all he decided that for him imprisonment was to be time of religious retreat together

with and an opportunity for rest and a regular routine of spiritual meditation and practice. He did this to free and purify his spirit.

The reverend Abernathy and I thought we would do the same. It helps us prepare if we fast for the first two days we are imprisoned.

Dr King takes a deep breath and continues;

Dr King:

And that my friend is why I very much appreciate the effort you have gone too” but I’m afraid I am unable to eat your greens.

Second Inmate

You mean?

Dr King nods

Second Inmate

You Mean; you can’t; you can’t

Dr King shakes his head slowly as Reverend Abernathy moves to Dr Kings side and also shakes his head followed by the third prisoner who does as well. There is a long movement of hesitation and with a look of desperation on his face the inmate makes eye contact with the Quaker.

The Quaker looks longingly at the plate of greens and with trepidation says:

Quaker:

I know very little about Gandhi; and it would be a shame to waste good greens after all the trouble you have gone too. Who would want to see you return to the kitchen with all that food just for it to go to waste?

Dr King, Reverend Abernathy, and the third prisoner look at what is happening, smile, quietly chuckle as they shake their heads before looking away. As the curtain slowly rises the bunkbeds are removed and the audience is returned to scene one. The second inmate is back at his dish washing station behind the tub, but he is holding his right hand in the air and in a joyful manner and is turning around slowly but repeatedly.

Scene One

First inmate:

Well, by the look of the smile on your face Dr. King enjoyed that dee-licious piece of ham you stole from the Wardens private kitchen and hid under that stack of greens?

Second inmate:

Nope, he said he didn't want any.

First Inmate:

What? Ahh, now you got to tell me more than that.

Second Inmate:

The white dude ate the ham, but this hand; you see this hand right here? *(he holds up his right hand even higher)* This hand shook the hand of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and there ain't nothin can ever change that.

As the curtain falls, the inmates return to washing the dishes but inmate two is holding his right hand in the air as if to not get it wet.