

theatre:
CALGARY

Stafford Arima, Artistic Director

PLAY GUIDE

MARIA CROOKS & CAROLINE RUSSELL-KING

SELMA



BURKE

APRIL 2 - 27, 2024



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2** **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**
- 3** **ABOUT THE PLAY**
Summary
Character Breakdown
Historical + Social Context
- 8** **WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE**
- 10** **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**
If you have 15 minutes...
If you have 30 minutes...
If you have an hour...
- 14** **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION**

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2023-2024 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, opportunities to connect art to personal life can deepen understanding and appreciation.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

ABOUT THE PLAY

SUMMARY.

Selma Burke begins towards the end of her life—age 80. Time is fluid in this play, and the scenes flow out of order through a variety of settings (*see the box on this page*). As such, we jump back in time to Selma at her first artist modelling session, where she first catches the eye of Claude McKay.

When we enter Selma's apartment, we see the playwright's convention of having actors play the art that Selma creates. This reoccurs throughout the play—actors switching in and out of character as sculptures or paintings. Claude enters the scene, explores her artwork, and shares his poetry.

Selma's father visits her studio, and we get a glimpse into the childhood experiences that shaped her life as an artist: the destruction of her work by family and strangers alike and the limits of her father's support for her art.

The context of the hospital shifts to Selma in nursing school where we see both the impact that race relations have on her life and the power art has over her.

Selma goes to art school and faces the age-old dilemma of not seeing herself or her culture represented in the artists being taught in class. The closest to Black art that her professor is able to provide is Henri Matisse's appropriation of African and Persian art. Selma vows to become his apprentice. She travels to Paris to study with Matisse, and he becomes a trusted mentor.

Selma returns home to Claude. He has become resentful while she's been away. His jealousy manifests in his critique of her work. He reveals that while he's been struggling to "make it," she's been invited to Washington, D.C. in response to a contest she applied for.

SETTINGS

- Selma's apartment/studio in Harlem, NY
- Sarah Lawrence College Yonkers, NY
- A river walkway
- St. Agnes Hospital Nursing School, Raleigh, NC
- College lecture hall
- Atelier of Matisse, Paris
- The Oval Office, White House, Washington, DC
- R. S. Lewis Funeral Home, Memphis, TN
- A street corner in Harlem
- Inside Selma's mind
- The office of John Sinnock, the Federal Mint, Washington, DC
- The office of J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Washington Field Office, Washington, DC
- NYC rooftop
- Auction house
- Selma Burke School of Sculpture, NY
- Marshall Park, Charlotte, NC

STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say “Whoosh!,” and students quickly return to their ‘places’ in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

The contest Selma won was to create a *bas relief* of United States President (1933-1945) Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She is invited into the Oval Office to draw his portrait. They discuss polio, a condition for which Roosevelt used a wheelchair and discuss his condition.

Selma returns to her home in New York to create her sculpture of Roosevelt. Claude stands over her, disappointed that she feels like she has to “grovel for the approval” of white people.

Eleanor Roosevelt arrives to see the bas relief and is taken aback by how young and healthy FDR looks in the piece. Selma convinces her that he would want to be remembered as the young man he was when he first led the country out of the Great Depression.

The next time we see Selma, it's 1965—the eve of the Selma to Montgomery March in Alabama for the rights of Black Americans. Claude has become a strong and passionate voice for Black America and accuses Selma of creating work that “won't change anything.” She refuses to join him (and Martin Luther King, Jr.), claiming that her work is more important, and he leaves...angry.

Selma is alone in her studio with three sculptures juxtaposed: Duke Ellington, a newly-mainstreamed jazz musician; Mrs. Keller, a Holocaust survivor; and a gentleman whose bust, once completed, will be donated to the public library in exchange for allowing Black children inside. We start to see the toll that Selma's art begins to take on her soul.

A phone call arrives for Selma allowing her to listen in on a secretive conversation in Washington, D.C. John Sinnock has been hired to sculpt Franklin Roosevelt's face for the American dime. Under the cover of darkness, he meets at the White House to collect Selma's drawings, but, of course, claims that he won't be “copying it.”

At MLK's viewing, Selma encounters the mortician and points out a flaw in his reconstruction of Mr. King's face, but he refuses to fix it. She proposes that every woman in line to see him off will add makeup to his face to cover the mortician's error.

After the funeral, Selma buys a newspaper, and when she's handed change, she sees her portrait of FDR on the dime she's given. The next scene is spent comparing the nuances of the dime with her bas relief, realizing that they are identical and that her drawings were stolen and credit for her work was given to John Sinnock.

Selma confronts Mr. Sinnock in his office at the U.S. Mint. He refuses to admit that he copied her work, condescends, and dismisses her. She is then called to meet the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover under false pretenses. He accuses her of threatening a government employee and cavorting with radicals—like Claude—engaging in Communist, racial, and homosexual activities.

Matisse comes to New York and visits Selma at her home. While they're discussing her art, Claude appears and lets her know that her father has passed away, but he died proud of his daughter.

At an auction for her own work, Selma's sculpture is sold for millions less than one by her mentor, Henri Matisse. Architect Herman Kobbe introduces himself as an adoring fan. Selma recognizes him from politics and accepts his offer for lunch, a studio visit, and, later, his hand in marriage.

Years have passed. Selma is now a private art instructor in her own art school. Claude returns, seeking money. We meet a student of Selma's who appears to exist on a plane of privilege, and, in response, we hear from Selma the struggles she has faced her entire life. Her student offers a petition to tear down U.S. Civil War statues in the American South. Selma decides not to sign, but instead, to immortalize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on his journey to true freedom.

The play ends as it begins—with Selma at age 80—only this time in conversation with her final sculpture, MLK.

SOME TERMS TO KNOW

Primitivism | an artistic movement marked by the appropriation of cultures deemed “primitive”

Jim Crow laws | mandated racial segregation laws in place from 1870 to 1965

New Negroes | a term borne of the Harlem Renaissance that implies outspoken advocacy and a refusal to submit to the Jim Crow laws of the American South

Polio | a disabling and life-threatening disease that can infect a person's spinal cord, causing paralysis

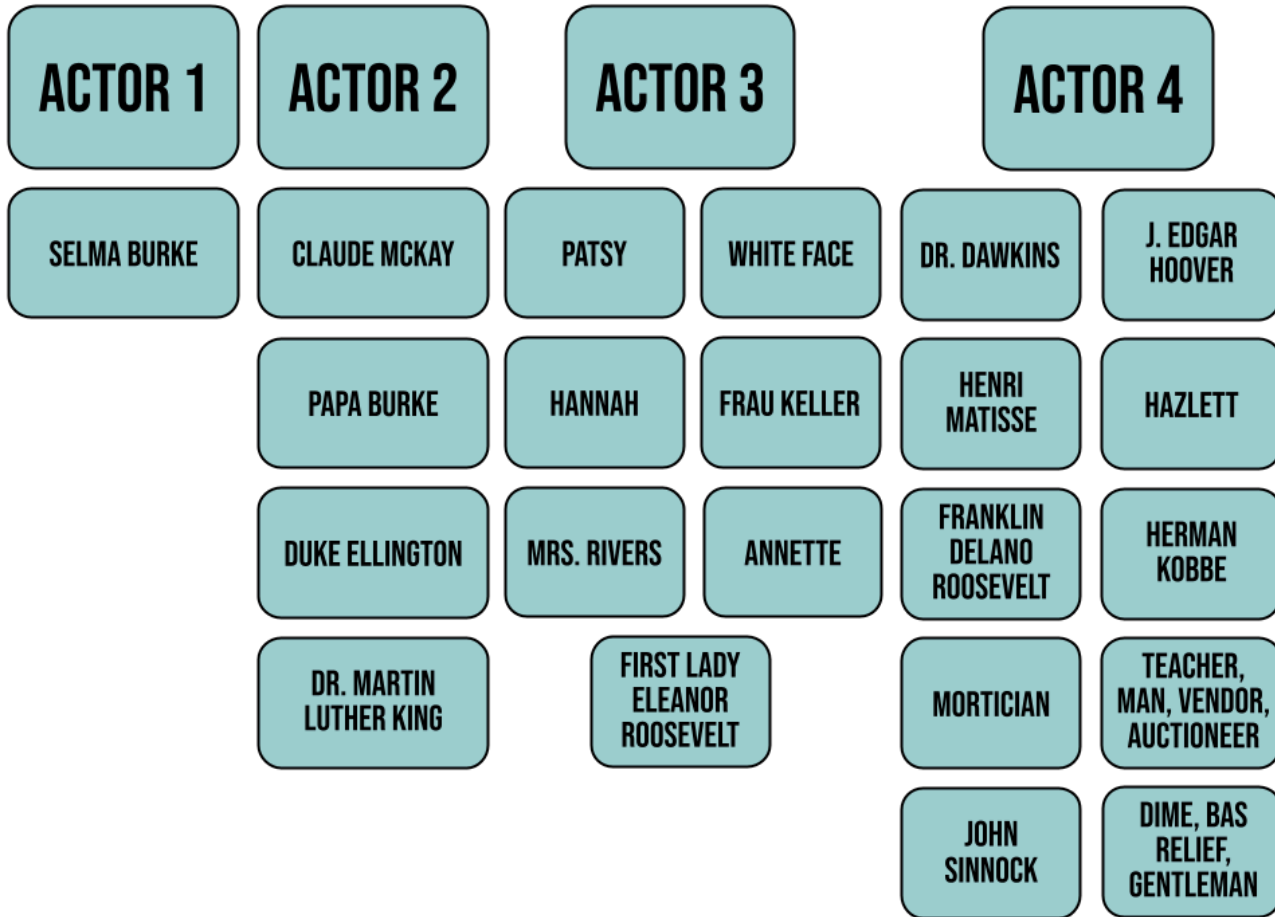
March of Dimes | an organization that began as a way to raise money for Polio research, now operates across North America as a way to fund threats to mothers and babies

Bas relief | a type of art in which shapes are cut from the surrounding stone so they stand out against a flat surface

Great Depression | a period of international economic depression after a major fall in stock prices in 1929

Communism | a political theory leading to a society in which all property is publicly owned and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs (*associated terms: Trotsky, Red*)

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



Below are images of some of the real people who appear as characters in *Selma Burke*.

Selma Burke



Claude McKay



Duke Ellington



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



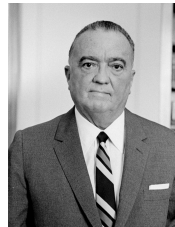
Eleanor Roosevelt



Franklin Delano Roosevelt



J. Edgar Hoover



Henri Matisse



HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SELMA BURKE

- 1 She was born in 1900 in North Carolina, USA and lived to 95 years old.
- 2 Her first sculptures were made from clay found along the riverbed.
- 3 She trained and practiced as a nurse.
- 4 She studied art at Sarah Lawrence College & Columbia University.
- 5 She was one of the first Black women to enlist in the U.S. Navy when America entered WWII.

WHAT IS THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE?

Following the American Civil War, the promise of work and basic freedoms drew nearly 175,000 African Americans to settle in Harlem, a Black neighborhood in New York City, by 1920. It was there that a group of writers and musicians used their work to celebrate their Blackness. A time of intense creativity followed and has since been dubbed the *Harlem Renaissance*. It was a celebration of African American heritage.

Often described as a “spiritual coming of age,” the Harlem Renaissance birthed artists, musicians, and writers like:

- [W.E.B. Du Bois](#)
- [Josephine Baker](#)
- [Zora Neale Hurston](#)
- [Louis Armstrong](#)

At the height of the movement, Harlem was the center of American culture, home to African American-owned publishers, newspapers, music companies, theatres, and nightclubs. The literature, music, and fashion they created defined culture and “cool” for blacks and white alike, in America and around the world.

[National Museum of African-American History and Culture](#)

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHTS Maria Crooks & Caroline Russell-King

Of all the artists in the world, why tell the story of Selma Burke here and now?

Caroline. Art is ubiquitous [*appearing everywhere*]. The struggle to make art is as necessary now as it has always been, and that's what the play is about: the struggle to make art.

Maria. And the conversation that has been going since Black Lives Matter about whether art should be destroyed...that falls right into that zeitgeist [*the general cultural climate of an era*] at the moment.

Why did you choose to write this play as a collaboration?

C. I think it was important for different voices to be written by different artists.

M. And that's exactly what happened. A lot of what I believe, or my feelings, appear in the play, as well as Caroline's. It's not just one voice speaking.

Is there anything audiences should know about you, your process, or this work?

C. What's important here is that the art has a voice...The presence of the art and the interaction of the protagonist and her art is...one of the things I'm really looking forward to exploring.

M. We are both very excited about the portrayal of the art by the actors...not displaying the art on the wall or on the screen, but [*the artwork*] actually comes alive and is an integral part of the storytelling.



Maria Crooks



Caroline Russell-King

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



An open mind.

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

Assigned seats.

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

Live actors.

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

A break from reality.

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

Questions.

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

Disconnection.

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 9) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't _____ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...



THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:

The Playwright writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The Director creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

The Actors use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The Designers imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

The Stage Manager assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

Fluid Sculptures

This is a great activity to get students moving and communicating using their bodies. It combines the skills of improvisation with tableau. Fluid Sculptures is loosely adapted from the Augusto Boal activity of the same name—which is used to open conversation around power dynamics and oppression.

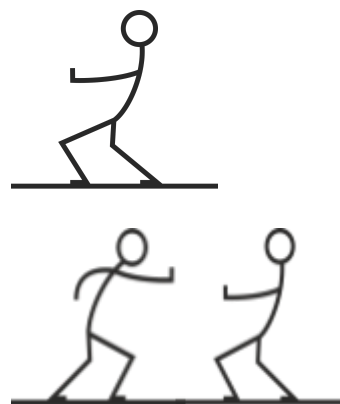
Focus Question. How can students create relationships and stories using only their bodies?

Objective. Students will be able to establish and interpret relationships and stories from tableau.

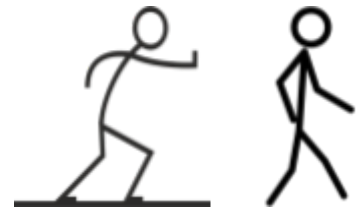
Procedure.

- 1 Start with students in two concentric circles [the inner circle (A) facing the outer circle (B)].
- 2 Choose a student volunteer to help model the activity with the facilitator. Have the volunteer be Partner A and the facilitator be Partner B.

- Partner A creates a frozen image (a tableau or pose) of their choosing. For students who might need more prompting, feel free to choose a theme or open the floor to suggestions from the group.
- Partner B then looks at their partner's choice and builds onto the image by creating a complementary tableau.



- Partner A then steps out of the image, reviews their partner's position and creates a new story or relationship by freezing in a new tableau.



This sequence repeats with each partner stepping out and creating a new story or relationship every time.

NOTE: It's tempting for students to continue the story (like a series of connected images), but encourage them to try to create something new each time.

- 3 Allow students to play in their partnerships before pausing them to reflect. Discuss: *What were some of the physical choices you made? What did you consider before stepping into the scene? What were the stories that emerged?*
- 4 If time, allow pairs to present their sequence. It can be a repeat of something they already created, or it can be new.

IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Sculpture Stories

Artists' work is always left to interpretation, and we, as viewers, see ourselves, our families, and our stories in ways that the original artist may never have intended. This activity asks students to envision the stories in some of Selma Burke's statues.

Focus Question. How can art inspire a story?

Objective. Students will be able to craft a story inspired by sculptures by Selma Burke.

Procedure.

- 1 Walk students through [the images](#) of some of the pieces of Selma Burke's work referenced in *Selma Burke*.
- 2 Ask them to choose an image that captures their imagination, and give them time to plan a story inspired by this image:
 1. Choose a piece to use as your inspiration.
 2. CHARACTER. Who are two characters this sculpture makes you think of?
 3. SETTING. Where would these two characters be?
 4. CONFLICT. What kind of problem might these two characters encounter?
 5. DIALOGUE. What are some things these two characters might say to one another?
 6. RESOLUTION. How might these two characters solve the problem?
- 3 At this point, students can either turn their plan into a piece of writing, or they can practice telling their story aloud to a partner.
- 4 Allow a few examples to be shared—especially those inspired by the same piece. Discuss: *What element of the sculpture drew your attention? What is different about these interpretations of this sculpture? What did someone else share in their story that excites you? What does this activity tell us about Selma Burke's art?*

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

In Their Shoes

A note from the playwrights at the beginning of the script says, “Selma lived from 1900 - 1995, which is approximately 49,932,000 minutes – here imagined are 90 of them.” This activity will challenge students to imagine the conversations surrounding significant moments in Canadian history.

Focus Question. How can we use information we have about historic events and dramatize them as narrative fiction, dialogue, or cartoons?

Objective. Students will be able to use historical facts to piece together a scene surrounding a significant moment in Canadian history.

Procedure.

- 1 For your current social studies unit, have students brainstorm a list of significant events. This can be done in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class.
- 2 For each event, identify the people (or characters) involved in this moment. Consider the stories we aren't traditionally told.
- 3 Now have students choose their moment.
 - Whose story do they want to tell?
 - How do they want to tell that story?
 - Narrative fiction (short story format)
 - Dialogue ([play format](#))
 - Comic ([graphic novel format](#))
- 4 They should use the attached [planning sheet](#) to identify the characters, setting, moment, conflict, and resolution that their scene will depict.
- 5 Allow students 30 minutes to work on their pieces independently before sharing with a partner.
- 6 If time, encourage students to share their drafts for the class. Discuss: *What impact does the genre have on the telling of the story? How did two writers interpret the same event differently? What perspectives do we hear by exploring history this way? What made you choose the character you chose to voice?*

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *Selma Burke* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1 How does presenting historical stories and information as a play change your perception of the event?
- 2 Has someone else ever taken credit for your work? How did it feel? What did you do about it?
- 3 What is an issue you've stood for? What made you fight for it?
- 4 If you could represent a person (living or dead) through a piece of art, music, dance, or writing, who would it be? Why would you pick them?
- 5 What does it mean to be an artist (of any medium)? What is the responsibility of an artist?

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