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Dramatic Publishing

THE FACE OF EMMETT TILL

By

MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY and DAVID BARR III



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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The Face of Emmett Till (formerly: The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till) by David Barr III and Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, was first produced by Pegasus Players, Chicago, Ill., in its 1999-2000 season. Mrs. Mobley's trust in David Barr both as a playwright and as a man made the creation of this work possible. Mrs. Mobley was determined to capture clearly and truly all the circumstances surrounding the death of her only child. The play tells the searing, compelling history of that August in 1955 when the body of Emmett Till was discovered floating in the Tallahatchie River. Producing this play, Pegasus was privileged to help to the stage an event that marked a turning point in United States history. The play gives voice to Emmett Till's mother and her determination that her son's death not go unnoticed. Due to her courage and persistence, Emmett Till's death became a national issue and the springboard for the civil rights movement. *The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till* is Mamie Till-Mobley's lasting, moving, and inspiring memorial to the life of her son and the price that he paid to remind America that "all men are created equal." In 2003, Pegasus revived the show to kick off its 25th anniversary season...a season that highlighted Pegasus' proudest and most honored productions.

Alex Levy
Artistic Director, Pegasus Players
Chicago, Illinois

The Face of Emmett Till (originally titled *The State of Mississippi vs Emmett Till*) was developed with Mrs. Mamie Till-Mobley and based on the life and tragic death of her son, Emmett Till. The play premiered at Pegasus Players Theatre, Chicago, Ill., producers Arlene Crewsdon and Alex Levy, on September 9, 1999. It was directed by Douglas Alan-Mann with the following cast:

MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY Michelle Wilson
EMMETT TILL Bryan Parker
MORRIS DEES / GERALD CHATHAM . . . Chris Jackson
ALMA SPEARMAN Sandra Watson
HENRY SPEARMAN Amos Ellis
ROY BRYANT / JOHN WHITTEN / POLICE CHIEF . . .
Paul Hoffman
CAROLYN BRYANT Cyndi Rhoads
ROY WILKINS / BISHOP FORD Jason Lee
MOSES WRIGHT Willie B. Goodson
WILLIE REED / A.A. RAYNER Ronnel Taylor
MAURICE Francoise Baptiste

PRODUCTION STAFF AND CREW

Set Design Jack McGaw
Lighting Design Dave Gipson
Sound Design. Joe H. Plummer
Costume Design. Karen Welles
Stage Manager Katie Klemme

The Face of Emmett Till (The State of Mississippi vs Emmett Till) had its West Coast premier in August 2000 at the Unity Players in Los Angeles and its East Coast premier at the Paul Robeson Theatre Company in Buffalo, N. Y., in February 2001. Both theater companies restaged the play during the summer and fall of 2001.

AUTHORS' NOTES

This stage play chronicles the life and tragic death of Emmett Louis Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago who in 1955 was brutally murdered while vacationing in Money, Miss. Emmett was accused of whistling at a local white woman. This single incident has been credited for sparking the modern-day civil rights movement. The play calls for the singing of various civil rights movement hymns and songs. These songs may be sung by any members of the cast who are able. But please note: Though I realize the temptation to make certain scenes in *The Face of Emmett Till*—e.g., the church sequences, the courtroom exchanges—as “theatrical” as possible, it is highly suggested that the overall staging of this play be *minimalist* at best; i.e., no gaudy gospel/“prayer dance” numbers with choir-robed cast members, no ultra-realistic funeral sequences with casket in tow, no re-pass or formally choreographed “funeralizing” is needed in this play. When this has been done in the past, it has given the entire production a campish, disingenuous feel that looks amateurish at best. Simply stated, this won’t be in concert with what I or Mother Mobley wanted to communicate through the dramatic re-telling of this story.

I am also requesting that on-stage and fixed set pieces be kept to an absolute bare minimum. Therefore, all transitions should be as fluid and effortless as possible. This will give an intended cinematic feeling to much of the play. There are *no* blackouts anywhere within the play. All scene changes should take place in “twilight” or partially lit scenarios on stage. The cast movement and manipulation of the set from scene to scene should be visible. The set should obviously have one constant feature: The civil rights movement memorial in Montgomery, Ala., situated prominently upstage.

THE FACE OF EMMETT TILL

A Play in Two Acts
For 7-9 men, 3 women, with doubling

CHARACTERS

MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY: African-American woman, referred to as Mamie Till-Bradley through the bulk of the play, appears at age 67 and age 32.

EMMETT TILL: African-American teenager, 14 years old, as he was before his death in 1955.

MORRIS DEES: White man, head of Southern Poverty Law Center, mid- to late 40s.

ALMA SPEARMAN: African-American woman, mother of Mamie, early 50s.

HENRY SPEARMAN: African-American man, stepfather of Mamie, late 50s to early 60s.

ROY BRYANT: White man, small-time supply-store owner in Money, Miss., mid- to late 20s.

CAROLYN BRYANT: White woman, wife of Roy Bryant, early 20s.

J.W. MILAM: White man, stepbrother of Roy Bryant, early 40s.

ROY WILKINS: African-American man, executive secretary of the NAACP during its heyday, mid-40s.

MOSES WRIGHT: African-American man, great-uncle of Mamie and Emmett, mid-60s.

A.A. RAYNER: African-American man, south-side Chicago funeral director, early 50s.

MAURICE: African-American teenager, country cousin of Emmett, 18 years old.

WILLIE REED: African-American man, Money, Miss., resident key witness, early 20s.

GERALD CHATHAM: White man, district attorney of Tallahatchie County, lead prosecutor in the Till murder trial, early 50s.

JOHN WHITTEN: White man, defense attorney for Milam and Bryant, early 40s.

SENATOR JAMES O. EASTLAND: White man, Mississippi senator, early 50s.

SHERIFF H.C. STRIDER: White man, Tallahatchie County sheriff, early 50s.

JUDGE SWANGO: White man, presiding judge in the trial of Milam and Bryant, early 60s.

BISHOP LOUIS HENRY FORD: African-American man, pastor who eulogized Emmett, late 40s.

WHISPERER #1: African-American man, late teens.

WHISPERERS: Total cast.

MRS. BURKE: Southern white woman, early 20s.

REPORTER: Southern white woman, early 30s.

Double-casting suggestions:

MORRIS DEES / GERALD CHATHAM / J.W. MILAM

JOHN WHITTEN / ROY BRYANT

WILLIE REED / A.A. RAYNER / WHISPERER #1

JAMES EASTLAND / SHERIFF H.C. STRIDER / JUDGE SWANGO

CAROLYN BRYANT / MRS. BURKE / REPORTER

ROY WILKINS / MAURICE / BISHOP LOUIS HENRY FORD

TIME & PLACE

November 1989 and August/September 1955. Civil rights memorial, Montgomery, Ala.; various locales throughout the south side of Chicago; and Tallahatchie County, Mississippi.

ACT I

Scene 1

The set is dimly lit. Lights reveal several cast members in shadow singing “We’ll Never Turn Back.”

CAST. *We’ve been buked and we’ve been torn
We’ve been taught that sure as you’re born
But we’ll never...turn back
No we’ll never...turn back
Until we all...live free
And we’ll have equality.*

WHISPERERS. *Shame! Shame! Shame in Mississippi!
Shame! Shame! Shame in Mississippi!!!!!! Shame!*

(Lights up on WHISPERER #1.)

WHISPERER #1. When I was a little boy living in Canton, Mississippi...I worked as a day laborer for the meanest white woman in town. A few weeks after Emmett Till was murdered... she called me to her family room.

CAROLYN (as MRS. BURKE). You hear about that little nigger who was killed up ’round Money?

WHISPERER #1 (cautiously). No, ma’am.

CAROLYN (as MRS. BURKE). Do you know why he’s dead?

WHISPERER #1. No, ma’am.

CAROLYN (*as MRS. BURKE*). He's dead because he forgot his place with a *white woman*. A *nigra* from Mississippi woulda known better. But this *boy* was from *Chicago*. (*Pause*.) Tell me again, how *old* are you?

WHISPERER #1 (*nervously*). Fourteen, ma'am.

CAROLYN (*as MRS. BURKE*). Well I do declare. That Chicago boy was *fourteen, too*. It's a shame he had to die so young.

ALL WHISPERERS. *Shame! Shame! Shame...in Mississippi!!! (Lights fade on CAROLYN.) Shame!*

WHISPERER #1. I went home that night, shaking like a leaf on a tree. She had made me feel like rotten garbage. That entire summer, she had tried to instill in me the kind of fear that kept blacks in the South docile for centuries. She had tried...and she had failed. But this time...when she talked about this boy named *Emmett Till*...there was something in her voice that sent chills down my spine. I was never the same. Nothing...was ever the same.

ALL WHISPERERS. *Shame! Shame! Shame...in Mississippi!!! Shame!! (Lights fade and end scene.)*

Scene 2

As the lights slowly fade on the previous scene, the soothing sound of running water is heard in the distance. Lights up on a UC platform with a replica of the civil rights memorial in Montgomery, Ala. The structure itself is a large, circular, black granite table that has the names of famous civil rights martyrs carved into the top of an upside down cone-like structure. A brief history of the '50s and '60s civil rights movement is also carved in

lines that radiate in the top of the structure like the hands of a fine clock. Toward the center of the wall, Dr. Martin Luther King's well-known paraphrase of Amos 5:24... "We will not be satisfied...until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream"...is engraved in the side of the structure. Lights slowly reveal MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY staring up at the memorial. It is November 5, 1989, the day the monument was officially dedicated. MORRIS DEES enters. He sees that MAMIE is transfixed by the beauty of the monument. MAMIE is holding several promotional pamphlets in her hands. Outside, muffled murmurs and restless voices are heard escalating throughout the following scene.

DEES. You nervous?

MAMIE. No. *(Slight pause.)* Well...maybe a little.

DEES. You'll do fine.

MAMIE. It's strange. I've been waiting for this moment for over thirty years. Now that it's here...I can't seem to steady myself.

DEES. Well don't you worry. You're surrounded by friends. *(Pause. The angry murmurs are growing.)* I think Rosa Parks is almost finished with her speech. You're on next. *(Pause.)* Can I get you something while you wait?

MAMIE. I'm fine, Mr. Dees.

DEES. Morris.

MAMIE. Morris. *(Beat. MAMIE slightly nervous. Angry noises swell louder. DEES senses MAMIE's discomfort.)*

DEES. Oh...don't worry about them. Security is pretty tight around here.

MAMIE (*gesturing with the pamphlets in her hands*). I've been reading up on you. (*Reading from one of the pamphlets.*) "In 1971, Morris Dees co-founded the Southern Poverty Law Center." It says here that Coretta Scott King calls you "...by any measure, one of the most dedicated and effective civil rights lawyers in the history of the United States." (*Half-beat. DEES smiles. MAMIE smiles back.*) That's high praise.

DEES (*chagrined*). A lot of that stuff is exaggeration...and over exaggeration, I'm afraid. (*Angrier, outside voices swell. They seem to be getting louder...and closer.*)

WHISPERERS. *Zeig Heil! Zeig Heil! White Power! White Power!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

MAMIE (*nerves overcoming her*). *God, it never stops. (Pause. Steadying herself.)* I'm sorry.

DEES. It's all right. Most of those idiots are loudmouthed fools afraid of their own shadows when the liquor wears off.

MAMIE (*beat. Uneasy*). This is the first time I've traveled South since... (*Beat.*) I guess some things never change.

DEES. Some things don't. (*Half-beat.*) But some things do.

MAMIE (*her discomfort growing. DEES smiles reassuringly at her*). How do you do it, Morris? You build a beautiful civil rights monument to our loved ones. And you organize this affair for the families. You're risking your life for what some people might say...isn't really your fight. (*Beat.*) You don't need this.

DEES. No, ma'am, I suppose I don't.

MAMIE. Then why do it? (*DEES hesitates. MAMIE pointed.*) I'd really like to know.

DEES (*uneasy pause*). Well... (*Beat.*) In 1955, I was twenty...and I was still living on my daddy's farm in

southern Alabama. One morning, I read about the death of your son. I can't explain it really...but reading about the lynching of a fourteen-year-old boy just...well...I felt like something inside of me was born on that day. It made me seriously examine the South. Our way of life. How this child was killed. And *why* he was killed. *(Pause.)* In some ways... I guess he reminded me of the black fellas I played with on the farm. Whatever it was...he was dead...for no reason...and his mama was crying for all the world to see. *(Pause.)* At the time, I had never sent a letter to a newspaper in my life. But the death of this innocent little black boy struck a real chord in me. And I wrote that...“We in the South practice segregation. But we are also supposed to believe in *justice*. If this young boy did something illegal, then he ought to be tried and convicted before he is punished. Not lynched.” *(Pause.)* When my uncle read what I had written...he called me a *nigger lover*. *(Half-beat.)* But...that newspaper published my letter. Even thirty-five years ago...I suppose there were bastions of moderation on “...the race issue.” Even in the South. *(Half-beat.)* One way or the other... the death of Emmett Till changed everything for me. *(Outside angry noises escalate.)* Maybe you better wait backstage until it's time for your speech.

MAMIE. No. I think I'll stand here a little longer. I want to see Emmett's name under these lights. *(Half-beat.)* There's not a day that goes by when I don't think about him. I finally got to the point where I can actually look at his picture without crying. *(Half-beat.)* Even after all of these years. *(Beat.)* But lately...I've found myself thinking of him constantly. No matter how much time

passes, losing a child...it's like...a knife, through your heart. It's a pain that never goes away.

DEES (*pause*). I think I understand. (*Pause. Purposely changing the subject.*) Mrs. Mobley...can I ask you a question?

MAMIE (*somewhat cautiously*). Certainly.

DEES (*with some difficulty. Somewhat chagrined*). I realize this might seem a bit out of place, but...

MAMIE (*curiosity*). No, it's fine. Go on.

DEES. Well...have you ever thought...that this struggle... and your struggle...might have been to save someone else's child?

MAMIE (*pause*). Yes. But the way things are in the world today, I'm not sure his death means as much as it once did.

DEES (*beat*). I disagree. Standing here...in Montgomery... just a few steps from Dr. King's church on Dexter Avenue...it's a symbol of just what your son's passing meant to so many people. Even for people like me who never knew him. But knew the sacrifice he made. (*Shifting gears. Trying to change the somber mood.*) It's not a coincidence that less than three months after your son's death...Rosa Parks stood her ground against Jim Crow. (*Looking offstage as if he has been signaled.*)

MAMIE (*long pause. Then a knowing half-smile from MAMIE. Beat*). Perhaps, but I still miss him, Morris.

DEES (*light applause heard in the distance*). I think... they're ready for you. (*MAMIE stands stoically. Lost in a memory.*) Mrs. Mobley? (*Beat.*) Mrs. Mobley? (*Lights fade on DEES as his last sentence echoes throughout the theater. Lights soften and end scene.*)

Scene 3

Previous scene fades to black. EMMETT's voice is heard in the background, swelling from the shadows.

EMMETT (*voice-over*). Mama? (*Beat.*) Mama?

(MAMIE crosses downstage to the suggested living room area. EMMETT enters wearing a period baseball hat from the Kansas City Monarchs and a White Sox jersey. He is wearing a baseball glove and holding a baseball, which he occasionally throws up in the air and catches. EMMETT is struggling, trying to deliver a recitation of the Gettysburg Address. He stammers through half of it and forgets the rest. He's distracted. It's game time.)

EMMETT. “FFFFFourr score and sssseven years ago...our ffffatherssss brought forth on this continent, a nnnewww nation conceived in...conceived in...”

MAMIE. *Liberty, Bo...Liberty.* I know you can do this.

EMMETT. “lllll...liberty...”

MAMIE. Good. What do you do when you get stuck on a word?

EMMETT (*takes a deep breath and whistles to steady himself*). M...M...MMMama? CCCCCan't I learn sssomething thattttt's easier? Whenever I stuterrrr like thatttt... all the kids laugh at me. And I don't llllike it.

MAMIE. Don't worry about them. You just worry about this speech, boy.

EMMETT. It's tttoooo hard, Mamma. And I ssssound funny. I know I do.

MAMIE. This is the *Gettysburg Address*. It's Abraham Lincoln's most famous speech. Besides...you sound fine. All you need is practice.

EMMETT. Can't I jjust lllearn this after the ggggame?

MAMIE. At this rate, you might not make it to another baseball game until football season.

EMMETT. BBBBBut, MMMMama, they're gonna let m...m...me ppppitch today.

MAMIE. Bo, the last time you pitched your team lost 99 to 1.

EMMETT. The ummmmpire didn't know how to call the ssssstrike zone.

MAMIE (*pause*). Bo...*I* was the umpire.

EMMETT. I know.

MAMIE (*laughing at EMMETT's nerve. They both giggle as MAMIE tickles him*). Boy!

(*Doorbell rings. HENRY SPEARMAN enters.*)

MAMIE. Morning, Daddy.

SPEARMAN (*enters, kisses MAMIE and hugs EMMETT*).

Hey there, Mamie Lizzie. How you doin' there, young fella?

EMMETT. FFFFFFFine, Granddaddy.

SPEARMAN. That's good. Real good. Mamie, I'm looking forward to seeing Bo pitch. I hear he's better than Satchel Paige and Don Newcombe.

MAMIE. Well...I'm not so sure *we* are going to play baseball today, Daddy. Emmett's behavior doesn't warrant a baseball game or any other extra-curricular activity.

EMMETT. I'lll bbbbee goodddd. I ppppromise!

MAMIE. He hasn't finished his studies...

EMMETT. I can do that spppeech, MMMMama...just
wwwatch mmmme.

MAMIE. In fact, unless I see marked improvement, he may
not be playing baseball for a very long time.

EMMETT. “FFFFFour score and ssseven years ago our fa-
thers bbbrought forth on this continent, a new nation,
conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition
that all men are ccreated equal.”

SPEARMAN. That sounds good, Emmett. Real good.
(*Half-beat.*) So how you been, daughter?

MAMIE. Holdin’ on, I suppose.

EMMETT. “...that from these honored dead we ttttake in-
creased devotion to that cause ffff for which they gave the
last full measure of devotion...that we here resolve that
these dead shall not have died in vain.”

SPEARMAN. Your Uncle Mose and his boy Maurice will
be getting to Chicago late tomorrow night.

MAMIE (*to SPEARMAN. Trying to hide her enthusiasm.*)
Oh, that’s nice. Everybody looks forward to Papa
Mose’s visits, especially Emmett. That’s a God-fearin’
man.

SPEARMAN. Yes Lord. (*Beat.*) I suppose you read about
what happened to Lamar Smith?

MAMIE (*half-listening*). Who?

SPEARMAN. *Lamar Smith.* Civil rights worker down in
Brookhaven, Mississippi. He was a colored fella that...
(*Beat.*) *Lord, Mamie Lizzie!* The story is all over the
front page of the *Defender*. The man was shot down in
broad daylight on the front lawn of the courthouse.

MAMIE. Father, Father.

SPEARMAN. The *Defender* says he was trying to register
black folks to vote. Same thing happened to Reverend

George Lee down in Belzoni three months ago. They shot him to pieces for speakin' out against Jim Crow. (*Half-beat.*) I can't believe you didn't hear about this. People are saying that the NAACP is sending a hundred folks to Mississippi to...

MAMIE. The *NAACP* is never going to change anything down there. Even if the government makes whites desegregate *some* things, a lot of the Negroes in the South are too scared to ever take advantage of their rights. Do you know what I hear most folks down there call this *NAACP*? (*Half-beat.*) "*Niggers Ain't All Colored People.*" (*Beat.*) Daddy...the *NAACP* doesn't mean one thing to those white folks in Mississippi. And you know it.

EMMETT (*speaking louder, trying to get MAMIE's attention*). "*—and that a government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*"

SPEARMAN. Change is comin', Mamie. I can't tell ya where or when. But when it gets here...it ain't gonna be so easy to turn a blind eye.

MAMIE (*now loud enough for EMMETT to hear her*). Right now...the only thing I'm interested in *changing* is my son's behavior.

EMMETT. I'm done with the sssspeech. Can I go to the game, *now*? PPPPlease? PPPlease?!!!!

MAMIE. What do you think, Daddy?

SPEARMAN. Speech sounded fine to me.

EMMETT. MMMMe...ttttoo.

MAMIE. Daddy, you didn't even listen to him. And what about this boy's behavior? Honestly...the things that come out of his mouth, sometimes.

SPEARMAN. Young man...are you sorry for the things
your mama said you said?

EMMETT (*slyly*). MMMMMMost of it.

MAMIE. *Most of it?*

SPEARMAN. Well that's good enough for me. *Play ball!!!*

EMMETT. *Yeah...ppppplay...bbbball!!!! (All laugh.
MAMIE hugs EMMETT and SPEARMAN. Lights fade
and end scene.)*