Having Our Say
The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years

NOVEMBER 8-17
A.J. Fletcher Opera Theater
Synopsis

The play opens with 103-year-old Sadie and 101-year-old Bessie Delany in the home in Mount Vernon, New York. The audience is there as a guest in their house. They recount a childhood rooted in the aftermath of the Civil War. We listen as they take us to growing up at Saint Augustine’s University in Raleigh, NC, where their father and mother had gone to school. Their story continues through the injustices of the Jim Crow era and the incredible successes they had in their professional careers. Facing discrimination in the South, they moved to Harlem during the 1920’s and soon after faced the Great Depression and a World War. Through it all, we learn of their ability to find community as well as facing the struggles of being professional women in a male-dominated society, of choosing a unique path for themselves, and how they stayed true to themselves and to each other for more than 100 years.
Director’s Corner

With Tia James, director of Having Our Say, from an event at Saint Augustine’s University in Raleigh with Dr. Linda Dallas, professor of Visual Arts at the University.

How did you get to where you are?

What was important during that time was I had teachers who saw me and would keep after me, which is such a huge part of my journey, those teachers who just kept believing in me. There was one particular time where I was filling out this application for a scholarship. I was feeling overwhelmed, and I remember trying and then I balled the piece of paper up and I threw it in the trash. At the end of the year, I had gotten the scholarship. It was because my teacher, Mrs. Dixon, saw me throw it in the trash, and she took it out of the trash, put it with the application and talked to my guidance counselor. I’m doing what I’m doing because I had teachers in my life who kept pushing me.

What life experiences prepared you for a career as an artist?

I would say, when I was in college, I went to Virginia Commonwealth University. There, I learned how to love people because there was a particular group of friends that I had. You know, in college sometimes you don’t have enough money to eat. One person would say, “My mom bought chicken…”, another would say, “I have some canned goods”. We would come together and eat and watch our favorite musicals or work on our lines together. The most important experience was that community that I had. They taught me a lot, too. They helped me to understand what it meant to be generous, and I understood what it meant to have people support you when you’re not fully supporting yourself.

What did you do to prepare yourself to direct Having Our Say? To tell that story?

The thing that has been the most beneficial to me is that we have clips of them (the Delany sisters). I’ve been watching them on YouTube. The actors playing them don’t have to be exactly like them, but by watching their energy, personality, and chemistry together, it inspires me and helps to understand the story I want to tell.

What about their story is relevant today?

One of the reasons why I think the story is so important to tell is that history of these ladies belongs to us. Not only our history and our legacy, but they are an American story that just had not been told. Growing up, there was so much of African American history that was not shared with me. You’re going to school and you’re learning, but you’re only learning half of the stuff, and even that half that you’re learning is not the full story. This is our legacy; this is who we are. We are moving through with people who have helped us get there. We have a story, so let us celebrate them.

What advice do you have for the students about following their passion, whatever that may be?

Something that set me off on my journey was that I grew up Christian. I followed the carpenter. There is scripture that says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Not only will the desires of your heart manifest to you, but that wonder can actually place the desire there. Delight yourself. Keep having fun with the thing. If that is the thing you are passionate about—if that’s the thing that you would do for free (don’t tell nobody that), fill yourself with it.

A teacher of mine at NYU grad acting, David Costable, he said, “there must be personal joy in the thing, it must cost you something, and you have to assume your own brilliance”. Know that you got it. Even when you fail, know that it was a victory, too.
BEFORE and AFTER

Before you or your students and/or children see the play, consider:

- Why is it important to celebrate the stories of people who came before us in history?
- When you think of people who you believe are different than you, do you tend to only think of one identifying factor? How can you expand your idea of other people’s identities?
- Why do you think creating HBCUs (Historically Black College/University) were important? Do you believe they are still relevant?
- What is your relationship to the history of America?

After you have all seen the play, discuss:

- What can we learn from how Sadie and Bessie chose to live their lives?
- How do you think the Delany sisters would react to this current moment of history?
- Why is it important to continue to tell their story?
- How is their story relevant to your life?
The Power of Telling Your Story

One of the reasons this play and the book it is based on are so celebrated is that the stories we are frequently taught as Americans about the black experience in this country is through terrible injustices that were inflicted upon that community. Sadie and Bessie discuss the racism they incurred and observed, but those are instances in the celebration of the larger Delany Family Story. This is because Sadie and Bessie, through writing their book, were able to shape their own narrative and to place themselves as protagonists in the version of the story they wanted to tell. One of the ways we can move through tragedy is by writing a story with yourself as the protagonist, or hero. Follow the steps below to get started on shaping your narrative.

STEP ONE:
Think about a moment in time when:
- Your world changed
- You had to leave something (an actual item, an idea, or a stage in your life) behind
- You lost your voice
- You used your voice

STEP TWO:
Write down everything you remember about that moment. What smells, touches, tastes, sounds, and sights were around you? Can you remember what words were spoken?

STEP THREE:
Consider yourself as the main character.
- What was the change that occurred in yourself?
- What was the beginning, middle, and end of this moment (of course, your life hasn’t ended, but the ending of your story should show us how you changed from the beginning of the story)?

STEP FOUR:
Write or tell your story to someone else. Ask a friend to listen to your story or find a storytelling event to attend.
LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING

One study guide cannot begin to encompass the depth of sorrow, joy, and transformation that has occurred in the story of black America. From Africa to forced labor, freedom, racism, lynching, music, and into the future. For those looking to learn more, read Sadie and Bessie’s books and perhaps start with the 1619 Project from the New York Times an in-depth undertaking of this country beginning from when the first slave ships landed on these shores.

During one of the scenic transitions, an original recording of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” can be heard. This song has been adopted as the Black National Anthem; the NAACP called it the “Negro National Anthem” in 1900. It was first performed by school children celebrating the birth of Abraham Lincoln in 1900 by activist James Weldon Johnson, originally as a poem, and his brother John set his words to music. It has been included in Christian hymnals and has been performed by many from Beyoncé, notably, at Coachella, to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The third verse was read at Barack Obama’s inauguration in January 2009.

By the 1920s, white churches were also singing the song, and its message of hope praised by a rabbi. The “noblest anthem I have ever heard”, said Rabbi Stephen Wise in 1928 according to Shana Redmond, a professor of musicology and African American Studies at UCLA. Some think there should be no such thing as Black National Anthem, as it could be a message of separatist ideology. Read the lyrics and find a recording to come to your own opinion about its message.

Image courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
'Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
'Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.

Reference:
NPR "Till Victory is Won: The Staying Power of Lift Every Voice and Sing", August 16, 2018 by Claudette Lindsay-Haberman
New York Times Mazagine “The 1619 Project” August 14, 2019, multiple contributors
NAACP “NAACP History: Lift Every Voice and Sing”
Washington Post ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’: The story behind the ‘black national anthem’ that Beyoncé sang” April 16, 2018 by Samantha Schmidt
YOGA and STRETCHING

Bessie and Sadie had many routines they stuck to for keeping healthy and happy. One was doing yoga, which they began in the 1950s and kept up as long as they were able. Try this yoga pose that’s great for seniors, kids, and everyone in between!

A great way to open your hips, this pose also strengthens your entire lower body.

**How to do it:** Stand with feet hip-width apart and parallel, hands on the hips. Roll your shoulders up, back, and down. Engage the low belly as you lift your chest.

Lift your left leg and cross your left foot over your right knee. Keeping your left foot flexed, sit back into a single-leg chair position. Lower only as much as you comfortably can—every little bit counts. Find a focal point to help you balance and breathe here for three to five breaths. Repeat on the opposite side.

**Make it easier:** Practice this while seated in a chair, keeping the standing foot rooted on the floor and the top foot flexed.

*Taken from silversneakers.com*
LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

America, in wrestling with its history of enslaving humans, must also reckon with the stories, the records, and the history that was lost. Take a look at this timeline of African American History from the National Parks Service and then remember what you’ve learned about the Delany Family.

Fill in the places where their stories align.

1619 The first African American indentured servants arrive in the American colonies. Less than a decade later, the first slaves are brought into New Amsterdam (later, New York City). By 1690, every colony has slaves.

1739 The Stono Rebellion, one of the earliest slave revolts, occurs in Stono, South Carolina.

1793 Eli Whitney’s (1765 – 1825) cotton gin increases the need for slaves.

1808 Congress bans further importation of slaves.

1831 In Boston, William Lloyd Garrison (1805 – 1879) begins publication of the anti-slavery newspaper the Liberator and becomes a leading voice in the Abolitionist movement.

1831 – 1861 Approximately 75,000 slaves escape to the North using the Underground Railroad.

1846 Ex-slave Frederick Douglass (1818 – 1895) publishes the anti-slavery North Star newspaper.

1848 Augustus Saint Gaudens (1848 – 1907) is born in Ireland. His family soon emigrates to the United States.

1849 Harriet Tubman (c. 1820 – 1913) escapes from slavery and becomes an instrumental leader of the Underground Railroad.

1850 Congress passes another Fugitive Slave Act, which mandates government participation in the capture of escaped slaves. Boston citizens, including some of the wealthiest, storm a federal courthouse in an attempt to free escaped Virginia slave Anthony Burns (1834 – 1862).

1857 The Dred Scot v. Sanford case: congress does not have the right to ban slavery in the states; slaves are not citizens.

1860 Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865) is elected president, angering the southern states.

1861 The Civil War begins.

1863 Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation proclaims that all slaves in rebellious territories are forever free.

1863 Massachusetts 54th regiment of African American troops led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (1837 – 1863) marches out of Boston on May 28th, heading into combat.

1865 The Civil War ends. Lincoln is assassinated. Seventeen-year-old Augustus Saint Gaudens is so moved by the sight of Lincoln’s body lying in state that he views it twice. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting slavery, is ratified. The era of Reconstruction begins.
1866  The “Black Codes” are passed by all white legislators of the former Confederate States. Congress passes the Civil Rights Act, conferring citizenship on African Americans and granting them equal rights to whites. The Ku Klux Klan is formed in Tennessee.

1868  The 14th Amendment is ratified, defining citizenship. This overturns the Dred Scot decision.

1870  The 15th Amendment is ratified, giving African Americans the right to vote.

1877  The era of Reconstruction ends. A deal is made with southern democratic leaders which makes Rutherford B. Hayes (1822 – 1893) president in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, and puts an end to efforts to protect the civil rights of African Americans.

1879  Thousands of African Americans migrate out of the South to escape oppression.

1881  Tennessee passes the first of the “Jim Crow” segregation laws, segregating state railroads. Similar laws are passed over the next 15 years throughout the Southern states.

1887  Augustus Saint Gaudens unveils the “Standing Lincoln” statue in Lincoln Park, Chicago.

1896  Plessy v. Ferguson case: racial segregation is ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court. The “Jim Crow” (“separate but equal”) laws begin, barring African Americans from equal access to public facilities.

1897  Augustus Saint Gaudens unveils the Shaw Memorial in Boston Common.


1955  In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks (1913 – 2005) is arrested for breaking a city ordinance by refusing to give up her seat on a public bus to a white man. This defiant act gives initial momentum to the Civil Rights Movement.

1957  Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 – 1968) and others set up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a leading engine of the Civil Rights Movement.

1964  The Civil Rights Act is signed, prohibiting discrimination of all kinds.

1965  The Voting Rights Act is passed, outlawing the practices used in the South to disenfranchise African American voters.

1967  Edward W. Brooke (1919 - ) becomes the first African American U.S. Senator since Reconstruction. He serves two terms as a Senator from Massachusetts.

1968  Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

2008  Barack Obama (1961 - ) becomes the first African American to win the U.S. presidential race.