

STUDY GUIDE

Prepared for The Theater Project
by Liz Neblett and Kathleen Cirillo

HAVING OUR SAY

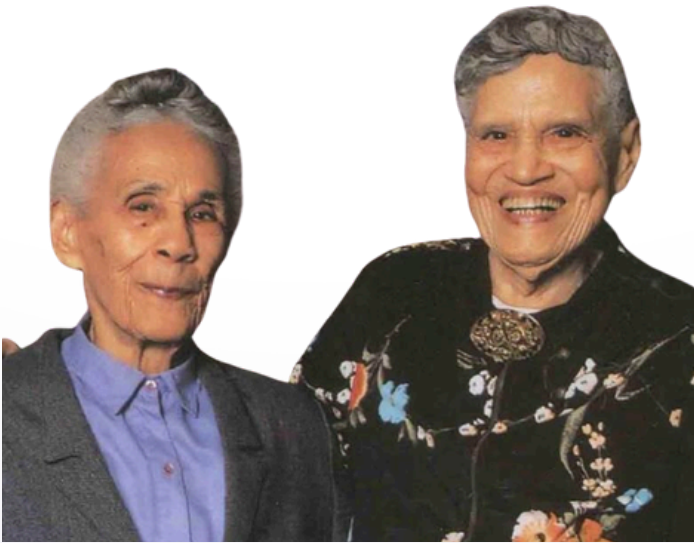
By Emily Mann

Gail Lou as Bessie

Daaimah as Sadie

**The THEATER
PROJECT**
THINK THEATER

MEET THE DELANY SISTERS



Dr. A. Elizabeth (Bessie) Delany,

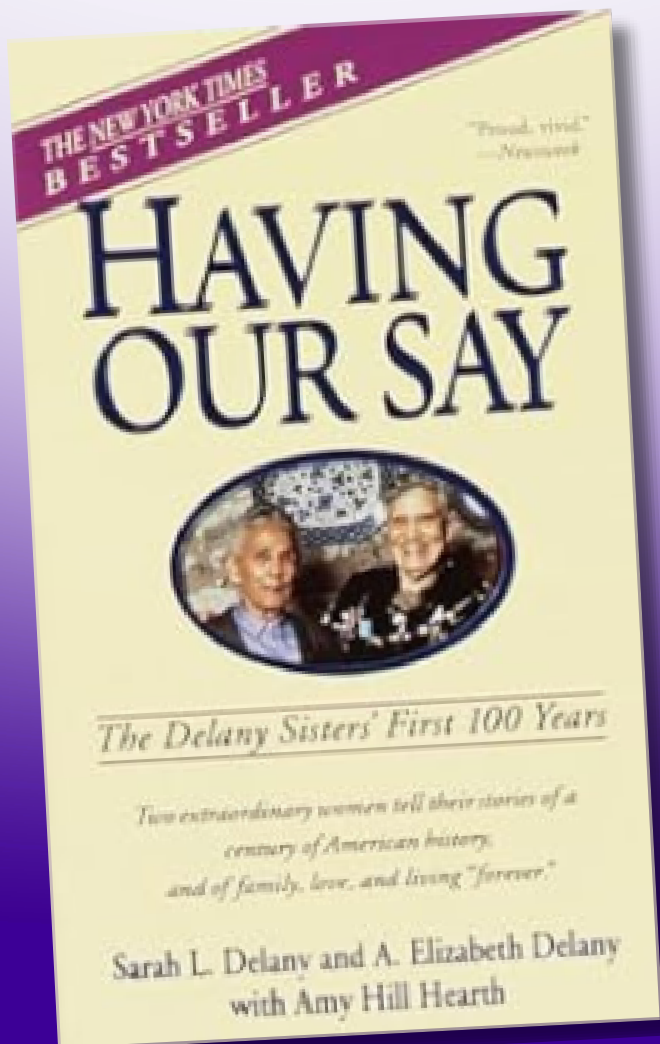
Sarah L. (Sadie) Delany

Sarah (Sadie) Louise Delany (1889-1999) and Annie Elizabeth (Bessie) Delany (1891-1995) were the eldest two of the ten children born to Henry Delany (1858-1928) and Nanny James Logan (1861-1956).

They grew up and were educated in Raleigh, North Carolina, at St. Augustine's school, where their parents had met. Their father became vice principal of the school while they lived and studied there and always encouraged them to get more schooling.

After their high school graduations, Sadie and Bessie became teachers, so they could make enough money to go on to college. Soon afterwards, they followed their older brothers to Harlem in New York City, where black citizens had many more opportunities. Sadie attended Pratt Institute and Columbia University, and became a teacher of Domestic Science. Bessie went to dental school at Columbia University and became a dentist. They settled in Harlem, surrounded by the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.

After retirement, the sisters moved to Mt. Vernon, New York, where they spent the remainder of their lives. Both sisters lived to be over 100 years old. Their lives spanned Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement. Through it all, they maintained their indomitable spirit.



MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: Emily Mann

Emily Betsy Mann is an American director, playwright and screenwriter. She served as the artistic director and resident playwright of the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, NJ from 1990 to 2020. Over the course of her 30-year tenure, during which McCarter won the prestigious Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre, she oversaw more than 160 productions, including more than 40 world premieres. Her plays include: *Having Our Say*, adapted from the book by Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth; *Execution of Justice*; *Still Life*; *Annula, An Autobiography*; *Greensboro (A Requiem)*; *Meshugah*; *Mrs. Packard*; and *Hoodwinked (a Primer on Radical Islamism)*. Her inventive, research-driven work gave rise to a new genre called “theater of testimony”.

Her adaptations include: *Baby Doll*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *A Seagull in the Hamptons*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and *Antigone*.

MEET THE AUTHOR

ABOUT THE “ACCIDENTAL AUTHOR”

Amy Hill Hearth, from her website: <https://www.amyhillhearth.com/>

Writing Compelling Stories of American Life Since 1991

“I am an accidental author. I was a newspaper reporter who wrote a story in 1991 that was read by a publisher who asked me to expand my story into a book. The result was *Having Our Say*. Sometimes magic happens.”

“My works focus on little-known, forgotten or overlooked voices and extraordinary stories from the past. I am fascinated by people and what motivates them, and I like to think that my books offer insight into the complex, sometimes confusing, occasionally bizarre, and always unique American character. I began my career as a newspaper reporter in Massachusetts, Florida, and New York. I am a versatile writer. Among my eleven books, I've published fiction as well as nonfiction, and books for adults as well as younger readers. During the pandemic lockdown, I wrote my first historical thriller, *Silent Came the Monster*, published in May 2023. I love to challenge myself by trying new genres.”

PRESHOW ACTIVITIES

2. Students read the Langston Hughes poems below

The Delany sisters lived in Harlem at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, as did Langston Hughes, who articulated the experience of being Black in America. We hope you enjoy exploring these poems.

These should be read one at a time, silently at first, then aloud by a student volunteer.

- Have students write one pair of lines from the poem.
- Ask students to read their chosen lines aloud without comment.
- Have another student read the poem in its entirety.
- Discuss reactions to the poem.

COLORED CHILD AT CARNIVAL

Where is the Jim Crow section
On this merry-go-round,
Mister, cause I want to ride?
Down South where I come from
White and colored
Can't sit side by side.
Down South on the train
There's a Jim Crow car.
On the bus we're put in the back—
But there ain't no back
To a merry-go-round!
Where's the horse
For a kid that's black?



LANGSTON HUGHES

(1901 – 1967)
American poet,
social activist, novelist,
playwright, and
columnist

FREEDOM

Freedom will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here, too.
I want my freedom
Just as you

PRESHOW ACTIVITIES

How much do you know about Jim Crow?

Jim Crow laws were state and local statutes that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States from the late 19th century until the civil rights movement, institutionalizing discrimination against African Americans. This is something the Delany Family experienced that had a huge impact on many in the South. (Discrimination was also a problem in the North, although it was not labeled “Jim Crow.”)

Consider the examples below – have you ever encountered this kind of discrimination?

Jim Crow laws, were enacted regarding the interaction between blacks and whites. Laws were made that affected daily life including relationships between the races, employment, and transportation.

Black citizens had to prove literacy to vote. The test was designed to be difficult enough to prevent black citizens from voting. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act prohibited racial discrimination in voting across the country.

Theaters, hotels, hospitals, restaurants, public pools, some stores, public parks, public schools and universities, and all other public places were segregated.

How were Black citizens able to fight against these laws?

- Montgomery Bus Boycott - Black citizens in Montgomery, Alabama stopped riding the public buses after a black seamstress, Rosa Parks, was arrested for not giving up her seat to a white person. The boycott lasted from Dec. 5, 1955 to Dec. 20, 1956. Eventually, the Supreme Court declared the bus company’s policy unconstitutional.

- Black churches and other organizations founded their own colleges and universities such as Shaw University, 1865 in Raleigh, N.C., Howard University, 1867 in Washington, D.C., and Morehouse College, 1867 in Atlanta, GA.

- Because traveling by car became very popular among all American citizens, blacks needed safe places to stay. The Negro Traveler’s Green Book - The Guide for Travel and Vacations was published from 1936-1967. This guide, the idea of a postal worker, listed safe places for blacks to eat and sleep, and listed “Sundown Towns,” towns where blacks had to leave before dark.

Can you think of other examples of resistance to these laws?

Sources:

These websites helped us develop this study guide – you might enjoy exploring them history.com. You can search any topic here nmaahc.si.edu (National Museum of African American History and Culture) bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov

PRESHOW ACTIVITIES

CONTEXT: Share and discuss these dates and events. Then test yourself with the TRUE FALSE test that follows.

TIMELINE

- Feb. 1858 - Henry Beard Delany, “Papa,” was born into slavery on a Georgia plantation.
- June 1861 - Nanny James Logan Delany, “Mama,” was born free to a mixed-race woman and a white man. They could not marry.
- Jan. 1, 1863 - The Emancipation Proclamation ends slavery.
- 1865 - The Civil War ends.
- June 19, 1865 - Northern Union soldiers announce the end of slavery to the black community in Galveston, Texas. The day is now celebrated as “Juneteeth,” and is a federal holiday.
- 1866 - The parents of the Delanys married in Raleigh, North Carolina.
- 1865 - 1877 - The Reconstruction period; in the South, “Black codes” were written to control the actions of former slaves, such as where they could live and work, and how much they could earn. Later, Northern representatives wrote new laws that allowed black citizens more freedom, such as the ability to run for elected office and to own businesses.
- 1880s - 1964 - In the Southern states, many people did not agree that blacks should have the same rights as whites. Many laws, referred to as “Jim Crow” laws, were enacted regarding the interaction between blacks and whites. These laws affected all aspects of daily life.

CONTINUED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE

PRESHOW ACTIVITIES

TIMELINE CONTUNUED

- 1916 - Sadie moved to Harlem, New York to attend Pratt Institute, and two years later, she received her B.A. at Columbia University's Teacher College.
- 1918 - "Papa" Delany becomes the first elected Negro bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Church.
- 1918 - After completing some science courses at Shaw University in Raleigh, Bessie moved to Harlem to join her older siblings and to attend New York University's (NYU) dental school. NYU did not accept women, so she attended Columbia University in 1919.
- 1955 - Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white woman on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama.
- 1957 - Sadie and Bessie moved to Mt. Vernon, New York, where their brother Hap had built a house after white real estate agents refused to sell him a house in a good neighborhood.
- 1964 - The Civil Rights Act passed. This law prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. This included prohibiting racial segregation in schools and public places, and discrimination in employment and voter registration. This law is still used in the courts today.
- 1968 - The Fair Housing Act passed. This act protects the buyer or renter from landlord discrimination. It is unlawful to refuse to sell, rent to, or refuse to negotiate with any person because of their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

After reviewing and discussing the timeline, test yourself below:

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

- T F** 1. The Civil War ended before the Emancipation Proclamation.
- T F** 2. Juneteenth is a Texas state holiday.
- T F** 3. The Delany sisters' parents married when the father was a free man.
- T F** 4. During Reconstruction, black citizens could run for office.
- T F** 5. Jim Crow laws prevented blacks from having the same rights as whites.
- T F** 6. Blacks could not attend college in the south.
- T F** 7. In the south, all public places were segregated except public schools.
- T F** 8. The Montgomery bus boycott changed bus policies.
- T F** 9. The Green Book listed places where blacks could stay, but it did not list restaurants.
- T F** 10. The Fair Housing Act protects both buyers and renters from discrimination.

TRUE/FALSE ANSWER KEY:

- 1. False - President Lincoln presented the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.
- 2. False - Juneteenth was declared a national holiday on June 18, 2024 by President Joseph Biden.
- 3. True - Slavery had been abolished before the parents were married.
- 4. True - This was true until "Black codes" were established in the south.
- 5. True
- 6. False - There were HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) established such as Shaw University.
- 7. False - Even public schools were segregated.
- 8. True - The boycott forced the U.S. government to take action and forced the bus company to change.
- 9. False - The Green Book also listed restaurants.
- 10. True

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

For pairs or small groups

1. Reflection (5-10 minutes)

Students reflect on these quotes from the play. How do they reflect their understanding of the characters' experiences?

- a. Have a student read each quote aloud. Discuss what each sentiment tells us about each character.
 - b. Ask students to think of examples from the play that relate to the quote.
 - c. Ask students to choose a quote that they feel is true for them, and to write a journal entry about how it reflects your experience.
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Sadie: The way I see it, there's room in the world for both me and Bessie. We kind of balance each other out.

Bessie: People are always asking us how we lived past one hundred. I say, "We never married. We never had husbands to worry us to death." We lived a clean life, but Lord, we had a good time.

Sadie: See, when you are colored, everyone is always looking for your faults. If you are going to make it, you have to be entirely honest, clean, brilliant, and so on.

Bessie: I'll tell you something else, honey. We were good citizens! Good Americans. We loved our country, even though it didn't always love us back.

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

2. Pass the Paper: an easy introduction to the art of playwriting (15-20minutes)

Participants form pairs. Each pair has one piece of paper and two pencils or pens, one per participant. One member decides to take on the role of one of the sisters from the play. The other participant can take on the role of a person from history. (Example: Barack Obama, Muhamad Ali, Whoopie Goldberg). One of them starts by writing a line of dialogue, something like this:

- Good afternoon. I feel I need to talk to you.

This participant passes the paper to their partner, who reads what is written and writes the next line of dialogue, taking on the point of view of the chosen character.

The second participant passes the paper back to first participant, who writes the next line of dialogue.

Participants continue passing the paper back-and-forth, generating a scene of one to two pages.

Some pairs can read their scenes aloud. Rich discussions can follow.