



Director John Gould Rubin, Edwin Lee Gibson and John Carlin at the first rehearsal.

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

"Dick Gregory, uniquely, sacrificed an extremely successful and lucrative career for activism. There are any number of prominent figures who use their celebrity in favor of a cause, but very few who relinquish fame and money for their beliefs. For this alone, he was a hero; a hero who died in relative poverty and not nearly as well-known as his life and activities should have made him.

One goal I had in creating this show was to re-discover a hero among us... He pursued injustice wherever his experience and imagination led him, so that, ultimately he wielded his activism on behalf of a wide array of progressive issues including food production, economic depravity, the power structure of international oppression — and, of course, throughout his life, racial injustice... He was deeply intelligent, acutely attuned to the truth, unbendingly faithful to his beliefs and ridiculously funny. A hero by any standard." — John Gould Rubin, Director

DICK GREGORY'S ADVICE TO STUDENTS

While preparing for his keynote address at Bryn Mawr College, Gregory offered these pieces of advice to the students in an interview:

1. Sleep deprivation can be a killer. Don't pull all-nighters to study.
2. Dehydration is also a killer. Drink plenty of water every day.
3. Schools must teach students how to live and not just how to make a living. I would ask students if they know how to live. Be lovable, kind and peaceful.
4. Look out for how the world has changed and keeps changing.
5. Finally, when you get out into the world, you are going to have to work hard to clean up the mess we've left you. Recess is over.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What are the powers and limitations of a joke?

2

What does it take to initiate conversations about race?

3

How do art and activism intersect?

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Defining Moments in Black History: Reading Between the Lies by Dick Gregory
Nigger: An Autobiography by Dick Gregory

INTERVIEW

Dick Gregory's Searing Humor is Brought to Life in *Turn Me Loose*
<https://goo.gl/sCPXL9>

Dick Gregory: "What I'm Running From"
Bryn Mawr College Feb. 28
<https://goo.gl/g53k14>

ARTICLE

"Dick Gregory, 84, Dies; Found Humor in the Civil Rights Struggle"
<https://goo.gl/Jdj9oZ>

VIDEO

Interview for KVOS-TV, 1966
<https://youtu.be/75ajExLNU9k>

The Medgar and Myrlie Institute
<http://www.eversinstitute.org/>



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.



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ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAY

Into the spotlight of a smoky nightclub steps **Dick Gregory**, a revolutionary African-American comedian and activist who is about to be nationally known. It is 1960 and the fight for civil rights is the talk of our nation. Gregory has pledged his life to be a catalyst for change, and he is starting with comedy.

In the play, Gregory chronicles his rise as the first Black comedian to expose U.S. audiences to the everyday injustices faced by Black citizens. Each time Gregory steps up to the mic, he offers biting political commentary with his trademark charm. He also risks his career and life.

The play zooms between the 1960s and present day, between talk shows and comedy clubs. Whatever the situation, Gregory is ready to engage any audience member, regardless of race, with his unique wit.

But will the crowd laugh? And more importantly, will they consider the prejudice and inequality he hopes to eradicate?

A PLAY ABOUT COMIC GENIUS DICK GREGORY TURN ME LOOSE



IN ASSOCIATION WITH JOHN LEGEND, GET LIFTED FILM COMPANY,
MIKE JACKSON, THE WILL AND JADA SMITH FAMILY FOUNDATION,
BETH HUBBARD, THE PRIVATE THEATRE, ERIC FALKENSTEIN,
SIMONSAYS ENTERTAINMENT, JAMIE CESA AND JANA BABATUNDE-BEY
BY GRETCHEN LAW | DIRECTED BY JOHN GOULD RUBIN

KREEGER THEATER | SEPTEMBER 6 – OCTOBER 14, 2018

Turn Me Loose is generously sponsored by Beth Newburger Schwartz and Dr. Donald Wallace Jones, Dr. Betty Jean Tolbert Jones and Tracey Tolbert Jones. The D.C. Ticket Partnership is generously sponsored by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, The Bay & Paul Foundations, Rockwell Collins, and the Albert and Lillian Small Foundation.

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



GRETCHEN LAW

“There is a lot of tragedy, unfairness and brutality — but racism is one of the issues that manifests all of the dark sides of what it means to be human.”

Gretchen Law was first introduced to Dick Gregory’s work as a child when she played his comedy club albums with her family and friends. Growing up in the 1960s and ‘70s, she found herself drawn to the Civil Rights Movement in order to combat the shocking violence of racism. “It was an issue that touched me personally as a young person in every aspect of my life.”

Law has written five plays which have been produced at festivals across the country. With her writing, she illuminates racial tensions and presents them in an unavoidable, complex way. Her work on the play *Al Sharpton for President* caught the attention of Dick Gregory. He insisted that she be the playwright who put his life story onstage.

Alongside her work as a playwright, Law also holds degrees from the Yale Divinity School and the Columbia University School of Social Work. She is currently a practicing psychotherapist, and lives in Guilford, Conn.

THE POWER OF A WORD

Curse words are frequently heard in stand-up comedy, but Dick Gregory’s bold vocabulary shocked audiences in a different way. Gregory’s routines intentionally included racial slurs that had been said to him throughout his life. He would playfully say these racially-charged obscenities to diminish their power. If an audience member hurled a slur back at him, he would halt his routine and take the opportunity to have a kindhearted dialogue with that person on the spot. By using these words, he encouraged the audience to consider their own perceptions of race and respect, while reclaiming the terms for himself. He exemplified this with the title of his first book — *Nigger: An Autobiography*. When asked why he chose this title, he said, “I really named my book, *Nigger*, for my momma. So that every time she heard that word, she would know that they were advertising my book.”

PROFILE: DICK GREGORY

Richard Claxton Gregory would say he was “not poor, just broke” upon being born on October 12, 1932 in St. Louis, Missouri. As a child, Gregory made money shining shoes, often enduring verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse from White patrons. In 1951, he attended Southern Illinois University on a track scholarship, but, before he could graduate, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. There, he discovered his love of comedy. After winning several troop talent shows, Gregory’s colonel reassigned him to the Army Special Service’s entertainment division as a comedian.

Once discharged from his service, he launched himself into Chicago’s stand-up comedy scene. He quickly gained notoriety, and caught the attention of famed magazine editor and socialite Hugh Hefner in 1961. Gregory’s 6-week run in front of White audiences at Hefner’s club was unprecedented for a Black comedian. With rave reviews from *TIME Magazine*, he became a nationally-known comedian and activist.

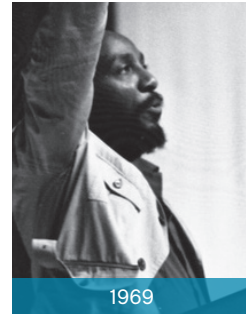
He was known for his savvy and cutting **satire** on race relations in the U.S. However, Gregory did not view social justice as just jokes, but his civic mission. He volunteered to speak at civil rights rallies across the country, participated in sit-ins, fasted to protest the government, and even ran for public office.

Gregory spent the majority of his later life in Washington, D.C. He published 16 books, ran a nutrition company, and advocated for all citizens’ freedom. He continued to write, teach, perform and protest. He died on August 19, 2017. He was survived by his wife Lillian and 10 children.

satire — the use of exaggeration or irony to highlight the absurdities of a topic



1964



1969

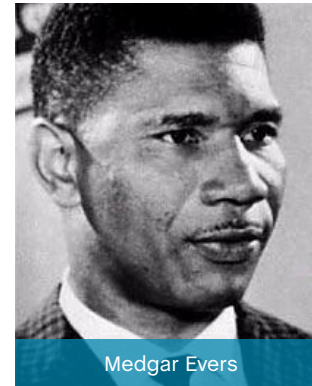


1995



2015

“MY FRIEND MEDGAR”



Medgar Evers

Born July 2, 1925, Medgar Evers was a pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement. He was also a dear friend to Dick Gregory, and inspired Gregory’s activism. Evers was born and raised in Decatur, Mississippi. His life’s mission was racial equality in his state. He established chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) throughout Mississippi and became the NAACP Mississippi Field Secretary. His calls for quality education and access to voting were

well known throughout the Movement, but also made him the target of political opposition groups. In 1963, Evers was assassinated in the middle of the night when returning home from an NAACP meeting. “Turn me loose” were his last words.

Medgar was one of the first casualties of the Civil Rights Movement to make national headlines. His death spurred President Kennedy’s call for a civil rights bill. The murderer, a known White-supremacist, faced two trials. In both cases, he walked free despite significant evidence demonstrating his guilt. In 1990, Evers’ wife Myrlie Evers implored law enforcement to reopen the investigation. Byron De La Beckwith was found guilty and given a life sentence nearly 40 years after Evers’ murder.



Dick Gregory was voted by Washingtonians to be featured in a mural titled “The Torch” at the historic Ben’s Chili Bowl (U and 13th St. N.W.). He appears alongside figures such as Muhammad Ali, Dave Chappelle, Barack & Michelle Obama, Prince and Harriet Tubman. Source: MuralsDC, Muralists: Aniekan Udofia with Mia Duval

WATCH

Watch this short clip of Dick Gregory’s stand-up. How would you define his relationship to the audience? <https://goo.gl/DzUBhi>



NEEDED

(PUBLIC CITIZEN #1 - PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES IN EXILE - INAUGURATED 3-4-69)

Following his loss in the 1968 presidential election, Gregory made posters of himself as a “needed” President, a play on being a “wanted” criminal. He earned nearly 50,000 votes, which is impressive for an independent, write-in candidate.

COMEDY AND ACTIVISM

“I happen to be a firm believer that you can’t laugh social problems out of existence.”

— Dick Gregory

While Dick Gregory greeted audiences with a disarming charm, he was typically nervous before going on stage. He had become the first Black comedian to play major all-White venues and perform for integrated audiences. His jokes reflected his life experiences, but his observations challenged or offended the beliefs of the waiting crowd. Gregory often stood before audiences of bigots and hecklers that shouted hateful taunts at the stage. He made a point of answering these disruptions with poise and kindness — whatever it took for the audience to hear his ideas. He said, “I’ve got to go up there as an individual first, a Negro second. I’ve got to be a colored funny man, not a funny colored man.”

Despite the potential backlash, he knew he had a responsibility to question racism publicly. He had a national platform to educate White Americans on racial discrimination. Activism became the focus of his career. He earnestly fought for political progress — including his run for Mayor of Chicago in 1967 and his campaign to be President of the United States in 1968.

Being outspoken as an activist came with a cost. Gregory lost fans and performance opportunities because of his political beliefs. This did not deter him. Even in his final years, Gregory remained a passionate and vocal advocate for nutritional health, feminism, animal rights and racial justice. His philosophy? “When you accept injustice, you become injustice.”