

KING HENRY, MAYOR

© 2014 by Austin McLellan

CAST

Henry Loeb, Mayor of Memphis

Etta Loeb, his daughter, a young lady of about 14

Thomas Oldman, Chairman of City Council

Reverend James, a prominent clergyman in the City

Jean Forsythe, secretary to the Mayor, about the Mayor's age

James Earl Ray, the assassin

SUMMARY

King Henry, Mayor is a history dramatizing certain events surrounding the Memphis sanitation workers' strike and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. The story of the strike, Dr. King's visit, and tragic assassination are well known. Less familiar is the story of the other key figures during these events. This drama is about them. The play takes liberties with many details, but the broad outline of the historical record is preserved.

STAGING NOTES

Although the play has been divided into several scenes, a single-unit set is appropriate since most all action occurs in the Mayor's office at City Hall. A small part of the set can be left empty to contain James Earl Ray's monologues in the spotlight. The Mayor's office requires a desk, and armchair for visitors. An exit door is needed. A simple intercom may be set up, or voices on the intercom can simply come in from offstage, though dialogue on the intercom has been kept to a minimum. A large window (or an image of one) is needed in the background, or back wall, looking out on nothing in particular...maybe the sky, an outline of buildings? Sound effects include police/ fire sirens. Other props: A large pistol for the Mayor, Ray's rifle, a placard, newspapers, etc.

PROLOGUE

JAMES EARL RAY

*(Set is dark, then RAY appears in a pool of light.
He is sighting a rifle upward, into nowhere).*

“Hmm...yes...it will be easy. Bang. ‘One for the history books.’” *(He slings the rifle over his back).* “And what does it matter? They’ve been aiming at this for a long time now. Not me, not James Earl Ray. I ain’t got nothing to do with it...I’m just a little spark. This fire’s been smoldering for years. A hundred years. A thousand. Ha! And they don’t even know it. It won’t be my fault. No, it’s not even me any more.” *(He slings the rifle back off his shoulder, cradling it affectionately.)* “This is all they’ve ever really wanted anyway. All they understood: the gun, the whip, chains.... And now what is it those garbage men want? Another twenty-five cents an hour? And the others, they don’t want to give it to them. Hah!” *(He pats the rifle gently.)* “It’s our time, baby. Our time. They’ve been waiting on us a thousand years. Memphis and King. They know us. They’ve been waiting on us to show up. And now we’re here. Waiting, waiting....

(Light fades).

SCENE 1

(The Mayor's Office, City Hall, Memphis, Tennessee. 1968.)

JEAN FORSYTHE

(Enters, bringing large stack of mail.)

Good morning, Mayor.

LOEB

(at his desk working)

I’m not sure I have time to be bothered with all that, Jean. *(She begins to withdraw.)*
Wait. What is it?

JEAN FORSYTHE

The paperwork, sir, for the bond issue, and the new tax proposal. A letter from the Governor. The usual.

LOEB

Lay it all down over there. Where are the newspapers? I need the newspapers.

JEAN FORSYTHE

Sir, you might want to wait a bit. Let me get you some coffee.

LOEB

No, Jean, I might as well read them now. ‘Get it over with.

JEAN FORSYTHE

I'll get them.

*(She exits. LOEB rises from his desk,
walks heavily to the window in the rear, staring out.)*

JEAN FORSYTHE

(On the intercom)

Sir, it's Councilman Oldman to see you.

LOEB

He's not scheduled.

JEAN FORSYTHE

(intercom)

No sir, but he seems pretty insistent.

OLDMAN

(Enters)

Mr. Mayor.

LOEB

(Turning to greet him.)

Councilman.

OLDMAN

Sir, I know this isn't a good time.

LOEB

'Never a good time these days. The Council meeting is this afternoon, right?'

OLDMAN

Yes sir, we're meeting with the strikers.

JEAN FORSYTHE

(Enters)

Here you are sir. *(LOEB begins reading the newspapers, walking back to his desk. She exits.)*

LOEB

'Garbage strike enters fourth week in Memphis.' 'Reverend King marshals sanitation workers in Tennessee.' 'Governor weighs use of National Guard.' *(LOEB sits.)* Tell me something, Tom, something good. Tell me we're just trying to run a city here, fill a few potholes, keep the lights on, get the damn garbage picked up. You ask people to do a job, you pay 'em, they do the work. We can't pay 'em like they're doctors and lawyers. *(Pauses.)* It's not choppin' cotton. It's good work, steady, and a fair wage. And now this --

(He waves the newspapers.)

OLDMAN

Pay no attention to them. They're blowing everything out of proportion. You know, sir, as well as I do, that we're just trying to get along down here like we always have. And we've done pretty darn well. The New York Times? The Washington Post? They've got no idea the hell we're going through trying to fix this mess. 'N fact, I was up all night with the Council trying to work this thing out. (*LOEB glares at him.*) Discussing the --

LOEB

Discussing what? What's there to discuss?

OLDMAN

Well, today's Council meeting, with the strikers.

LOEB

You know what to do.

OLDMAN

Yes. (*hesitating*)

LOEB

Well?

OLDMAN

We were just trying to figure out the best way to handle things today.

LOEB

There's nothing to handle. You get in there and read the City's offer. You tell 'em each point, plain and simple.

OLDMAN

We were discussing the best way to present --

LOEB

Just do it. There's nothing to 'present'. Nothing to discuss. What are you talking about? Just read that contract loud and clear like it's the law of the land. (*Pauses.*) You want to 'present' it? Present it like you're handing down the Ten Commandments. 'Like you're reading right out of the Bible.

OLDMAN

Right. We were just thinking they might want to talk, show their side.

LOEB

Their *side*? They don't have a side. We know what they're thinking. They're on strike aren't they?

OLDMAN

Yes. We'll read the contract and close the floor to discussion.

LOEB

That's right. *(Pauses.)* You've got the police there?

OLDMAN

Yep.

LOEB

Laughs.

JEAN FORSYTHE

(on the intercom)

Sir, your daughter Miss Etta's here to see you.

OLDMAN

I'll be going.

LOEB

Lemme know, Tom.

OLDMAN

I will, Mayor.

(Enter ETTA LOEB.)

Miss ETTA.

(He exits. ETTA crosses the room, plops down in the chair, and puts her feet on her father's desk.)

LOEB

Don't do that. *(She complies, slowly.)* How did you get here?

ETTA

I called the cops.

LOEB

I thought I said I didn't want you driving around town right now.

ETTA

I didn't drive, Daddy. I called the Sheriff and he sent a car over to the house. *(She pauses.)* I don't want to go to school anymore.

LOEB

I'm not surprised. Why not?

ETTA

Everybody's asking about the garbage. They won't leave me alone.

LOEB

Those people you go to school with.....their parents can afford to have their trash picked up. Private companies do it. They've got nothing to complain about. Besides, I'm sure they all voted for me.

ETTA

Well I'm not going there anymore. Someone called me a 'nigger lover' yesterday. 'Said you were gonna let the garbage men start running this town, ruin everything.

LOEB

That's ridiculous. *I'm* running this town.

ETTA

I'm not going back!

LOEB

You'll do what you're told. This will be over in a little while. They can't hold out much longer. The whole city is together on this. We'll talk and talk and talk till everybody gets tired and goes home. That's how we do things. Then we'll all get back to normal.

ETTA

Is there gonna be a parade?

LOEB

A march. Yeah, we'll let them march. They tried it before and all hell broke loose, but this time the police will be ready.

ETTA

Well, what about Reverend King?

LOEB

He's a bum. I don't trust him. He thinks this is like Harlem in New York, or like that uproar down at Ole Miss. Well it's not. King just wants to get in the newspapers. Since he won that Nobel prize over there in Europe, he's been incorrigible. A one-man circus. He should just go to Hollywood if he wants to be a big star.

ETTA

I heard the garbage people are looking for another ten cents an hour. *Pauses.* How much do you make an hour, Daddy?

LOEB

It's more than that.

ETTA

How much more?

LOEB

(Impatient).

No. They want more than money. It's something else. I don't get it. I just don't get it. We've always hired the Negro in the Sanitation Department. It's good jobs, steady. We've even got a few Negroes in police and fire now. Church Negroes, mind you, the best kind. And now they're marching in the streets.

ETTA

There's some white people in those marches too, Daddy.

LOEB

Union people from out of state.

ETTA

What's unions got to do with the garbage?

LOEB

The garbage men want a union. They want to be recognized.

ETTA

Recognized? Like knowing their names and stuff?

LOEB

I can not, I will not, learn the name of every Negro in the Sanitation Department! They're employees of this City. They get paid every week. That's all we owe them. That's enough.

ETTA

Then what's 'recognized'?

LOEB

Nothing, just something the lawyers made up.