



# MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE PLAYGUIDE

## UNTIL THE FLOOD

BY DAEL ORLANDERSMITH  
DIRECTED BY TIMOTHY DOUGLAS  
WITH MAIESHA MCQUEEN

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# UNTIL THE FLOOD

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Maiesha McQueen in *Until the Flood* at MRT.  
Photo: Kathy Wittman

## THANK YOU

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## STUDY GUIDE CREDITS

Portions of this study guide are excerpted from the Goodman Theatre. Originally published by the Education staff for the live and digital run of *Until the Flood* in Chicago. Reused with their permission.

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### MRT CREDITS

Rehearsal photos by Kathy Wittman  
Video by Kathy Wittman/Ball Square Films

# UNTIL THE FLOOD

**MAIESHA MCQUEEN** (*All Characters*) is an Atlanta native, who was last seen playing the principal role of Becky in the national tour of the Broadway musical *Waitress*. Noted regional credits include: *The Color Purple*, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, *Ain't Misbehavin'* (Portland Center Stage); *Da Kink In My Hair* (Horizon Theatre); *Sirens of Song* (Milwaukee Rep); *Chasin' Dem Blues*, *East Texas*



*Hotlinks* (True Colors Theatre). Maiesha has also traveled the globe as co-founder and musical composer for the touring company Progress Theatre, whose work has been presented at spaces such as The Public Theater, The Kennedy Center, The Apollo Theatre, and the World Music Festival in Amsterdam. NYU/Fordham graduate. Special thanks Dael Orlandersmith for birthing such a beautiful and important piece of art. IG: [@maieshamcqueen](https://www.instagram.com/maieshamcqueen)

**DAEL ORLANDERSMITH** (*Playwright*) Dael's plays include *Stoop Stories*, *Black n' Blue Boys/Broken Men*, *Horsedreams*, *Bones*, *The Blue Album*, *Yellowman*, *The Gimmick*, *Monster*, and *Forever*. Ms. Orlandersmith was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and Drama Desk Award nominee for *Yellowman* and the winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for



*The Gimmick*. Dael is the recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts grant, The Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights, a Guggenheim, along with several other awards and honors. Her play *Forever* was commissioned and performed at the Mark Taper Forum/Kirk Douglas Theatre in 2014, followed by performances at the Long Wharf Theatre Winter 2014/15, New York Theatre Workshop 2015, and Portland Center Stage 2016. Her play *Until the Flood* was done at St. Louis Repertory in the fall of 2016. She is currently working on two commissions for Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland and Milwaukee Repertory Theatre. *Until the Flood* was done at Rattlestick Theatre in 2018 and Milwaukee Rep in 2019 before it was done at Portland Center Stage, ACT Seattle, the Arcola Theatre in London, The Galway Arts Festival at the Druid theatre, and at the Traverse at Edinburgh Festival. The

play is scheduled to be performed Berlin in October of 2021. Ms. Orlandersmith is working on a commission for Rattlestick Theatre called 'watching the watcher' and has two plays opening at Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 2021 – *New Age* – to be directed by Jade King Carroll, and *Antonio's Song/I Was Dreaming of a Son* – co-written with Antonio Suarez Edwards and directed by Mark Clement. She is also working on a new work with writer/performer David Cale called *You Don't Know the Lonely One*. In 2020 Ms. Orlandersmith received the Doris Duke award.

**TIMOTHY DOUGLAS** (*Director*) Previous collaborations with Ms. McQueen: *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* and *The Color Purple* (Portland Center Stage). Premieres: Adrienne Kennedy's *Etta & Ella on the Upper West Side* (McCarter Theatre Center); August Wilson's *Radio Golf* (Yale Rep), Robert O'Hara's *Etiquette Of Vigilance* (Steppenwolf), Jason Reynolds' *Long*



*Way Down* (Kennedy Center), Rajiv Joseph's *The Lake Effect* (Silk Road Rising), Keith Adkins' *Safe House* (Cincinnati Playhouse). Off-Broadway: *Yellowman* (Billie Holiday), *Bronte: A Portrait of Charlotte* (Alloy), and *Rosmersholm* (Oslo Elsewhere). Representative projects: Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (Arena Stage, Great Theatre of China/China tour) and projects for Actors Theatre of Louisville, Guthrie, ACT, Folger Shakespeare, Mark Taper Forum, 24 Hour Plays/Broadway, South Coast Rep, Sundance, Round House, and many others. Currently serving as *Distinguished Artist in Residence* at Emerson College. 2018 Lloyd Richards'/National Black Theatre Award. MFA: Yale. [www.timothydouglas.org](http://www.timothydouglas.org)



# A MESSAGE FROM COURTNEY SALE

NANCY L. DONAHUE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

Dear MRT Community,

Thank you for joining us for our 42nd season. This spring slate of shows stands out for many reasons; our first endeavor into filmed performances, the first show I've fully produced since joining MRT in March of 2020, and the first time the remarkable words of Dael Orlandersmith have been on the MRT stage.



*Until the Flood* focuses on the lasting impact of the shooting of Michael Brown on the Ferguson community and nation. Told through a cross section of identities—Black, white, women, men, young and old—Dael builds a powerful play that allows us to go underneath the headlines. The play asks us to examine the legacy of police brutality against Black communities, the disturbing leverage of male violence, and the ways in which we forge paths of justice and healing.

I want to acknowledge the incredible educators in our region. You have been through an enormously challenging year. Your commitment and dedication to your students is deeply inspiring. Thank you for sharing *Until the Flood* with your students and crafting brave spaces to hold this conversation with young people.

In service,  
Courtney



The *Until the Flood* in the first week of rehearsal at MRT's Liberty Hall. Photo: Kathy Wittman

# GREETINGS FROM THE YOUNG COMPANY

## A MESSAGE FROM ROBERT CORNELIUS

Greeting Students, Teachers and Friends:

My name is Robert Cornelius. I have been the Director of the **Young Company** at **Merrimack Repertory Theatre** since the summer of 2019. It has been a privilege to get to work with students during our summer workshops – even virtually last year – and to try to find ways to expand our educational partnerships with schools and students throughout the year. Having our Artistic Director Courtney Sale take such an interest in the development of the program has been a gift, and with the production of the play *Until the Flood* by Dael Orlandersmith, we have a golden opportunity to offer more chances to work with students, families, and our community.

We have taken advantage of this in a few ways:

- In conjunction with the production, our Program Coordinator Kaitlyn Crockett and I have hosted a workshop on writing Documentary Theatre with some of our YoCo members, whose short plays will be available to stream when the production opens.
- We have adapted this study guide to help students navigate the themes of the play, give them an idea of what to look for during the show, and how to best enjoy live theater on the screen. Students will get to know the artists and artisans who helped this production come to life and learn a little about the beginnings of this incredible piece.
- I will have the opportunity to virtually visit their classrooms to talk about the themes of the play and hear the students' critiques, which is very exciting.



Plays like *Until the Flood* are a perfect chance to get young people engaged and talking about the things that are important to them. My job as an Arts Educator is to help them find their artistic voices and give them the confidence to use them every day. I really do consider that a privilege. MRT will continue to be a part of the development of new artists and arts appreciators throughout the school year, and again in the summer, when we will be having our annual workshop and performance of the Young Company. I could not be more excited about the prospects. I hope you enjoy this study guide, and also enjoy the show!

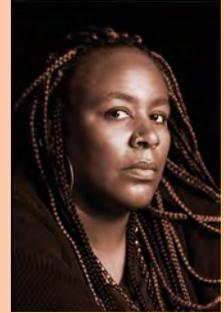
All my best,  
Robert Cornelius  
Director, MRT Young Company  
Merrimack Repertory Theatre



# NAVIGATING THE WATERS: A CONVERSATION WITH DAEL ORLANDERSMITH

BY SAM MAUCERI (SOCIAL STUDIES AND THEATRE)

*In Until the Flood, Dael Orlandersmith explores the social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting of teenager Michael Brown. Drawing from her extensive interviews with Ferguson residents, Orlandersmith crafts an extraordinary theatrical experience in which she embodies eight residents of the town as they try to come to terms with the complex events that shook the nation.*



**Sarah Brandt:** Why did you want to write this play?

**Dael Orlandersmith:** Well, actually, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis first came to me [about writing the piece]. I said yes because I think it's important. I want to tell a story. I want to go beyond what's right, who's right, who's wrong. How does this shooting affect people? In terms of race, how far have we come? Those are the questions that have come to mind. What does it invoke, provoke in you? What kind of thought?

**SB:** What sort of preparation did you do?

**DO:** [Repertory Theatre of St. Louis Associate Artistic Director] Seth Gordon and I met with Michael Brown, Sr. and a few other people, a lot of political activists and people who are just generally in town. I wanted to look at that because, you know, race is obviously a very... it's high voltage. It's a high voltage situation. I wanted to see exactly how far we've come, which is interesting to me, in terms of, say, from the 1940s on. And also, what does it mean to the individual? What does race mean to an individual? How does it affect individuals, and how far has St. Louis come? What does it mean to be a part of this? And then again, for me as a New Yorker. I find that a lot of people in St. Louis feel this is nothing new to them. A lot of them just want to put this down. And a lot of other people have said it's just an everyday occurrence. So it's about showing those perspectives.



**SB:** The people we meet in the play—are these people you met?

**DO:** They are composite figures. Because I made it very clear to everyone that I spoke with—I don't have a right to invade your life that way. I have a right as a playwright to tell a story. But I don't have a right to dig into someone's life like that. Because that's no longer about theater; that's perverse voyeurism. A word that I use heavily is "boundary." The role of certain types of theater, we are supposed to

be mental and emotional travelers, but having said that, if I write about someone's life directly, that makes me responsible for them in certain ways that I don't feel comfortable with. And given where that person is within their life, it can invoke and provoke a lot of stuff that they just won't be able to deal with. I'm not a therapist. And I actually said that to everyone I spoke with.

**SB:** You've written in many formats—poetry, plays, solo performance—what made you choose the solo performance format for this play?

**DO:** It's an interesting format. I want to look at how one person, not just myself—if the play goes on, I want other people to do it—how one person can embody a kind of humanity. Aspects of humanity. I think that's interesting, because it does start with one person. How does one person take in the world? We always see the collective, but the collective starts with the individual. Individuals form a collective, right? So how does one individual take in the world?

**SB:** You're the writer of this play, but also are working with a director. Tell us how that works.

**DO:** He can tell me what is overwritten, what we can cut, what we can emphasize. It's a third eye. What sound bites do we need? How does a character need to be fleshed more? Both on the page and on the stage. In terms of technique—how to bring it alive on the stage. And then we combine these ideas.



**SB:** When a performance [is finished] and the lights go down, is there anything in particular that you're hoping the audience takes away?

**DO:** Did I give them permission to feel both comfortable and uncomfortable? That's what interests me, because I don't speak for people, I speak to people. Because when you start speaking for people, you get on a political tirade, and I know this situation goes beyond the political. It extends itself into personal stories and the emotional and how we live on a day-to-day basis. What are our personal narratives? And how do we feel about this, knowing this could have happened with these young men?



(right page) Dael Orlandersmith - in performance in *Until the Flood* at Rattlestick Theatre NYC in the lower photo. (this page) Protesters above in Milwaukee and below in Atlanta.

# GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BY SAM MAUCERI (SOCIAL STUDIES AND THEATRE)

1. Most plays have multiple actors and tell a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. However, *Until the Flood* is composed as a series of monologues from many characters expressing how one event has affected their lives in a variety of ways. How does this structure of storytelling affect how you respond to the points of view depicted in the play? Have you seen any other plays or movies with a similar structure?

2. To create *Until the Flood*, Orlandersmith interviewed community members in Ferguson, Missouri. Rather than playing the real people she interviewed and quoting them directly, Orlandersmith used her interviews as inspiration to create “composite characters.” Do you feel that this makes the play any more or less realistic? What responsibility do you think a playwright has to tell the truth when their play is based on real events? Are there multiple ways to tell the truth?

3. Throughout the play, the actor transforms herself into many different characters. Pick two characters from the play and compare and contrast them by answering the following questions:

- a. What information are we given about this character at the beginning of the monologue?
- b. What additional facts do we learn about this character, their experiences, and their identity?
- c. What do you notice about this character’s physicality? How much space do they take up? Do they move around the stage or remain stationary? Are they slow or fast? Are their movements heavy or light? What kind of gestures does this character use?
- d. What do you notice about this character’s voice? Do they speak with a higher or lower voice? Do they speak quickly or slowly? Loudly or softly?
- e. What costumes or props does this character use? What information do we get about this character from these choices?

4. Identify a character from *Until the Flood* that you share a point of view with. How is this character similar to you? In what ways are they different from you?



(left) A protester in Washington, D.C. (next page) Michael Brown and Darren Walker.

5. A 2020 *New York Times* article invokes playwright August Wilson who “called not for colorblind casting, but for institutions that invite art by and for people of color, to tell their own stories and not simply ones adapted for them. He doesn’t call for blindness, but visibility: people of color seen on stages and behind the curtains.” How do you see this quote’s relevance in *Until the Flood*, which portrays characters who are both Black and white? What significance is there in her playing white people? How does theatre as a medium and this play in particular allow for a Black woman to play white characters? In contrast, what examples have you seen of cross-racial casting that you feel are ineffective or offensive to people of color?

6. Throughout the play, Orlandersmith explores the harmful expectations put upon young men in America. Do you feel that young men are allowed to be vulnerable in American culture? What potential consequences do men face for expressing vulnerability or emotional pain? How do these expectations specifically hurt Black men?

7. In her final poetic monologue, Orlandersmith closes the play with the following:

Boy  
Man  
Boy  
Man  
Black  
White  
Gun  
Shoot  
Black boy - down

White man - shoot  
Both down  
Both are down  
Both are done  
Done  
Gone  
They are BOTH gone



In what ways do you agree or disagree with this conclusion? Does this message concluding the play as a whole change how you view the monologues that precede it?

# TIPS FOR WATCHING THEATRE ONLINE

BY LIAM COLLIER

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, theatres around the world have had to adapt their art form for a new medium. Unlike the writers behind your favorite TV show, Dael Orlandersmith, the playwright of *Until the Flood*, did not imagine you watching her play from your home. In all likelihood, she was more concerned with the audience in the room on the night of this recording than with her future viewers. Just as the blurry videos of a concert posted to social media will never compare to the live event, a recording of a piece of theatre will never be quite the same as the real thing.

With this in mind, here are some steps we recommend you take to give yourself a more fulfilling theatrical experience:



## Before You Begin

Imagine the space. Liberty Hall where MRT's version was filmed seats 279 patrons. On the night of a performance, it would have been full of bustling audience members sitting together in the dark. If you can, dim the lights in your space. Set aside any distractions. Theatre often expects its audience's full attention. Unlike TV shows, which you can pause and return to, plays build tension by asking audiences to lean in and listen closely. If you're able to, go to a space where you can watch alone, use headphones if you have any, and silence your phone for a moment, so you can focus on the performance.

## As You Watch

Consider what you're missing. As you watch the videos provided, think about what aspects of the performance you cannot access through the screen. What might lie just outside the camera frame that you cannot see? Are there sounds, smells, sensations that you would experience if you were in the space?

## After You Watch

Reflect on your experience. Did you enjoy what you watched? If you did, amazing! What moments would you have enjoyed seeing live? If not, what moments or aspects of the performance did you find off-putting? Would seeing the performance live have impacted your experience? Theatre, at least prior to March 2020, was always meant to be experienced in person. Right now, the theatre community is figuring out what it means to exist in a virtual space. For many of us, this is brand new. As theatres adapt, audiences are learning to watch theatre in a new context. As we navigate this uncertainty, we look forward to the day when audiences will be able to join us in-person again. Until then, thank you for being a part of this journey with us.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR “HASSAN”

BY LIAM COLLIER (English Language Arts)

The following questions were written to accompany “Hassan, Black, age 17.” You may find them particularly useful in English Language Arts classrooms.

1. Over the course of this excerpt, Hassan shares three anecdotes about his life in Ferguson: an encounter with the police, a drive through wealthy white neighborhoods, and a conversation with his history teacher. How are these three moments connected? Why do you think Hassan is choosing to tell the audience about these moments in particular?
2. In his 1979 opinion piece, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”, writer and activist James Baldwin wrote that “language is...a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity.” Baldwin was engaging in a contemporary debate about the significance of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), the distinct vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation used by many Black Americans in the United States (sometimes referred to as Ebonics).

**In her 1988 article, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie Jordan,” writer, teacher, and activist June Jordan added: “I know that standard forms of English for Black people in this country do not copy that of Whites. And, in fact, the structural differences between these two kinds of English have intensified, becoming more Black, or less White, despite the expected homogenizing effects of television and other mass media. Nonetheless, White standards of English persist, supreme and unquestioned, in these United States. ...compulsory education in America compels accommodation to exclusively White forms of ‘English.’ White English, in America, is ‘Standard English.’”**

3. Why do you think schools in the United States require students to learn “Standard” English grammar? Do you think AAVE’s unique grammar and vocabulary should be taught in English and Language Arts classrooms in the United States? What is the significance of Hassan’s use of AAVE in *Until the Flood*?
4. A metaphor is “a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn’t literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison.” Where do you see Dael Orlandersmith use metaphor in this excerpt? How does her use of metaphor impact your understanding of Hassan and the world he lives in?
5. Hassan often repeats words and phrases two or three times within the space of a single sentence. What effect does this repetition have on your experience as an audience member?
6. Throughout this excerpt Hassan repeatedly uses the N-word. Why do you think the playwright chose to use this word in this monologue and throughout *Until the Flood*? If you watched the entire play, did you feel differently about the use of this word depending on which character was using it? Why or why not?

# OTHER FLOODS: RACISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Artists have always responded critically to important and pressing social issues. Theatre is no different, as Dael Orlandersmith demonstrates in *Until the Flood*, which responds to the murder of Michael Brown by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. Dael joins a long lineage of writers, filmmakers, poets, and visual artists who use their craft to go deeper into such issues, hoping to expose and uncover how we got to the issue in the first place. The following is a list of books, films, limited TV series, and plays that explore police brutality and instances of systemic racism in the U.S., most often focused on real events, just as *Until the Flood* is. ***In no way is this an exhaustive list, and be careful to take care of yourself, as some of the pieces may bring up strong emotional responses.***

## Books - Recommended by Lowell's Pollard Memorial Library

- *Stamped: Racism, Anti-racism, and You: A Remix of the National Book Award-winning Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds, a history of racist and anti-racist ideas in America.
- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, the affects of a shooting on a teenager.
- *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi, a coming-of-age story about a Haitian teenager.
- *Black Boy, White School* by Brian Walker, a Black teen transfers to an all-white prep school.
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, captures the longing of lonely children, the brute insult of bigotry, and the wonder of words that can make the world right.

## Movies/Documentaries - Recommended by the Goodman Theatre

- *Whose Streets?* – A documentary following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after Michael Brown's murder.
- *Fruitvale Station* – A film starring Michael B. Jordan recounting the death of Oscar Grant at the hands of San Francisco transit police.
- *The Hate U Give* – A film based on a book by the same name in which a Black teen witnesses the fatal shooting of her best friend by cops.
- *13th* – A documentary by Ava DuVernay examining the implications of the 13th Amendment on Black lives.



## TV Series - Recommended by the Goodman Theatre

- "When They See Us" – A limited series based on "the Central Park Five", Black teens in Harlem who were wrongfully convicted of attacking a white woman in Central Park in 1989.

## Plays/Playwrights

- *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna DeVeare Smith. Both one-woman plays performed by Smith follow real instances of violence caused by racial tensions in major American cities.
- *Yellowman* by Dael Orlandersmith, a striking play that deals with racism within a black community in South Carolina.
- *Little Baby Jesus* by Arinzé Kene's, the story of three teenagers struggling with the intersection of class, race, mental health, and gender identity.
- *The Scottsboro Boys* by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and David Thompson, a musical about nine Black teenage boys, who were falsely accused of rape.

PHOTO: Director Timothy Douglas with Maiesha McQueen in rehearsal. Photo: Kathy Wittman.

# LINKS TO PLAYBILL (PROGRAM), VIDEOS, AND PHOTOS



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(Available 4-21-21)



Maiesha McQueen in *Until the Flood*.  
Photo: Kathy Wittman