AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

RFK: The Journey to Justice
A Conversation with L.A. Theatre Works Cast Members
Philip Casnoff, Kevin Daniels, Henry Clarke,
and King Institute Scholar-in-Residence, Clarence B. Jones

Presented by Stanford Lively Arts
and
The Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts

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Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and tonight we’re here for a public conversation on RFK: The Journey to Justice, an L.A. Theatre Works radio play – a docudrama, really – that will have its West Coast premiere tomorrow night at 8:00 p.m. in Dinkelspiel Auditorium on the Stanford campus.

Murray Horwitz and Jonathan Estrin are the authors of this play, which was co-commissioned by Stanford Lively Arts. Under the guidance of the executive and artistic director of Stanford Lively Arts, Jennifer Bilfield, this organization, the on-campus arts presenters organization, places special emphasis upon the work of living writers, composers, and choreographers, and frequently commissions works that provide a platform for creators of our time. We are all very fortunate to be beneficiaries of this effort. The commission of RFK: The Journey to Justice, is in honor of the Bonnie J. Addario Lung Cancer Foundation with support from Van and Eddi Van Aucken.

This Aurora Forum event tonight is presented by Stanford Lively Arts and the Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, and is cosponsored by the Office of the President and Provost and Stanford’s Office of Public Affairs.

We have a very exciting evening of conversation, and I want to begin simply by introducing our guests. We have three actors from the L.A. Theatre Works company. Beginning at your left we have Philip Casnoff, who plays John Fitzgerald Kennedy and other voices in the play. He is a Golden Globe Award-nominated, Theater World Award-winning American actor known for his roles in TV series and on Broadway. He is best known for his critically acclaimed performance of the lead role of John Blackthorne in the 1990 Broadway production of Shogun: The Musical. He also starred in the L.A. Theater Works production of An Immaculate Conception: Sex in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction, by Stanford’s own Professor Carl Djerassi.
Next we have Kevin Daniels, who plays Martin Luther King in the radio play. Kevin was last heard at L.A. Theater Works in the recording of Betrayed and has also performed in Becket, On the Waterfront, and The Lion in Winter. Other favorite projects of his include Flag Day at Ojai Playwrights Conference and Twelfth Night at Lincoln Center. His film and television credits include Law and Order, Frasier, Smallville, and Buffy The Vampire Slayer. Kevin is a graduate of the Juilliard Drama Division.

Next we have Henry Clarke, who plays Robert Francis Kennedy. Henry’s stage credits include multiple productions at Shakespeare & Company, No Man’s Land at A.R.T., Hamlet at Icarus NYC, The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told at Speakeasy Stage, The Heidi Chronicles at New Century Theater, House of Gold at PlayPenn, and Bach at Leipzig for Odyssey Theater. On television, Henry has appeared in Chuck and Brush Up Your Shakespeare, an Evening at Pops, and has been in several feature films including Senses of Place and Undertakings, which is now in production. He’s a Harvard College graduate, holds an MFA in playwriting from Smith College, and an MFA in acting from the American Repertory Theater Institute at Harvard.

All of us are honored to be here tonight with Clarence B. Jones, who is the former personal counsel, adviser, draft speech writer, and close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from the time Clarence was recruited into the movement by Dr. King in 1960. A graduate of Columbia University and the Boston University School of Law, he is now a scholar in residence at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute here at Stanford and he is the author of What Would Martin Say? He was our guest at the Aurora Forum for a one-on-one interview two years ago this month, and he’s just back from New York – he flew back this afternoon – after taping a PBS broadcast that will be aired on March 31 with Tavis Smiley on the “Beyond Vietnam” speech that was given by Dr. King at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967.

Please join me in welcoming our guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

We thought that Susan Loewenberg might be with us here tonight, but she’s unable to make it until tomorrow evening, when she will join us for a post-performance discussion. It’s interesting to consider the way the play got started because Susan Loewenberg was a graduate student in history at UCLA. She was in a course on biography and had chosen in the year 1968 Robert F. Kennedy as the subject matter that she would research in this class. During her research, she learned about a meeting that took place between RFK and James Baldwin in New York City in the spring of 1963 where Kennedy said to Baldwin, “Bring together the best people you know who I can talk to about what’s happening in the civil rights movement.” So Baldwin consulted with Clarence B. Jones, and Clarence is one of the survivors of that meeting. We’d like to begin by finding out what happened.

Clarence B. Jones: What happened is that Jimmy (James Baldwin) had a conversation with the attorney general, as you described, a day or a couple of days before in which he said, “Bring together some of your friends who I can talk to directly so I won’t have to talk to (using the words at that time) the Negro community through the media.” So Jimmy called me and he said, “I’ve spoken to Kenneth Clark (Dr. Kenneth Clark),” who
some of you may know did the critical research in the landmark 1954 Brown decision (the test showing the consequences of segregation – the black doll and the white doll test that was designed by Kenneth Clark, a very distinguished psychologist), and Lena Horne, Lorraine Hansberry, Rip Torn, Harry Belafonte, and a young SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] worker from Louisiana, Jerome Smith, and myself. The meeting was intended to give an opportunity for the attorney general to listen and have a dialogue. I’m not sure whether Burke Marshall was there or not; I don’t recall. But I do remember there was someone – maybe Steve Smith, I don’t remember – but I do know that the persons I have mentioned were there.

There came a time in the discussion when Lorraine Hansberry, sitting on the couch next to Lena Horne and Dr. Kenneth Clark, said to the attorney general, “Mr. Attorney General, the person you really should be listening to is that young man sitting over there.” That was Jerome Smith, because he had just literally come back from Louisiana. The analogy I used was as if we were in war and you had taken a soldier and he had just come back from the front lines of combat, and Jerome Smith literally was combat-wounded. He was bearing the scars and the pressures of having been on the front lines of civil rights, having been beaten, having been jailed. And when he began to tell his experiences and the attorney general at some point said, “Well, you know, Mr. Smith, we’ve done this and we’ve done that,” Jerome interrupted him. He said, “You haven’t done anything so far.” Then, of course, there was discussion back and forth with all of us, but the conversation that he had with the attorney general really defined the character of the meeting thereafter because, in effect, what Jerome Smith said to him bluntly was, “You’re full of bull; don’t tell me this. You’re lying. Don’t tell me you did this, because I was there.” The attorney general reddened; he was put on the defensive.

I became an unintended sidebar, an unintended consequence of the meeting. After the meeting he was very critical of me because, he said, “Look, you know what we did in Birmingham. You know what we did. Why didn’t you speak up?” My position was that I was there because Jimmy Baldwin had asked me to be there. If you want it in a more formal sense, I was there as Dr. King’s lawyer, and my role was not to defend the Justice Department. If the Justice Department wanted to defend itself, it wasn’t Clarence Jones’s role. That’s why I said earlier in the discussion, those of you who would like to … I don’t know whether you may be able to find it online, but the attorney general was publicly critical of me in the New York Times in talking to James Reston. So when I read the article in the New York Times, I then wrote a long letter (which I must say, with credit to the New York Times, they published), which was a rebuttal of the meeting.

I haven’t heard or seen the play that you three gentlemen have done, but that was a journey to justice. I would say that that was a powerful point along the journey. I think that Robert Kennedy was really taken aback by the fact that he expected to receive more gratitude. He expected to be more warmly received rather than be the subject of scathing scorn and criticism. So that was an important point along his journey.
Kevin Daniels: It’s so great to hear you tell this story because it plays a prominent role in our telling of this play and it happens….

Philip Casnoff: …in the first act. It’s actually the scene between Bobby and me, and Jerome Smith interrupts it. What you call “blood language” is extremely colorful. And it’s very interesting because the way the scene is constructed is that Bobby is reporting to Jack what happened, and Jack’s response is, “In Dad’s apartment? This happened in Dad’s apartment?” It was in Joe Kennedy’s apartment, and he was in disbelief about what went on in Joe’s apartment. There was some humor to the scene, but you also see that Jack didn’t get it really. And when Jerome Smith blows off, justifiably, a lot of steam, I think clearly Bobby was in shock when that happened. And when I’m listening to it in the scene, I’m a little bit flabbergasted.

Henry Clarke: Tell me how the room responded. What did Kenneth Clark and Lorraine Hansberry do when the discussion became so…?

Jones: Well, actually, as I said earlier, we were having a fairly animated discussion, and at some point during that discussion, Lorraine, Kenneth Clark was talking, and Rip Torn and Harry and Kenneth Clark … at some point, Lorraine said to the attorney general, because Jerome Smith had been relatively quiet up until that time, and it was Lorraine who said, “With all due respect, Mr. Attorney General, the person you really should be listening to and hearing from is Jerome Smith because he’s on the front line. We have our opinions, but you want to get it from the horse’s mouth.”

So after that discussion, we were stunned. I must say I wasn’t surprised, but I was shocked by the rawness of it, because as I think I described Jerome, he was just like somebody who had just come back from combat, and he was not interested in appropriate language. He was not interested in what the attorney general thought of him. He was just interested in having the attorney general hear his pain and the pain of what he experienced. And he wanted to be sure, if nothing else, that he heard it loud and clear rather than what may have been filtered, even by those of us who were there in the room with him.

Daniels: Hearing you talk about this story, when I first saw the scene or first read the play, I got a very visceral sense of what happened – how, once he had the outburst, all the noise kind of leaves the room. It’s kind of like, Well, you wanted to know. And hearing you describe it, that’s exactly what happened. And it’s a credit to the writers; they really captured that moment. And that’s the challenge: it’s when we first see this guy begin to change at the end of that scene.

Jones: And as Jerome was talking, there were people like Lena Horne, particularly, who were shaking their heads. Lorraine was shaking her head.

Daniels: They all piled on.
Jones: Yes, that’s the way it really is. You need to hear this. That’s the way it really is.

Gonnerman: This is in 1963, and the play begins in 1960. There’s this situation. Does it begin …

Casnoff: It begins just before the election.

Daniels: The primary, actually. So that’s where the play begins.

Casnoff: It would be ’59, ’60.

Gonnerman: So it really begins with the story, it seems to me, of King in jail in Atlanta, where he has been arrested for a parole violation because he participated in a lunch-counter sit-in. He was on parole for a traffic violation, sentenced to six months of hard labor, and transported to a regional state penitentiary. And Coretta, five months pregnant, is distraught. Clarence, you were distraught as well because…

Jones: Well, it was not just me. I had just met Dr. King in late February of that year for the first time, and he had been tried in April 1960 in Montgomery, Alabama, for tax evasion, and that’s how I got involved because I was asked to be one of the lawyers – a law clerk, essentially – to four other very capable lawyers. He was acquitted by an all-white jury, interestingly enough, in Montgomery in 1960, and then the presidential primaries were taking place. So I guess you are talking about the event….

Gonnerman: This was in October.

Jones: Yes. So when he was imprisoned, they arrested me, Stanley Levinson, Harry…

Clarke: The Commie.

Daniels: I so want to know about Stanley Levinson. He’s mentioned in the play and I’d love to know more about him.

Clarke: Referred to as “the Commie infiltrator.”

Daniels: Well, not by Bobby.

Jones: I’m glad you raised that. Bayard Rustin introduced Stanley Levinson to Martin King in Baltimore in 1955. Stanley Levinson was a white Jewish real estate lawyer who became very close to Martin King in terms of being an adviser and confidant. They developed a relationship from the time they met in Baltimore in 1955 until Martin’s death. I had met Stanley in late 1960. I should tell you – you will be reading about some of the things I’m writing – Stanley was one of my closest personal business friends. Stanley and I really were together either by phone or together 24/7 because we were just that close in working with Martin King. Yes, in fact, he had been a member of the Communist Party – he and his twin brother. They were identical twins. They had been
members of the Communist Party but had broken and left the Party when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary.

Daniels: The play doesn’t make it clear if he was actually a Communist or…

Jones: No. Hoover knew that the Levinsons (actually, Stanley had the name Levinson, but his twin brother was named Roy Bennett – different name) … he knew that they had broken with the Communist Party. In fact, the irony is that while they continued to refer to him as a Commie, it’s the same Hoover who tried to get the FBI agents to convince Stanley to be an agent for them.

Daniels: Was this getting back for not being an FBI agent for him? I was wondering why he was so adamant. We have a scene where he says, “You have to leave your friend Levinson behind.” I say, “I can’t.”

Jones: Well, the record is that sometime in 1963, there was a meeting at the White House of civil rights leaders. President Kennedy takes Martin King and has a private walk with him in the Rose Garden and during that walk, he says to Dr. King, “I wanted to speak to you privately because the attorney general and J. Edgar Hoover have brought some very disturbing information.” (Dr. King told me this afterwards.) “What was it?” He said, “Two people close to you – Stanley Levinson and Jack O’Dell – are members of the Communist Party.” Stanley Levinson was spoken about as being like a Soviet agent. And the point that Kennedy made to Dr. King during that Rose Garden meeting: he used the analogy of the Macmillan government. There had been a cabinet member in the Macmillan government by the name of Profumo, and he had had an affair with a woman by the name of Christine Keeler. And Christine Keeler at the same time was having an affair with a known Soviet agent. So Kennedy said to Dr. King, “I don’t want you, as a result of your relationship with Stanley, to cause us to have a problem. That caused the Macmillan government to fall.” The president’s discussion with Dr. King was that the Republicans would use this to defeat our civil rights initiative.

So after that meeting in the Rose Garden, Martin King sat with me and Andy Young, and then I had the dubious distinction of playing the role of … he asked me to be a personal investigative person. And Dr. King said to me, “Yes, I know Stanley was a member of the Communist Party, but the question I really need to know is whether, in fact, he rejoined. Is the President’s statement true?” I turned to him and I said, “Hold on. You introduced me to Stanley!” [Laughter] “You’ve known him longer than I have.” He said, “Yeah, but Clarence…” So then I went to Stanley; I absolutely went to Stanley and I said, “I’ve been asked to conduct this inquiry with you.” Stanley’s immediate reaction before we got into a discussion was, “What Martin is seeking to achieve is more important than me. If my relationship with Martin is going to be an issue, then you have to tell Martin that he’s got to cut me off.” That was his immediate reaction.

Casnoff: I just want to set one thing straight. The play actually begins before that event, talking about his imprisonment – what one of the characters refers to as King actually being put into a chain gang situation. But the play itself begins with Kennedy
complaining about the fact that Jackie Robinson won’t do anything for him. Then he
goes to Harry Belafonte, who suggests meeting this guy, Dr. King. And Jack’s response
was, “Well, we were thinking of something more along the lines of Sammy Davis, Jr.”
[Laughter] He knew nothing.

I just want to add one thing because we were talking about this before: My uncle, whose
name was Mel Wolf, was the national legal director of the American Civil Liberties
Union. You two knew each other at that time. When I was about to do this play, he
called me up and he said, “I’m going to send you a couple of articles that I wrote for The
Village Voice back then complaining about the fact that the Kennedys were doing nothing
for civil rights. I think the play does (maybe not enough), but does some justice to the
fact that they had to be dragged into it, dragged into it. First, they were going after votes.
They were doing as little as they had to do in order to….

**Jones:** What you’ve just described is an historical fact. That’s right. That’s exactly
what had to be done. With respect to Robert Kennedy, to the extent we’re keeping on the
theme “journey to justice,” yes, there was a transformation in Robert Kennedy from a
ruthless, cold, calculating, take-no-prisoners person protecting his brother, and so forth,
to a person of compassion with concern for the poor and racial justice. That was some
journey – a journey from pain. This will get us a little off. He was feeling very
aggrieved by his brother’s death, assassination – not just the fact of him being
assassinated but the feeling of whether or not he had had some responsibility for that,
because Robert Kennedy was the center of the effort of the CIA to assassinate Castro.
There were several attempts, and there was this question out there as to whether or not
the assassination of his brother was in retaliation for that, so he had that concern.

**Gonnerman:** If we go back to this imprisonment in 1960, it was significant because
after Jack Kennedy calls and expresses his sympathy for Coretta’s difficulty at this time,
Daddy King comes out in support of Kennedy. If you remember, Kennedy won by
120,000 votes. So suddenly Daddy King gives him the election through the National
Baptist Convention.

**Jones:** I just want to say, people say 120,000 votes from Daley’s Chicago, so I just say
that. [Laughter]

**Daniels:** Can you tell me a little bit about Daddy King, because he’s also in our play.

**Jones:** I did not know Daddy King well. I knew him, obviously, but with respect to the
incident you’re talking about, he had been opposed to Jack Kennedy being president for
two reasons. One, he was Catholic. Two, Daddy King was a Rockefeller Republican.
He was a Republican. We were concerned when Dr. King was arrested. He was arrested
and then he was sentenced to a local jail in Atlanta, but then they transferred him to some
state penitentiary. When that occurred, the first thing we thought of was that they were
going to kill him in jail. It was just going to happen.
Gonnerman: King himself said he wasn’t sure that he wasn’t going to be lynched on the way to the state prison in Reidsville.

Jones: Well, yes, he was concerned, to say the least. But we were concerned. We just said we had to move very quickly. I think the self-interest of the attorney general, and in this point I’m not going to say that the attorney general and Jack Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, did not have a concern. I’m going to assume they had some legitimate concern for Dr. King’s safety – that it wasn’t totally a political act. But the consequence of it was that it returned enormous political benefit.

Gonnerman: The play traces this journey of transformation, and I think I’d like to spend some time, as this is part of our “Art + Invention” conversation series where we talk about creative process, finding out what has happened to you actors as you’ve entered into these roles and had to do the research that brings you to the stage. Bobby?

Henry Clarke: He’s called RFK. I actually kept crossing out RFK on my script and put “JFK: Journey to Justice.”

Jones: And I was like MLK, MLK.

Casnoff: There are also scripts that say Peter Edelman, Peter Edelman.

Clarke: You know, it’s been a great privilege and really sort of incredibly fast. I wish we had had this discussion a month ago.

Gonnerman: How did this come together?

Daniels: It’s been a really, really quick process. We started rehearsal on January 4 and we had about two and a half weeks in Los Angeles working on a script that goes about 130, 140 different scenes. It’s a great arc and story. Director John Rubinstein was fantastic in getting us to just put it on its feet and see what story we needed to tell and, at the same time, Henry, who is in every scene in the play, has the enormous challenge of capturing who this man was and still telling this great arc. The script would say things like, “You’re in the attorney general’s office.” And then it would say “The same, months later.” And we would say, “The same, months later.” What? And you realized that things had just transpired and time had just taken place – to just really drop into this moment. Oh, right: here are the Watts riots. Oh, right: here is….

Clarke: And, oh, the Cuban missile crisis just happened.

Daniels: Exactly. It happens here. How do you respond to that?

Clarke: I was cast a couple of days before Thanksgiving, and being a good dorky intellectual, immediately went into research mode. And having grown up in the Boston area, the Kennedys are sort of larger than life and I realized that most of what I knew about them was sort of Boston Dunkin’ Donuts hooey, which is a great place to start.
researching. Let’s test this thesis and eliminate it in half an hour. Wow. But I called the L.A. Theater Works company and said, “I need whatever the writers have.” And in early December, they gave me the packet that our two writers had been working on, and I plowed through that, which was wonderful. But because this play covers such a brilliant story, I felt it was my job to understand Robert as well as I could and then also to interpret this enormous piece of drama that I had been handed. In actor speak, he really is a leading man, and figuring out how his personal and historic journey meshes with the dramatic journey of the evening is my job. The history is what it is, and the speeches are what they are, and they’re great. And it is a great pleasure and a tremendous challenge as an actor to be given these words and these stories of these events. So I certainly felt the need to be grounded in history and to understand the man as best as I could. But I also feel pretty strongly that my “Henry job” is to take the audience on a great ride, not in a sort of Universal Studios kind of way. It’s a more grounded ride than that.

**Gonnerman:** It’s interesting. I’ve read through the play, and the history is very fine-grained in the way it comes across. As you say, there aren’t time and date references, for example. Things just happen: boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. At the same time, there is, as you say, this wonderful arc of a story of social and personal transformation going on. What is that story?

**Clarke:** The story for me is in those little details. A friend of mine said, “Wow, Bobby really sort of snuck in the back door of civil rights.” And I suppose that’s true. I sort of think of it as the banging screen door on the side of the porch. But for me, it’s the little moments of realization. When they were trying to figure out how the integration of the University of Alabama was going to go down, they were literally sitting in the Oval Office wondering if it would be better to push Patterson out of the way or have people pick him up and move him. There’s a great moment on tape where Bobby looks up at Jack in the Oval Office and says, “What if we had somebody on the side door and we just opened that and they went in the door he wasn’t standing at?” So for me, the challenge was to take this piece from big, history-book greatness into those little moments. What did it mean to be sitting in that room when he got yelled at? What did it mean to have to make these little decisions and then to track how those decisions changed? And the decision to send Nick Katzenbach to Alabama instead of arm tackle the governor happened in a meeting with the president. It’s huge. It’s hard to imagine those little minute details. But then the decision to go to Mississippi and bring cameras with them and investigate the dark corners of American poverty springs from a different place.

So my job is to find the moments that shift the man. I think it was Evan Thomas who described Bobby as a romantic trapped in a pragmatist’s body. He describes Jack exactly the other way around: a pragmatist disguised as a romantic, which I think is great. For me, it’s a process of extruding this character so that that really passionate, borderline activist politician can come out in the end, and it’s in those little minute details: the little moments with Dr. King, the little moments of realization that he’s been betrayed by people he thought he could trust, the moment where somebody says, “It’s a moral issue, and you’re missing it.” He was a terrier, and he was necessarily strong-headed, as a lot of
very smart people are. And I love the process every night of watching all the little chips fall out of that until he can appear.

Gonnerman: I want to get back to some of the points you’ve just raised, but by way of contrast, King is very steady in this play.

Daniels: He is. We spoke earlier a little bit about one of our directors coming in and saying, “The danger of this play is becoming talking heads and presenting a history book as opposed to who these men were – real men – and not playing iconic figures. When I was preparing for the role, I needed to see any pieces of footage of Dr. King that I could possibly find. And I wanted to watch them and I wanted to read his writings, and I learned so much that I had taken for granted because I was just a young child. It was like, Dr. Martin Luther King: everyone knows the “I Have a Dream” speech, we all know what he did, but I had no idea what he had done. You saw a man with this incredible father who inspired him to use the ministry of Christ to get people equality. It didn’t matter what it was – what they needed – but he wanted everyone to be on the same page. To me, that’s an amazingly inspiring man and I just wanted to find out what inside of me I could bring to honor him.

Gonnerman (to Daniels): You’re in your early thirties.

Daniels: Thirty-three.

Gonnerman: And this was a revelation.

Daniels: Yes, it was an absolute revelation for me. Again, he’s very steady, and I’m trying to find out…. I saw one of his first interviews in 1957. He was on a show called The Open Mind. They were talking about what it meant to be “the new Negro.” I was watching him speak and he was unbelievably articulate, unbelievably …. What’s the word I’m looking for? Because I’m not those things. [Laughter]

Clarke: You talked about that once and said you were struck by how thoughtful and slow and sort of methodical, almost, he was.

Daniels: And then you contrast that to his later interviews. Mike Douglas interviewed him on the Mike Douglas Show, and he was still completely articulate and wonderful, but so relaxed and just in his element: This is who I am. And I thought, Wow, I would love to see the journey of how that man from 1957 became that man in 1967. I want to see that journey, and that’s what I’m trying to bring to you in the play.

Gonnerman: Philip, you were in your teens.

Casnoff: Yes, I’m a little older than these fellows here. I knew what the civil rights movement was. I lived through it. My uncle was involved in it, and it played out in my house because my mother was very liberal and my father was very sort of reactionary. I understood what it was like. I was a student when Vietnam was going on and I avoided
the…. I struck. I went to Wesleyan University and there were strikes, and I was very involved in the sixties. So that part I understood. Just to answer your question simply, the research that I did involved going on YouTube and listening to John. I didn’t really want to do an imitation but I wanted to get his rhythm; I wanted to get a sense of it. You end up sort of moving toward an imitation of him, but I just wanted to get that Boston flavor. There’s so much on the Internet now; you can listen to so many speeches, so many press conferences. But not just in his speeches. There are a couple of places where I wanted to get a sense of what he was like in private when he was just talking. So that was one part of the research.

The other part of the research was…. I had already read Taylor Branch’s book on King, which is extraordinary. The other part of the research for me was reading a book by Nigel Hamilton called Reckless Youth. I didn’t really want to read about Kennedy as the president. As an actor: “Geez, I’m the president. How am I the president?” I think probably they have their own issues with that, too. I can imagine people who become president saying, “Geez, I’m the president.” But Reckless Youth follows Jack from the time he was a little boy: his relationship with his brothers, his relationship with his father. And I felt that knowing what he was like growing up would inform because he’s a supporting character in this play. You get flashes. You get snippets. It’s not really about Jack, but Jack provides an important part of the story. So I found it very helpful to get his sense of humor, to get his… when he was in the war. There are so many letters in the book talking about his… and there are so many letters that he wrote. It’s been extraordinarily helpful. I’m about 600 pages into the 800-page book.

Clarke: That’s interesting, because I found for my own personal approach as an actor that the boyhood stuff was also in many ways the most informative and helpful.

Casnoff: What made them who they were …

Clarke: And where are we jumping off? As I said, it’s a great pleasure to pick up Robert Kennedy’s life in 1959, but it’s also a great burden. At some point, you just can’t worry about it. And I found it incredibly helpful to have a sense of where he was coming from, and I felt in that knowledge somehow more liberated to explore where I was going in the play from ’59 to ’68, knowing that I had a reasonably good grounding and some sort of personal understanding of who he was at the beginning.

Casnoff: Right, although I find that in the play, I find that I have learned (we’ve only performed it three or four times) that I’m finding out what the relationship is between the brothers through the play.

Clarke: I have punch lines in this.

Casnoff: You have punch lines, but it’s interesting because I think Bobby’s punch lines come from his seriousness – how seriously he takes himself. That’s funny.
Daniels: Yes, to watch someone be like a little angry bulldog and just really be upset is pretty funny.

Gonnerman: I want to go back to this point Henry was making earlier about just the very particular moments and the point that Clarence made about combat. One way of looking at the civil rights struggle is as a series of civil wars in America from 1955 to 1968. And like any war or combat situation, there has to be a lot of strategy, and there’s a lot of chaos. When you’re in the middle of it, you really don’t know what’s happening. One of the nice things about this docudrama genre is that you get to relive an historical moment. Retrospectively you get to see how it all emerged. Clarence, you were there in the midst of it. Could you be right there and have a sense of what was being accomplished at the time?

Jones: Well, I didn’t have a sense as to what was fully being accomplished. I had a sense of what was partially being accomplished, but I was too close to it on a 24/7 basis. Birmingham. I remember a meeting in Harry Belafonte’s apartment in January of 1963 in which Martin King had convened all of his close advisers and political people from the North and the South. Actually, it was convened in a somewhat confidential way; a lot of people in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference around Dr. King didn’t know that the meeting was taking place. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the question of going into Birmingham, initiating a major campaign to confront segregation in probably its strongest citadel in the South. Because when you’re talking about Birmingham, you’re talking about Bessemer Steel, you’re talking about coal, you’re talking about an industrial community. So I remember sitting in the planning meeting, and I remember Reverend Shuttlesworth saying, “You know, with all due respect to our friends in the North, Clarence, you know how much we respect you, and so forth, but you don’t understand Birmingham. Birmingham is not like any other place you’ve ever been.” He said, “Really, it should be called ‘Bombingham’ because they have so many unsolved bombings.” And I subsequently learned, of course, that they have quarries there. Dynamite was part of the work that was done on a day-to-day basis in Birmingham, so you had a city in which people were very skilled in the use of dynamite because they did it every day as part of their workday responsibilities. So you had this major confrontation in Birmingham where they were seeking to segregate the department stores and places of public accommodation, and of course you remember the police dogs and the horses, and so forth, and the fire hoses.

When you say, Do we have a sense of what we had accomplished, one of the things that I remember … I was part of the negotiations. There were the demonstrations and then there was a fellow who was city attorney, Erskine Smith, and it was part of my job, along with a fellow by the name of Charles Morgan, who died a year or so ago, to negotiate. There were the demonstrations and then there were the behind-the-scenes negotiations with the city. I remember coming down from New York for one more of our negotiation meetings and walking into this meeting on the top of one of the bank buildings in Birmingham with all of the power elite. This was a meeting with all of the television people, the newspaper owners, the department store owners – all the business powers. I remember walking into a meeting and someone had a copy of the New York Times and
some other papers, and on all the front pages were all these pictures of police dogs. They threw the paper down on the conference table and they said, “No longer in our name. Not in our name, Mr. Jones. Not in our name. This has got to stop. Not in our name.” So it became very clear that they wanted a negotiated settlement because their position was that what the world was seeing on the television screen and in the newspapers was really not Birmingham – was really not who they were. They were different; that’s not who they were. They said to me, “We’re not quite sure we understand what Dr. King wants.” In fact, I remember one person saying something like, “My grandfather was a segregationist, my father was a segregationist, I’m a segregationist, and I don’t understand all this. All I know is that, Mr. Jones, we have got to find a way of resolving this, and if it means that we have to change our ways, then so be it.” Now, these are staunch segregationists. But the power of…. I never will forget this thing: “Not in our name, Mr. Jones. Not in our name. That’s not who we are.”

Gonnerman: And the role of the media exposure.

Jones: Oh, yeah. The power of the media exposure. So did we have a sense of what we accomplished? I had a sense. There were a couple of extraordinarily dynamic moments in Birmingham. For example, Dr. King was jailed, and when he was jailed, I was his lawyer so I was one of the only persons who could go in to see him. So when I first visit, I go in to see him, and I want to talk with him about a real serious problem – about the fact that we don’t have the money and I’ve got to raise bail money because we had a number of children who were in jail and we had to figure out how to raise this bail money. While he was concerned about it, I couldn’t get him to pay attention to me. He was so agitated by a full-page ad that had been taken out in the local newspaper signed by eight or ten white clergymen in which they called him an outside agitator – that if it wasn’t for him, Birmingham would be OK, we’re making progress. So he was sitting and writing on any piece of blank paper he had down there: on toilet paper, on the edge of old newspapers. He said, “When you come back to see me, bring me some paper, and take this out the door.” So I would take all these scraps of paper he’d written on and put them inside my jacket. The next time I came to see him, the following morning, I brought him in sheets of yellow paper. Eventually, this was the letter from the Birmingham jail that he was writing. Then I took the sheets out, and I never paid attention to them because I had too many other things I was dealing with until maybe four or five days later. I read it and I said, “Oh, my God. This is extraordinary.” I consider the letter from the Birmingham jail to be perhaps the most profound political, religious, philosophical writing that Martin King wrote during his lifetime. If you go and read that letter without the use of any books of reference, he’s quoting scripture, he’s quoting philosophers. It’s an extraordinarily powerful political polemic. The letter from the Birmingham jail is like the Birmingham manifesto. It’s a human rights manifesto. It’s so powerful – much more powerful in its content than the “I Have a Dream” speech. The “I Have a Dream” speech is eloquent and it’s moving, but as for the power of its contents….

Casnoff: Who leaked it to the press?
Jones: We wanted to get the letter to the press.

Gonnerman: It was a response to a public ad.

Jones: Yes, it was a response to the ad. So did we have a sense of accomplishment? Yes, I knew then we had a sense of accomplishment. Then, of course, when we negotiated a settlement and Dr. King was sitting in the courtyard of the A. G. Gaston Motel to announce the end of demonstrations, yes, we felt we had achieved a significant victory. At that point, I had a sense that, “Wow, we did it; I can’t believe we actually did it.”

Gonnerman: And that really did bring the Kennedys in in another way.

Jones: Oh, yeah.

Clarke: Can I ask a follow-up? Was there a point at which you felt the Kennedys were coming around? How did you at the time view their involvement? Did you see it changing?

Jones: Yes. Their involvement can be best accurately described as we would beseech and ask and we would sometimes get a kind of diffident, flat response. And we felt that the only thing they clearly understood was if we presented to them an extraordinarily forceful dilemma – a challenge; that our job was to raise the level of consciousness and understanding of the Kennedy brothers and, in the process, hopefully to put some steel in their spine to exercise the power. Years later, I’ve often thought…. I came to know Nelson Rockefeller in connection with the Attica prison riots in New York, and something that Nelson Rockefeller said to me during that time has lasted with me for a lifetime. He said, in effect, that the thing that he least respected in a political leader was someone who was either too stupid or too afraid to exercise power. If you have political power, you have to use it. Part of our job was to get the Justice Department to understand that they had a responsibility to use the power which they had to protect us. They were always balancing the exercise of that power in terms of protecting their support in Congress, particularly with the Southerners.

Clarke: So then when the civil rights bill comes on the table, what was your view on that? Did you see it as a great step forward or as a piece of political pragmatism?

Jones: Both.

Clarke: Both. It’s nice when you can do both.

Daniels: It’s so interesting reading about this time period and living through it and getting a visceral understanding of what happened and then seeing the parallels in today’s world now with the health care bill or with gays’ rights to marriage – all of these things still happening today and our political leaders not seeming to have the will to take advantage of a majority or exercise the power you have.
**Jones:** That’s a very good point. But I would say the most powerful analogy that pulls at me every day is that…. I just came back from New York, where PBS was doing a taping of Martin King’s speech at the Riverside Church, “Beyond Vietnam.” In that speech, which was the first public speech (while Dr. King had said something earlier at a Chicago rally), this was the first careful speech opposing the war – Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam. In that speech, he makes the point that as long as the Vietnam War was continuing, it was like a giant suction cup draining all of the resources of men and materiel from enabling the Johnson administration to deal with domestic issues. I read very carefully and I listened very carefully to President Obama’s speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, and I listened to him make a distinction between what he felt his role was as Commander in Chief and talking about a just and an unjust war, and I reacted to him saying that Martin King would not understand. In effect, he was saying that Dr. King would … what he has faced today is beyond what Martin King would comprehend. He didn’t say those words, but that was the effect. I took him to task in a *Huffington Post* article. I challenged him on that. But I am convinced that there is an uncanny parallel with what is happening again. The only question is that we’re dealing years later with extraordinary technology. As I said in my interview, which you’ll see if they don’t edit it out, I said that there are not enough drones, there are not enough soldiers, there are not enough special ops to be able to defeat Al Qaeda as a military. You’re dealing with something else. You’re dealing with an ideology. You’ve got to challenge the ideological basis of this ideology that’s fueling the engine of hatred against America. There’s only so much money that this government can generate; there’s only so much money. We’ll see what happens in the State of the Union speech, but there is *only so much money*. Now, the cost of the Iraq war was off the books and Obama put it on the books. But it’s very difficult – the challenge that we face in this generation with this president is putting aside the (well, you can’t put side the moral question) … but if you wanted to just not look at it on a political-moral issue – just the pragmatic question: How can you provide jobs, health care, and fund two wars? There’s not the money to do it.

**Gonnerman:** The first act of the play ends with the assassination of JFK. The play itself ends with the victory speech at the Ambassador Hotel. It’s very open-ended at the end, leading right to this conversation right here.

**Jones:** Before you get there, I wanted to say that part of that meeting that we had in his father’s apartment – that was an important journey to justice. I think Birmingham was an important journey to justice. Clearly, clearly, when the president saw people getting beaten for sitting down at lunch counters and someone among his advisers…. I don’t know how it came about, but that was the first time when he said, “It’s a moral question.” The first time the president of the United States said, “It’s as simple as…."

**Clarke:** “This is a moral issue as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution.”

**Jones:** Right. That’s exactly what he said. That was a profound event. Now, the president wouldn’t have said that – Ted Sorensen would not have written those words for
him – without Robert Kennedy’s approval. So that was an important journey. I think one of the most profound points of change in Robert Kennedy on the journey – and I don’t know whether you cover it or not – is April 4, 1968, in Indiana, when he is standing on a flatbed truck.

Daniels: Beautifully done in this play.

Jones: Earl Graves, the publisher who founded Black Enterprise, was a Treasury agent long before he founded Black Enterprise. And Earl Graves was traveling with Robert Kennedy and he tells the story…. Robert Kennedy got the news of Dr. King’s assassination before anybody in the audience he was speaking to knew anything about it. So he had to announce to this predominantly all-black audience that he was campaigning for in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Clarke: 17th and Broadway

Jones: Yeah, 17th and Broadway. And it was a very poignant, powerful speech – one of the most powerful speeches. And when he says, “I know what it is to lose someone,” that had to be an extraordinary, powerful change. Earl Graves said he watched the attorney general give the speech, he gets off the platform and he sits on a chair and he puts his head down in his arms and he sobs. He says, “My God, my God, what is my country coming to?” That may have been the most powerful transformative event.

Gonnerman: And then the second act begins with that grief. It seems (do you agree with this?) that that grief opened him up to the suffering of others.

Clarke: Yes, the second act begins with Bobby grieving the loss of his brother, the president. Actually, the Indianapolis stuff is mere pages from the end. I do think, and this comes back to why the boyhood stuff is so interesting – I do think, particularly having experienced the loss of his brother Joe and rising a major step in the Kennedy family from “Bobby, go out back” to “Bobby, go run this campaign” I think that it’s certainly dramatically and also historically taking that next step up, deciding that he wanted to get the civil rights bill passed, and then (you know better than I) basically being on the outs with Lyndon Johnson and deciding to run for Senate. I think that being now the standard bearer of these great expectations and these great ideas fueled by a real tenacious desire to carry on and complete his brother’s work definitely opened him up, yes. And I also think that it allowed him, maybe for the first time ever, to be an operative for himself. There’s a level of protection when you’re the guy who gets something done for the main guy. There’s a level of operation and there’s a level of guardedness that exists when you’re getting something done for somebody else, and I think that being at the head – leading the charge himself – led to a very different kind of reflection and a very different kind of process.

The scenes in the play that are some of my very favorite to act are the scenes in Bobby’s office with his advisers because they’re a bunch of very smart, strong-headed guys trying to come up with a singular message to take to somebody else that, ultimately, somebody
else is going to act on most of the time. When he is no longer the attorney general and he is no longer recommending things to his brother, he has to act on those things that come out of the room. I think there’s a different emotional, moral thread that pulls on you when you have to do it.

Gonnerman: And he becomes courageous.

Clarke: And he becomes very courageous, and I think in some ways more courageous for having to do it. He liked heading the charge. He was the only Kennedy brother under six feet and the only one to get a varsity letter in football at Harvard. He just ran at the biggest guy and got knocked down and got up and ran at the biggest guy again. He liked the fight. So I think that having to fight that fight himself brought out the best in him. Not too many people do better when they’re angry, but I think he might have.

Daniels: There’s a line in the play, “God, you’re beautiful when you’re mad.”

Casnoff: I just want to make one comment about that. The only reason that Jack didn’t get a letter for the varsity team is because when he was on the freshman team, his chauffeur came at the end of a practice, and as a joke tackled him on the field, and it was the beginning of his back problems. They didn’t start with the women. It started with that tackle. And he had a whole series of sicknesses and blood things that were going on, but Nigel, in the book Reckless Youth, references that particular tackle. That ended it; he wasn’t going to be on the varsity team after that.

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Gonnerman: Let’s open up to audience questions and comments at this point.

Question from the Audience: All of these three people I’m sure suspected that they might be killed. They had very great ideas. How did succession planning influence their activities? How did they think about what would follow their lives?

Daniels: I don’t actually know. I know that King in many instances referred to, even in his last speech in Memphis: “We’re going to get there but I may not be there.” He refers to his death all the time. I don’t know what, if any, succession plan there was.

Jones: Dr. King was fearless, but he was afraid. He lived every day of the period that I was close to him from February 1960 until April 4, 1968, with the knowledge that every day could be his last day. So he dealt with it often in humor, and he sometimes dealt with it with sheer cold, clinical, dispassionate reality, starting with the fact that “If somebody wants to kill you, Clarence, if somebody wants to kill you, there is no way you can be protected. They will eventually get to you.” I don’t mean an average person, but I mean a person like that. So he had that belief. Then part of his fearlessness arose from…. This discussion (and I would like to see the play), but this discussion talks and relates to Martin King as a civil rights leader, but that obscures the fact that he was a minister of the gospel. He was a Christian minister. The “Dr.” comes from having a Ph.D. in
theology. And he was deeply … religion was deeply part of his soul, so to put it as accurately as I can put it, he didn’t fear anything on earth because he had such a deep belief in God that, in his own words, his Lord Jesus Christ would protect him, and that was all the protection he needed. That was exactly the way he felt.

Daniels: I remember seeing footage of him walking from place to place in large groups. There would be backfiring cars or gunshots, and then the flinch. I think it was actually footage of you telling the story about him talking about how they were going to try to shoot him, but they were going to get to you, but “I’m going to preach you the best funeral.”

Jones: That’s right. He said, “But I’ll preach a good funeral for you. I’ll let ‘em know.” And I said, “That’s fantastic.” [Laughter]

Gonnerman: I’ll preach the best sermon.

Jones: He used to say that to all of us. That’s the way he dealt with it: in humor. He said, “Oh, I promise to preach the best funeral.”

Question from the Audience: This is amazing to see the three actors and then a person who was really there. Will the three of you do anything different tomorrow night as a result of what’s happened tonight?

Daniels: Absolutely. [Laughter]

Question from the Audience (continued): Can you give me an example of something you’re rethinking?

Daniels: We were actually having a discussion about our process as actors on the way over here in the car. I couldn’t give you a concrete example of what’s going to be different other than an additional awareness of what the stakes really were in this moment and what the relationship between the two of them was. Just hearing you tell the story about the meeting, I can’t imagine the two of you being able to do that scene the same way. There’s no way.

Clarke: No, I’m not sure how it will be different, but it will be different tomorrow night because a lot of reality has seeped in, and not just from the play. It’s sort of extraordinary hearing about this meeting from you.

Jones: Did I make the point that while Jerome Smith was talking he began to sob? He was crying; he was sobbing as he was talking to the attorney general. The attorney general was flushed and red when Jerome attacked him. He had never been talked to that way. As they said, “It happened in Dad’s apartment.” It was really brutal.

Clarke: It’s interesting. The scene dealing with that meeting is all retrospective. I come in and Jack starts out the scene by saying, “In Dad’s apartment?” “Yes, they weren’t
even civil.” As I said earlier, I’m dealing with the history and I’m dealing with the necessary dramatic arc of the evening, and I’m much better qualified to deal with the dramatic arc of the evening. It comes at a moment when it would be fun as an actor to be fired up and mad about it, and it’s not the right choice. The right choice in the dramatic arc, if it was a total piece of fiction and I knew nothing about this … the right choice in the dramatic arc is to be bowled over and instantly changed – like woken-up-from-a-dream changed. And my sense of the historical event is that he was not suddenly struck by lightning and set along the path to righteousness. But the comments, the gestalt of this meeting, seeped into the system. I think we all hopefully have moments throughout our lives when we realize that we’ve been mostly wrong and a little bit right about something. And those are the most fun because you really have to look yourself in the mirror and see where your kernel of right sits in relationship to all your wrong. It’s more fun than being totally wrong because that’s fairly straightforward: “Well, I was totally wrong!” “I was mostly wrong, but I have to hold on to this” requires a reorientation of yourself. I struggle in that scene because it is flatly sort of funny. I struggle in that scene to figure out how that reorientation is happening to Bobby.

Casnoff: And I would say that that struggle is what the scene is about.

Clarke: So my longwinded answer to your question is that I will try tomorrow (and a great gift – we have two shows tomorrow) … I’m going to try to not do anything in that scene and see what happens. Instead of going in with an idea about where I can move the drama in that scene, I’m going to go in tomorrow and see where the drama moves, which I probably should do every day, anyway [Laughter], but it will be easier and much more fun tomorrow.

Question from the Audience: I remember seeing press reports several years ago about Dr. King’s family challenging the official story of his assassination. I wonder where that story has gone.

Jones: Dexter King and, I believe, Martin III went to have a visit with James Earl Ray while James Earl Ray was still alive and, as a result of that meeting, had come to the conclusion that James Earl Ray was not the person who had killed their father. That is not a conclusion that I share with the family. In fact, one of the reasons (not the only reason), but one of the reasons why I delayed writing a book called What Would Martin Say? in which I deal with the assassination was out of respect for Mrs. King, Coretta Scott King. When she passed, I felt that I was free in saying some things which she knew that I felt privately but I was saying publicly. There is no question in my mind that James Earl Ray pulled the trigger. That’s not to say that he is the person responsible totally for killing Martin King. There’s a difference. He pulled the trigger. My position is that Dr. King’s assassination was a result of cold, premeditated, calculated, conspiratorial murder involving several persons, primarily out of the oil industry in Texas. James Earl Ray was just a hired trigger man. That’s all.

Gonnerman: Well, we look forward very much to the performance tomorrow evening.
Daniels: It will eventually air on NPR on Saturday nights.

Casnoff: We’re going to record it at the Skirball in Los Angeles on March 17-21.

Clarke: It will be aired on the show called *The Play is the Thing*.

Daniels: We’re also going to be across the country. We’re going to be in Maryland at the end of the week. We’re going to be in Florida and Utah. If you go to LATW.org, there is a schedule listed of which cities we’ll be in.

Gonnerman: There are still some tickets for tomorrow evening, if you don’t have them already. May I suggest something as you leave tonight? We’re in Memorial Hall, which houses Memorial Auditorium, where Dr. King gave two speeches, one in April of 1964 and another on April 14, 1967, ten days after the “Beyond Vietnam” speech: a very important speech about poverty called “The Other America.” There is a plaque in the front of this building commemorating that. I suggest that on your way out you stop and take a look at that. You can also go to the Aurora Forum Web site archive, www.auroraforum.stanford.edu, and see that in 2007 we produced a program on “The Other America” speech, which contains footage of the entire speech. I recommend that to you as well, along with our January 2008 interview with Clarence B. Jones.

We’re very grateful tonight to Philip Casnoff, Kevin Daniels, Henry Clarke, and Clarence B. Jones for this conversation on *RFK: The Journey to Justice*. Thank you very much. [Applause]

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Philip Casnoff is a Golden Globe Award-nominated, Theater World Award winning American actor, known for his roles in TV series and on Broadway. He is best known for his critically acclaimed performance of the lead role of John Blackthorne in the 1990 Broadway production of *Shogun: The Musical*. He also starred in the L.A. Theatre Works production of *An Immaculate Misconception: Sex in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by Stanford’s own professor Carl Djerassi.

Henry Clarke’s stage credits include multiple productions at Shakespeare & Co., *No Man's Land* at A.R.T., *Hamlet* at Icarus NYC, *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* at SpeakEasy Stage, *The Heidi Chronicles* at New Century Theater, *House of Gold* at PlayPenn and *Bach at Leipzig* for Odyssey Theatre. On television, Henry has appeared in "Chuck" and "Brush Up Your Shakespeare; an Evening at Pops," and has been in several feature films, including *Senses of Place* and *Undertakings* (in production). He is a Harvard College graduate, holds an MFA in playwriting from Smith College, and an MFA in acting from the American Repertory Theater Institute at Harvard.

Kevin Daniels Kevin was last heard at L.A. Theatre Works in the recording of *Betrayed* and has also performed in *Becket*, *On the Waterfront* and *The Lion in Winter*. Other favorite projects of his include *Flag Day* at Ojai Playwrights Conference and *Twelfth Night* at Lincoln Center. His film and television credits include His film and television credits include *Law and Order*, *Frasier*, *Smallville*, and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Kevin is a graduate of The Juilliard Drama Division.
Clarence B. Jones is the former personal counsel, advisor, draft speech writer and close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from the time he was recruited into the Movement by Dr. King in 1960. A graduate of Columbia University and the Boston University School of Law, he is a Scholar in Residence at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University and author of What Would Martin Say? He was our guest at the Aurora Forum for a one-on-one interview two years ago this month.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.