



Synopsis

The scene is set by a group of British actors – TY/CJ/Em and Dayz – and a prologue of performance poetry. One of the actors, CJ, makes a nonchalant late arrival – the group admonish him and then carry on. As an ensemble, they establish an historical context for the action of the play, give a brief history of racial segregation and introduce the concept of the Freedom Riders: a group of white and black civil rights activists travelling through the Southern States to challenge the non-enforcement of legislation regarding the segregation of buses, interstate bus facilities and terminals. The ensemble then takes on the roles of the characters within the story.

Hank Thomas is a student on the brink of graduating. He is pleading with his parents for their blessing and permission to join the Freedom Rides. They refuse. Against their advice and wishes, his sister drives him to the bus and he joins the other riders. On the first “leg” of the rides, there are 13 riders in total. He meets Thora, an elderly Freedom Rider who introduces him to the rest of the group.

Another rider – Jim Peck – introduces himself and clarifies the principle of peaceful resistance. He talks about the need for the riders to train themselves up in order to be able to handle the abuse they will face, without resorting to violent retaliation. CJ, as an actor within the play, claims to have forgotten what comes next and the rest of the actors launch into a tirade of verbal violence against him. CJ is suitably shaken, but the point is made clear – whatever physical or verbal cruelty is inflicted upon them – they cannot meet violence with violence. Passive resistance is their defence and attack.

Back in the story, Jim talks the riders through the plan of action. Informing them that they will be travelling on two scheduled interstate buses – a Greyhound bus and a Trailways bus - and that on each bus, at least one black rider will sit in a seat normally reserved for white people. The riders set out on their journey, which starts out reasonably peacefully.

As the Freedom riders drive into Anniston, however, a mob of angry white people is waiting for them. The action is witnessed through the eyes of a little white girl. The mob begins to verbally abuse the Freedom riders and then they start attacking the bus. The bus eases

away, but when it starts to swerve - the riders realise the tyres have been slashed. The windows of the bus are crow-barred open and a torch is thrown inside. The bus is filled with smoke and screams until the door is finally forced upon. Thrown onto the street, the mob intensifies their attack. The little girl, defying the rest of her family, comes forward and approaches one of the Riders - washing her face and giving her water.

Meanwhile, a Trailways bus with another cohort of Riders makes its way to Birmingham Alabama. A member of the KKK makes a call to Bull Connor – a police chief in Birmingham. It is quickly evident that Bull Connor shares the KKK's contempt for the Freedom Riders and the threat they present to the Southern "way of life". The Klan member informs Connor that the bus is about to go through Birmingham and Bull grants him fifteen minutes to "burn, maim and bomb those negros" without any arrests being made.

In Birmingham, countless injuries are sustained and the driver abandons the bus. The riders reluctantly resign themselves to ending the rides. Until, that is, a phone call comes in from Diane Nash – a young student at Fiske University in Nashville. Nash informs them that there is another wave of Freedom Riders on their way. Galvanised by Nash, eleven students head down to Birmingham to ensure that violence doesn't win out.

As the students arrive in Birmingham - and before anything can happen - they are all arrested. Bull Connor drives the cohort of students through the "cave dark night" and kicks them out of the car on the stateline between Alabama and Tennessee: the middle of Klan land. They manage to find refuge and make contact with Nash, who informs them that other riders are on their way. Back in Birmingham, Alabama it is "war on the ground", as more injuries are sustained. From there, the Riders travel onto Montgomery.

Meanwhile, in Washington, the US administration is more concerned with moon-landings and federal prestige than with the problem on their own doorstep: the violent maiming of US Citizens, fighting to protect constitutional rights. The Governor of Alabama, John Malcolm Patterson – who is also committed to preserving the Southern "way of life" - refuses to enter into a dialogue with the president. Nash receives a call from Bobby Kennedy, telling her that the Riders have to "cool down". She replies "if we cool down any more sir, we'll be in the freezer." She makes it clear that the students – nor any of the Riders – have no intention to stop the rides. The Freedom Riders continue onto Montgomery.

As storytellers, TY/CJ/Em and Dayz plot out a timeline of events leading to the moment of the Freedom Rides, charting the journey from the abolition of slavery, the murder of Emmett Till, the actions of Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks, the de-segregation of a High School in Little Rock by "nine black kids". After the Freedom Rides is the Children's Crusade in Alabama, Martin Luther Kings' Speech, the Selma Marches: "one bead on a necklace leads to another. Footprints on the road mean it's been walked before."

As a deterrent to aspiring riders, the existing Freedom Riders are all placed in Parchman Penitentiary. The tactic does not work. More riders join the ranks. The eyes of the world are on Jackson, Mississippi, and the number of freedom riders imprisoned stands at more than 300. Eventually, Robert Kennedy has no choice but to make sure the laws desegregating interstate travel are actively enforced – thanks to the Freedom Riders. The actors deliver a final piece about each person's role and responsibility to continue the fight for freedom and justice.