

# Selma Burke

## *Carving a Sculptor's Life*



by  
Caroline Russell-King and Maria Crooks

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**Reviews for Selma Burke**

“A triumph for everyone involved.

The playwrights have crafted a tribute to the Black American sculptor that is as much an ode to art itself, as it is to this inspired and inspiring woman.

That is sensuous as it is sensitive and as funny as it is poignant.

What Crooks and Russell-King make abundantly clear is that Burke was as vibrant and amazing as her art and deserves a production that seethes with passion, drama and humour.

Stafford Arima ensured a world class production to launch it. This is theatre that is as entertaining and enlightening as it is inventive.”

- *Louis B Hobson, The Calgary Herald.*

“Imaginative, exuberant world premiere of a new drama.

Delightfully theatrical. An inspiring, imaginative exploration of an extraordinary woman.”

- *Stephen Hunt CTV*

“*Selma Burke* is a theatrical revelatory story. The production doesn't just bring words to life, it brings Selma's work to life. It's hard not to fall in love.

A dynamic show, telling the story of a creative artist that we should all recognize. I'm glad she's finally getting her due.”

- *Jenna Shummoogum, Calgary theatre reviewer*

“Easily one of the best plays I have read in recent years. An important and beautiful piece about the life and work of the artist, Selma Burke. A challenging but no doubt gratifying undertaking for both the playwright and any company willing to produce it.”

- *Adjudicator, National Playwriting Competition*

## **Accolades for *Selma Burke***

### Betty Mitchell Nominations

OUTSTANDING LEAD PERFORMANCE IN A DRAMA, Norma Lewis  
OUTSTANDING PROJECTION OR VIDEO DESIGN, Brendan Briceland  
OUTSTANDING SET DESIGN, Hanne Loosen  
OUTSTANDING CHOREOGRAPHY OR FIGHT DIRECTION, Javier Vilalta  
OUTSTANDING DIRECTION, Delicia Turner Sonnenberg

### **WINNER**

**OUTSTANDING NEW PLAY - Caroline Russell-King and Maria Crooks**  
**OUTSTANDING SUPPORTING PERFORMANCE IN A DRAMA – Heather Pattengale**

### Calgary Theatre Critic's Awards Nominations

OUTSTANDING DRAMATIC OR COMEDIC PRODUCTION, *Selma Burke*, Theatre Calgary  
& Alberta Theatre Projects  
OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE IN A Dramatic Leading Role -Norma Lewis  
OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE IN A DRAMATIC SUPPORTING ROLE, Heather  
Pattengale  
OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN LIGHTING DESIGN, Tim Rodrigues  
OUTSTANDING SET DESIGN Hanne Loosen

### **WINNER**

**OUTSTANDING NEW PLAY SCRIPT Maria Crooks & Caroline Russell-King**  
**OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN DIRECTION, Delicia Turner Sonnenberg**

### Theatre BC National Playwriting Competition

### **WINNER**

**FIRST PRIZE *Selma Burke*, Maria Crooks and Caroline Russell-King**

### Sharon Pollock Playwriting Competition

### **FINALIST**

***Selma Burke*, Maria Crooks and Caroline Russell-King**

Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." – Dr. Martin Luther King

"Destruction is the work of an afternoon; creation is the work of a lifetime" - Kamahl

## Dedication

To Selma Burke, with love.

## Acknowledgements

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The Alberta Foundation for the Arts  
Calgary Arts Development Authority  
Spelman College Museum of Fine Art  
Theatre Calgary  
Alberta Theatre Projects

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*Selma Burke* premiered April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, with Theatre Calgary at The Martha Cohen Theatre.

Artistic Director	Stafford Arima
Director	Delicia Turner Sonnenberg
Assistant director	Lennette Randall
Actor 1	Norma Lewis
Actor 2	Chrisopher Clare
Actor 3	Heather Pattengale
Actor 4	Chrisopher Hunt
Stage Manger	Meredith Johnson

### Notes on the text

This is a flight of fancy, based on the incredible life and talent of Dr. Selma Hortense Burke. While many of the events in the play are based on true life, many liberties have been taken by its creators. This isn't a biography, it isn't a fantasy, it's a drama with comic relief and it isn't linear. This was written not to educate or to lecture but to entertain. Selma ages from age 20 – 90. She lived from 1900 - 1995 which is approximately 49,932,000 minutes – here, imagined, are 90 of them.

/ indicates overlap of dialogue

... ellipse a thought that goes from public to private

- cut off interruption

-***Italics bold*** indicate direct quote attributed to Dr. Burke and other historical figures

### Notes on the set

The set may be lavish or minimal.

With a minimal set

Divan on wheels that can serve as the hospital bed/coffin,

Large box, then becomes a desk/table/plinth (3 holes cut on one side so that heads may pop up)

Two easels

Desk and chair

Wheelchair

A brass rectangle frame, a silver circular frame

Drapes on rod and pipe can be wheeled in or dropped in, to confer and delineate space.

The representation of the art is more important than the set.

### Notes on the art

The pictures of the art in this script are here only to guide the director, actors, movement choreographer and designers, they do not confer copyright. The actors portray *all the art*. Actors' heads pop out of boxes to form busts, they could lie down on a skateboard to be pushed across the stage (as in the brown fish). They can be made bigger with shadows and light or smaller. Sometimes they step out of their surroundings as if being chiseled. Sometimes they are rigid and sometimes they are pliable. All but Lincoln is made, molded, carved, and sculpted by Selma.

Directors and movement specialists may come together to interweave more than one body to make one image. The statues are always alive in Selma's mind, and they may have responses to Selma in the scenes. Sometimes they talk to her, argue and sometimes they are a *comic counterpoint* to the seriousness of the scenes. They do not have agency.

**The running time** 90 minutes straight through – no intermission

## Setting

The play takes place in various locations. Things are very fluid and seamlessly meld together, there blackouts are to be avoided.

- Selma's apartment/studio in Harlem, New York
- Sarah Lawrence College Yonkers, New York
- St. Agnes Hospital Nursing School, Raleigh, North Carolina
- College lecture hall
- Atelier of Matisse, Paris
- The Oval Office, White House Washington, DC
- R. S. Lewis Funeral Home, Memphis, Tennessee
- A street corner in Harlem
- Inside Selma's mind - a brass rectangle frame and a silver circle frame
- The office of John Sinnock, the Federal Mint, Washington, DC
- The office of J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Washington Field Office, Washington, DC
- NYC rooftop
- Auction house
- Selma Burke School of Sculpture, New York
- Marshall Park, Charlotte, North Carolina

**Time** The time is fluid and spans from 1925 – 1980

## Characters

- Actor 1 – **Selma** Burke
- Actor 2 – **Claude** McKay, **Papa** Burke, **Chauffeur**, **Duke** Ellington, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther **King**, **Gallery Head** (Art pieces- Island Dancer, Facial sculpture, Warrior, **Gentleman**.)
- Actor 3 – **Patsy**, **Hannah**, **Mrs. Rivers**, **Professor**, First Lady **Eleanor** Roosevelt, **Annette**, White House & FBI **Secretary**, **Head of Expo** (Art pieces- **White Face**, Frau **Keller**, Woman and Child, snowwoman, Burke-Reclining Nude along with Matisse nude, Statue of **Liberty**, Standing Female Nude, **Turkey**, **Despair**, Island Dancer, Light and Shadow.)
- Actor 4 – **Teacher**, **Man**, **Dr. Dawkins**, Henri **Matisse**, Franklyn Delano **Roosevelt**, Abraham **Lincoln**, Dr. Winston **McLelland**, **Mortician**, J **Sinnock**, J Edgar **Hoover**, **Vendor**, **Dime**, Bas **Relief**, **Herman** Kobbe, **Auctioneer**, **State Fair Head** (Art pieces- white angel, brown fish, all the brief flashes of slides of 17 European artists, bas relief, dime, “Non Jamais” statue, plaster of Paris leg.)

*Scene 1      You don't make it easy*

Sfx bubbling noises

Spotlight up on steam wafting gently from the oversized pot.

Enter a care worker Patsy, lights up on the Selma's kitchen.

Patsy            (calling out) Morning Miss Selma, it's Patsy, day shift.

                  (scolding) Miss Selma!

Selma            (Off stage) I'm working in here child don't interrupt.

Patsy            Miss Selma, I thought you agreed to no more cookin'. It's dangerous for you to be lifitin' pots of soup at 80 years old! You could scald yourself badly. It's my job to look after you, that's what I am trying to do (under her breath) and you don't make it easy. (calling back out) We agreed your carers would cook your meals.

Selma            (O.S.) I'm not cooking.

Patsy            You are cooking!

Selma            (O.S.) I am rendering!

Patsy            What?

Selma            (O.S.) It's just some bones, you boil 'em so that you can pick off the meat, to keep the bones.

Patsy            That's called cooking!

Selma            (O.S.) That's called art.

Patsy            Where did you get this from?

                  (She looks inside the pot dubiously, freezes)

                  That. Is a human foot!

Selma            (O.S.) No it isn't.

Patsy            I can see the toenails.

                  (Crosses to the door and looks in)

                  And what the hell are you doin' up there on that ladder?

                  (Lights down)

*Scene 2      Defying Papa*

(The corridor outside of the entrance to the studio Sarah Lawrence College, Yonkers New York)

(Selma enters barefoot, wearing a hospital housecoat. Her father follows stopping her with his voice.)

Papa Selma. Hortense. Burke.

Selma Papa! What are you doing here?

Papa Your Mama tol' me what you're doin'...

Selma Papa, I want to be an artist.

Papa You are already an artist. See I have this little face you made of clay when you were a little girl. I keep it in my pocket always, it's my talisman.

Selma I want to go to art school. I want to learn and earn extra money. I'm going to work as an artist's model and-

Papa An artist model? You pose naked?!

Selma Yes but -

Papa "You should not uncover the nakedness of a woman... it is depravity" Leviticus 18:17. You mad child? Are you cavorting with Satan?

Selma It's like nursing. Have any nurses seen you naked?

Papa That's different.

Selma Just like you I'm taking off my clothes for a reason.

Papa No. I don't want you bringing the devil into this family. You walk through that door, and you will never see me again.

(Selma makes a hard choice, walks through the door and Papa shuffles off rejected.)

### *Scene 2a Art studio reduction*

A curtain is dropped in that separates the two areas in the studio. There is an easel and divan.

(Following her into the room is Hannah.)

Hannah I will be sketching you for the anatomy portion of my portfolio. Sarah Lawrence College models after the Oxford and Cambridge system of one-on-one student faculty tutorials. My art teacher is working in the adjacent studio and will be supervising intermittently, checking up on us. I know this is your first-time modeling and I just want to say I don't mind if you pull your robe up when he is in the room.



Selma I'm fine.

Hannah Does your husband mind you modelling in the nude?

Selma I'm a widow.

Hannah Oh, I'm sorry. I know that this can be good work for the disadvantaged or unemployed.

Selma I'm neither.

Hannah Oh! Where do you work?

Selma The hospital.

Hannah That's a lot of floors to mop, (cheerfully) I expect you have well defined muscle structures.

Selma I'm actually a sculptor but nursing pays the bills. It also gives me the opportunity to study the human form. (lightly, matter of fact) As a nurse I see people in all their **adversities**: the young, old, strong, weak, huddled in pain, limping, oozing pus from all their orifices.

(Hannah winces)

Bodies that are battered and bruised from whippings and knifings. Dead bodies, slashed, strangled, shot, lynched...

(Enjoying Hannah's discomfort) I have seen a foot severed by a hunter's trap, an arm snapped off by a streetcar, a leg chewed off by animals-

Hannah Could, could you... (I think I'm going to be sick.)

Selma (Smiles) But today, I present my very healthy body for *your* art. (She drops the robe) How would you like me to pose?

Hannah Oh, the divan. However, however you'd like, Selma.



Hans-Boehler portrait of Burke

(She adjusts her easel) Great. I'm going to need more light. (Calling out) Excuse me, may I adjust the curtain to get more daylight?

(The teacher pulls back the curtain to reveal Claude also posing nude in a chair. The two artists say nothing as they observe and apply paint to the canvass and charcoal to the paper. Selma slowly turns her head, looks over at the other model. Returns to her pose. Claude leans slowly in such a way as to surreptitiously look at Selma. The teacher coughs gently. Claude returns to his pose. Selma smiles. They both in unison slowly move their heads to see each other. They make eye contact.)

(Time passes. The session comes to an end. Hannah shows Selma her work. Selma indicates "it's okay". Hannah, not happy with her response, picks up the easel and leaves. Claude watches as Selma puts on her robe and with a little hip sway leaves the studio.)

Teacher      Okay McKay, that will do for today.

Claude        I would prefer to be paid in cash after each sitting.

Teacher      I'm afraid the college cuts the cheques weekly. (Shows him the canvas.) What do you think?

McKay        (Joking) Obviously it was a little cold in the room.

Teacher      I didn't feel a chill.

Claude        (With intent) Maybe we could have a redo in a less classical pose, (beat) let's try a different position.

Teacher      (Relenting to the seduction) Well, it's after class hours, and all the students are back in the dorm... Maybe I could pay, out of pocket for a private session...

(The teacher draws the curtain.)

### *Scene 3      Anticipation*

Selma's Apartment

(A projected sign in light "Mother and Child". An isolated light comes up on the "mother". The woman is facing upstage The mother has the cover cloth and with her arm makes under makes what could be a Klan hood. Selma takes the Klan hood and makes the sheet into a baby for the mother to hold.)

(Lights shift into Selma's apartment. Soft Jazz comes up under.)



Untitled, (Woman and Child) Burke

(Selma uncovers the sculpture)

Selma

I invited him over not... no...

(The mother holding the baby opens one eye in a “Sure you’re not”)

I’m not going to sleep with him...no, I’m not!

(The mother holding the baby winks “Uh Huh”)

(A knock at the door. Selma covers the statue with a cloth. She admits Claude.)

Claude

Girls who get naked for money are either usually enslaved by dope or the rebellious daughters of preachers.

Selma

(Laughs) Well now, yes, my father *is* a preacher.

Claude

I overheard you say that you are a widow. I’m sorry. How?

Selma

He was a mortician and he accidentally injected himself with embalming fluid.

Claude

(beat) Now *there’s* a story.

Selma

You ever had a “needlestick injury?”

Claude

Jamaican rum is more my poison.

Selma

Where do you live?

Claude I'm a poet and a novelist. My ol' lady kicked me out, didn't want me doing my "little scribbles" as she called 'em.

Selma She wanted you to get a job?

Claude You know the only jobs available for me? Doorman, street sweeper, shoeshine-

Selma And you're too proud for that. Do you have babes to feed?

Claude My daughter, Hope. (Beat) You must have babies.

Selma (Not sad about this.) If I could have, I would have by now.

Claude (Points to the statue) So this isn't of you? It's very... maternal.

Selma No. This is the first piece I did in wood.

Claude It has a certain naïveté.

(The mother reacts as if insulted.)

Selma Well, actually the first piece I did was a snowwoman-

(Flashback lights change / childlike music starts, snow starts to fall. The Statue steps off her pedestal and crosses downstage. Selma mimes making her in 3 moves, into a tall, proud, well-endowed snowwoman. The snowwoman is childishly happy with her big breasts.)

-In riverbed clay. A big snowwoman. Tall and proud an' naked.



Untitled, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Burke

But then a man came along with a walking stick.

(A man enters and looks the statue up and down)

Man Child, is this yours?

Selma (proudly) Yes, sir.

Man This isn't decent.

Selma Snowwomen don't have clothes except for a scarf and a hat.

Man We can't have that being seen by everyone walking along the river path!

Selma Statues are for everyone.

Man Who do you think you are?

Selma Selma Burke!

Man Then you better go ask your mother for a dress to put on this thing.

Selma Statues don't wear clothes. It's not a doll.

Man Don't you talk back to me.

Selma I was just explaining because you don't seem to understand.

Man You are insolent and insubordinate, young lady. I'm going to teach you a lesson in morality.

(He comes at her with his walking stick, and she ducks afraid, but his target is the statue, and he beats it into the ground. The statue is decimated. Selma is distraught.)

(Lights change)

(Selma covers the statue up with the cloth.)

Selma (Recovering from the memory, she changes the subject) So, are you published?

Claude My novel and my poetry.

Selma Oh yeah?

Claude The pages of my books are smuggled into prison and passed around like highly valued contraband.

Selma Does it inspire them?

Claude *If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,*

*While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die.  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!*

(Selma is impressed and decides to show him her best work.)

Well now, what's under this one?

(Selma unveils it and turns it around. The actor who was the statue with the baby now has no baby but the gold body shield on her torso. In black light her face arms and legs disappear and the gold luminesces.)

Selma It's my first expensive piece, a solid brass torso. It shines like gold. It's called Light and Shadow.



Light and Shadow, Burke

Claude Well now, who was your model for this?

Selma I could barely afford the materials, I didn't have a model. I had a mirror.

(Selma adopts the same pose as the torso.)

Claude May I touch it?

Selma I believe that part of the beauty of sculpture is its tactile interaction.

Claude (With his fingers he touches the neck) It's cool and smooth. (He moves to the shoulders) Very nice.

Selma Why thank you.

Claude (Tracing the side of the waist the thigh the leg, back up to the stomach, then to the breast.) She feels fine.

Selma Yes.

(Their eyes lock as he slips his finger down and traces a triangle between her legs)

Claude I used to work in a kitchen and working with all the hot pans left my fingertips dulled to the senses.

Selma What part of your body would be more sensitive?

Claude The fullness of my lips.

(He gently kisses the neck of the sculpture)

(He locks eyes with her – banter)

This is just a factual assessment...(Kiss)

Selma (Joining the banter) So you can fully understand the materials...

Claude Just for research. (Kiss)

Selma In order to have a fully immersive experience with the work.

Claude One must fully engage with art.

(He kisses the breast of the sculpture, who remains neutral. Selma however, reacts with a slight intake of breath, almost inadvertently arching her back. Claude drops to his knees in front of the statue. As he begins to kiss the sculpture Selma's body reacts.)

(Lights change)

#### *Scene 4 The decision*

A hospital room teaching hospital.

(The divan becomes the hospital bed. Mrs. Rivers is sitting in bed maniacally rocking back and forth, clutching a bundle wrapped in a blanket. Selma stands beside her. Dr. Dawkins is holding a clipboard.)

Dr. Dawkins No other nurse has been able to help Mrs. Rivers. We don't want to use force. You're up.

Selma Yes, Doctor Dawkins. (She turns to the patient) Mrs. Rivers?

(No reply.)

Mrs. Rivers

(No reply.)

I know you are hurting badly. I am not a mother, but I understand a little of what you are feeling, my heart aches for you. I am so sorry, so very sorry but I have to take the baby away now. We have to examine her.

Mrs. Rivers She was stillborn. What is wrong with you?

Selma We have procedures to follow. Mrs. Rivers now she looks like a little baby girl, but rigor will set in, she will start to change, her little hands will become claws, her little cheeks will sink. You don't want to remember her like that.

Mrs. Rivers I just want time to freeze this moment, this moment where she looks so perfect.

Selma (Sees the doctor's clipboard) I can do that for you.

(Selma takes the chart from the Doctor and flips the page over to the back of the chart and takes the pen from his hand.)

Dr. Dawkins What are you doing?

Selma (To Mrs. Rivers) Hold still.

(Mrs. Rivers stops rocking, she holds the pose, Selma draws.

She holds out the sketch for Mrs. Rivers to see.

Mrs. Rivers' face melts and she starts to cry.

Selma holds out the sketch with one hand.

Pause.

Mrs. Rivers holds out the bundle.

Selma gives her the picture and takes the baby.)

Dr. Dawkins You'll need to take this down to the morgue.

Selma You take her to the morgue. (She hands the baby to the Doctor.)

Dr. Dawkins And where are you going?

Selma Art school.

(Lights cross fade)

*Scene 5 Leaving the USA*

Art School



The black rectangle box upright is a lectern.

(As the scene progresses, in a rectangle box of light, Actor #4 adjusts his pose or facial expressions as the list of artists is read out. The Professor stands at the lectern and clicks various slides to illustrate the artists of her lecture. We hear the familiar click of the carousel changing on the projector. Selma, sits in the chair looking up at her professor.)

Professor Welcome to Art History. I have curated for you the art of the geniuses who invite us to see the world through their eyes. Michelangelo. Jan Van Eyck. El Greco. Davinci. Raphael. Rembrandt. Caravaggio. Rubens. Constable. Turner. Rodin. Botticelli. Gaugin. Seurat. Degas.

(The “slide” covers his ear and looks deranged)

Van Gogh! Right up to the contemporary masterwork of Picasso and Matisse.





(Selma rises her hand)

Professor Yes, Miss Burke.

Selma You know *my* name out of all the students here?

Professor You're the only- one of the women.

Selma Are we only going to learn about European art?

Professor I think I know what you are asking. An example would be Matisse. In 1906 he took a trip to Africa and fell in love with an African statue. Matisse used this image throughout the course of his career. This was considered revolutionary.

Selma Isn't that considered theft?

Professor Homage. (To the class) Matisse, would see this as a form of cultural exchange-

Selma Where is Matisse?

Professor He's in Paris. He works in his atelier where he takes in a very select few *gifted* proteges.

Selma He'll take me.

(She gets up and leaves.)

*Scene 6 The oath*

Matisse's Atelier, Paris.

(As Matisse conducts the lesson working on his sculpture illustrating technique as he instructs. Selma follows along mirroring him. Both have clay and form their sculptures. The sculpture is actor #3 who adjusts her body to the left or right depending on who is sculpting her.)



Matisse Reclining Nude



Burke Reclining Nude

Matisse Let's continue with the lesson. What is art?

Selma Painting, writing, sculpture-

Matisse Art is an invitation. An invitation to a conversation. It says, "This is how I see the world. Do you like this lens? What do you see? Que voyez-vous? Do you want to have this conversation with me? Do you see the technique? Do you see the person behind the art?" Did you go to the Louvre?

Selma Everything is so grand in scale and composition. Which do you like?

Matisse Most of it is not to my taste. I'm just sorry there is so little for you to see.

Selma So little? I was overwhelmed by it all!

Matisse Well modern art isn't there and of the antiquities we lost so much.

Selma When?

Matisse We had this little thing called the French Revolution.

Selma The peasant uprising, the rebellion against the monarchy. They were justified. They were hungry.

Matisse But in their zeal to overthrow they destroyed So many statues, so many frescos, so many oils.

Selma They felt justified having been exploited.

Matisse        The need to punish others is not a good motivation to deprive your children of the bounty of artists.

Selma         Their children were deprived of food.

Matisse        Selling art would buy bread, destroying it - no. Art should never be destroyed.

Selma         What if it's just bad art?

(She steps back and looks at what she has been molding and beats it back down, the sculptor protests sadly as her nose hits the floor.)

Matisse        In whose eyes?

Selma         Mine. I sometimes make bad art.

(Statue flips to the confident sexy sculpture.)

Matisse        On the way to good art and good art on the way to great art.

Selma         Maybe.

Matisse.       Definitely. One, you will always have a reference point for how far you've come and two, your worst might be seen as someone's preference. No. You should never destroy art.

(The clay switches and Selma begins to re-model her)

Selma         Critics destroy art.

Matisse        Only metaphorically. The poor are angry that money was spent on art, so they destroy it. The uneducated don't understand art and so they destroy it. Parents destroy it because they want to protect les enfants. Les politiciens think it is propaganda for the other side and so they destroy it. The military destroy it because it has no worth in battle. The religious destroy it because it is idolatrous or wicked. The chaste destroy it because they think it is so powerful it will incite them to lust and all the pleasures, they deny themselves. Everyone has a good reason to rip it down.

Selma         Not me.

Matisse        Yes, even you.

Selma         No.

Matisse        There will come a time when you are asked to destroy art for a good cause, for a right cause, for a noble cause, but no matter the subject, no matter the slight you must not. (He holds up his arm as if swearing on a bible) Never. Jamais.

Selma        (copies him, swearing her oath) Non. Jamais.

(Beat)

Matisse        Let me see your work.

(He goes over to her statue, he looks, Selma holds her breath.)

This will not do.

Selma        Monsieur Matisse it is almost *exactly* as yours is.

Matisse        C'est un problème.

Selma        What's the problem?

Matisse        You are not here to make the art of Henri Matisse you are here to make the art of Selma Burke.

Selma        Ah, but I *can* make the same art as Matisse. (She smiles with satisfaction.)

Matisse        Oui.

*Scene 7        Claude breaks the intimacy.*

Selma's studio apartment.

(Selma is working on two white clay figures. One male, one female. She smooths the cheek of the woman's head with a wooden handled clay loop tool, gently over the woman's cheek and the man's nose. They are facing each other, it is obviously intimate, maybe about to kiss.)

(Claude is drinking rum staring moodily out of the window.)

Selma        Claude c'est bon n'est-ce pas?

You've seen more art in Europe than I have, what do you think?

(Claude looks at the faces breaking the intimacy connection between them.)

Claude        Sentimental benign crap.

(He takes his thumb and smooches it into the wet clay creasing the man's eye to an ugly wink and curls the woman's mouth cruelly with his thumb.)

Selma Claude!

Claude This work is derivative. You need to think like a modern Negro. It's good, but it can be outstanding. You, me, we are the New Negros, we must embrace it.

Selma If you've become the New Negro since I've been gone, I want the old one back.

Claude If I'm not wanted around here, I'll leave.

Selma Yes go, go sleep at Langston's. You think I don't know what's going on? Try tearing up some of his poems. See how he likes it.

(Claude stops at the door then takes a letter out of his pocket.)

Claude I can't get a commission, an agent or a publisher and you-

Selma Me what?

Claude You know that contest you entered before you went away-

Selma I never heard-

(Claude hands her the letter.)

Claude I can't catch a single break. You... you are going to the White House.

Selma Why did you open... Jesus! Claude, when did this arrive? *When were you going to give this to me?*

Claude I just did.

Selma I have to be *in Washington tomorrow!*

Claude (Flatly) Congratulations.

*Scene 8 Selma goes to the White House*

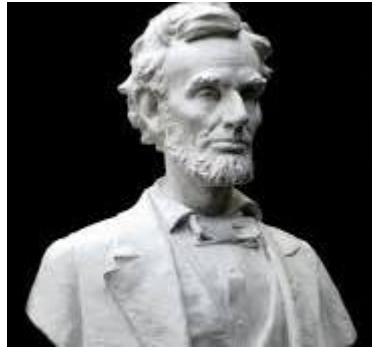
The Oval Office

(Selma rushes in and a woman looks down at her clipboard disapprovingly)

Selma Selma Burke. I'm here to see the President.

Secretary Have a seat. The chair next to the bust.

(she exits)



Max Bachmann

(Lincolns head pops through the plinth)

Selma Oh Lincoln. Hey.

Lincoln You're late to meet the sitting president of the United States of America with sweaty underarms? Carrying--

Selma The art store was closed. It's butcher's paper.

Lincoln Very professional-

Selma It took five hours to drive here. I had to promise the cabby I'd do sketches of his whole family. The guy has 47 kids!

Lincoln You're late, you screwed up.

Selma You screwed up too you didn't give us any property rights for those cotton fields...

(The secretary comes back motions her into the office)

Secretary You're late!

Selma I'm so sorry, my husband, never mind... I'm sorry.

. (Franklyn Delano Roosevelt is in a wheelchair.)

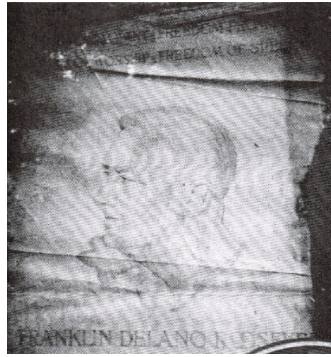
Roosevelt Hello Miss. Burke. Welcome.

Selma Mr. President thank you so much for granting me the time to meet with you.

Roosevelt Not at all Miss. Burke, it's a wonderful excuse to get away from all the affairs of the state.

Selma Thank you sir. The light is better by the window.

Roosevelt I prefer to sit behind my desk.



Sketches of FDR Burke

Selma           It's just your face, Mr. President no one is going to see – the desk.

Roosevelt       Fine. (He wheels himself over to the window catching the wheelchair on something.)

Selma           Would you like a hand?  
(Roosevelt looks at her.)  
Sorry, I know you're very capable.  
(Roosevelt angles his chair.)  
Can you please turn your head and look right for me sir?

Roosevelt       Where are you from?

Selma           New York City.

Roosevelt       I like New York. A lot of democrats there.

Selma           Please if you could just sit still-

Roosevelt       You've received several fellowships.

Selma           Yes.

Roosevelt       And the selection committee was impressed that you studied in Paris under Matisse.

Selma           I was able to teach him a few things.  
(Roosevelt laughs.)  
Please! Hold the pose!

Roosevelt       You got out of Europe before that mad man began his rampage. Have you been doing your part for the war effort here at home?

Selma           I drove a truck for the Brooklyn navy yard but I injured my back.

Roosevelt       Lucky to get better. With polio, no damn cure.



Selma Surely scientists are-

Roosevelt Always tell me they need more money for research!

Selma Can't the government fund it?

Roosevelt If I gave extra money for something that the republicans say I have a vested interest in they'd roast me alive.

Selma Republicans don't get polio?

Roosevelt You're right it's a bi-partisan issue.

Selma Make it a charity. I'm sure if every American paid just one dime that would add up to a lot of dimes for research and a cure-

Roosevelt The treasury could even re-issue the dime with my face on it. That would really irk the Republicans.

(They laugh.)

We would need a slogan: "Dimes, so that children can walk". "The walk of dimes"?

Selma "The march of polio?" (hearing herself) No!

Roosevelt "The march of dimes?"

Selma (At this point, Selma walks up to the president and holds his head in both hands. Chagrined, he holds still).

(Lights change)

*Scene 9 The Bas Relief meets Eleanor Roosevelt*

The Studio Apartment

(A brass frame is dropped in)

(Roosevelt the bronze plaque, faces Selma who fidgets with a cloth.)



Burke with her bas relief

- Selma           The commission states that if Elanor Roosevelt doesn't approve of you there will be no unveiling. I don't know if she's going to like you.
- Roosevelt       She isn't, she doesn't want to see *my* face. When I died, she found out about my affair.
- Selma           I'm bringing her face to face with you for the first time since she found out you were a big o' cheat.
- Roosevelt       She's going to want to see a shriveled up worn-out man and you made me look younger and handsome.
- Selma           She's not going to be happy maybe I should redesign you with an arrow through your head-
- Roosevelt       -And you're making her come to Harlem, she's going to be all nervous about that, she'll probably bring her chauffeur up with her for protection.
- (Knock on the front door. Selma covers him up)
- (Selma opens the door to Eleanor. Her chauffeur is behind her.)
- Good morning. Mrs. Roosevelt. Welcome.
- (She enters with her chauffer.)
- Eleanor         (A little nervous) Good morning. Mrs. Burke.
- (They shake hands)
- We can't stay long. I've got a ribbon cutting, and we're running behind schedule. Is the plaque ready to view?
- (Selma removes the cloth and steps back.)
- Eleanor         (Disapprovingly) Oh...
- Roosevelt       Hi honey, what do you think of your ol' man?
- Eleanor         When he sat for you, how old do you think he was?

Selma           Sixty-two.

Eleanor         He was ailing.

Selma           I am aware of that. He was so gracious.

Eleanor         But here you have made him seem like a youthful, vigorous man.

Roosevelt      Told ya.

Eleanor         Could you not see what he looked like by then?

Selma           Yes.

Eleanor         Then why on earth would you depict him as if he were a young healthy man?  
(The Bas Relief responds proudly.)

Selma           I did see that he looked... reduced.

Roosevelt      Reduced?

Eleanor         He was in pain every day of his life. He survived four grueling campaigns. He suffered, the loss of fellow Americans *he* sent to fight, and die. Where is *that etched on his face?*

Selma           *I have not done this image for today, but for tomorrow and tomorrow. Five hundred years from now America and all the world will want to look on our president, not as he was the last few months before he died, but as we saw him for most of the time he was with us- strong, so full of life, and with that wonderful look of going forward.*

Roosevelt      Atta girl.

Eleanor         (Makes a decision.) Well, until the unveiling...  
(She exits. The chauffeur gives her a thumbs up as he exits with her)

Chauffeur      At least there's going to be an unveiling.  
(Selma appreciates the comment and looks to the relief who wipes his forehead in a sign of "that was close".)  
(The lights transition)

*Scene 9A       The unveiling in Washington*

(The Roosevelt bas relief is unveiled. Sfx applause. She unveils him, cameras pop and band music plays, she bows.)

(Lights change, a hurried ticking speeds up as the scene progresses)

*Scene 10      The Game of Rejection*

(They are all on stage and switch positions rapidly)

(Sfx knock knock knock)



Photo of Burke, Charles Tennie Harris Carnegie Museum of Art

(The Turkey is crouched on the pedestal, hands under armpits for wings, head on one side the tongue comically protrudes. The head of the state fair stands beside it.)

Selma            You are the head of the committee for the state fair?

State Fair Head Yes.

Selma            I've made this maquette of a turkey. If you like it, I will make more and set up a booth to sell them.

Turkey           (proudly) Gobble, gobble.

State Fair Head No. My sister-in-law has the Thanksgiving decorations -- this will be a competition. Make something not Thanksgiving related.

Turkey           (Sadly) Gobble gobble.

(The Turkey gets off the pedestal and is replaced by Brown Fish)

(Sfx knock knock knock)

Selma            You are the head of the committee for the exhibition?

Head of Expo. Yes.

Selma            I've made this fish.

Fish              (Makes bubble bop bop bop noises proudly and demonstrates his fine fins.)



Fish Burke

Head of Expo. This is an exposition not a state fair! Make something bigger, more serious.

Fish (Sadly) bop bop bop  
(The fish on the pedestal turns around and Selma makes a tall, proud, angel)  
(Sfx knock knock knock)

Selma You are the head of the gallery?

Gallery Head Yes.

Selma I've made this angel done in the style of Michael Angelo!



Untitled, Burke

Gallery Head This is a gallery for Black art we don't want some white angel. Make something Afrocentric.

(Angel sadly droops its wings in disappointment, The white angel steps of the pedestal and is replaced by an African Mask in a warrior pose.)



Facial Sculpture, Selma Burke

(Sfx knock knock)

Selma You are the head of the--

Head No!

Selma It's an African mask-

Head *No!*

(The music ends with a “wah wah” kind of sound. The Warrior kicks the “sand” like a 6 year old boy being told he couldn't play baseball. The lights transition)

*Scene 11 I'm not going to Selma. Claude, I am Selma.*

(The studio – A head pops up from her work bench.)



Selma in her studio, unknown

Selma You are my last supply of plaster of Paris – I'm going to have to go back to nursing-

White Face You can't work on me now. The Selma to Montgomery march starts on Sunday. It's got your name, it's like a sign from God. Selma to Montgomery.

Selma            You are the only commission I've had in 6 months. I can't. I have to finish you.  
(phone rings)

Selma            This is she! (listens)

White Face      Who is it?

Selma            (Thrilled) Thank you, thank you. Yes, I can make that deadline, you can count on me. (hangs up) It's the performing Arts Centre in Milwaukee! I just got a big commission-

White Face      Claude will want you to go to the march. He's not going to like it—  
(Claude bursts in excitedly.)

Claude           Selma, pack your bags we're going. It's happening baby and we are going!

Selma            You and who are going?

Claude           Me, you, Selwyn and his brother and some other friends of his. He is driving down, and he has space in his car for us. (Crosses and goes off) (calling out) He wants to get on the road early, so we have to be ready by six tomorrow morning.

White Face      I told you so.

Selma            I don't remember being consulted on this.

Claude           There are going to be thousands- (He reappears with a suitcase)

Selma            I can't Claude.

Claude           What do you mean you can't? It's your duty. It's all our duty.

Selma            It's 54 miles walking for five days straight. I ain't got that kind o' time.

Claude           What are you doin' that's mor' important than civil rights? Voter registration? You're aware of what's going on down south ain't you? The state troopers brutally attacked *five hundred* on the Edmund Pettus bridge.

Selma            There's going to be trouble again, you know that-

Claude           Dr. King says it will be a nonviolent march.

Selma            Claude, it doesn't matter what Reverend King says. It ain't up to us. Violence will be done no matter how nonviolent we want to be.

Claude           They won't dare. Too many cameras will be there this time. The world will be watching. You're coming.

Selma            (excitedly sharing her news) Baby, I just got a commission! Duke Ellington.

Claude           You know your work ain't going to change shit.

(Selma is stung to her core.)

How is your work comparable to people who are putting their lives on the line to gain our rights huh? You in your studio playing with clay instead of –

Selma I am not playing...*You* are trying to trivialize my work again. I am immortalizing and celebrating the life of one of our heroes.

Claude You need to concentrate on the important things in life.

White Face Me thinks you're jealous. That is so petty.

Selma Let me tell you if I don't work, no bills get paid around here, the rent, food, heat, electricity. Nothing. I don't see you bringing in any money. Every job you're offered you think is beneath you. My work is important to me, and it should be to you too. You want me to tell those folks writing the cheque, "No. I can't make my deadline because I'm going for a walk in Alabama?"

Claude Now who's trivializing? It's not a walk and I'm not jealous of-

Selma Ellington is a genius. He's a composer who conducts from the piano bench. You know who were the geniuses doing that before? Haydn! Mozart! You think they don't have hundreds of busts of their faces in concert halls, opera houses, museums and in the parlors of rich, white people's houses? Who's immortalizing our people?

Claude And who's celebrating my contribution?

White Face Oh for Christ's sake, why are we talking about him now?

Selma (Softening she goes to him) I have sketched you dozens of times, it's what my hand naturally does. I drew you at breakfast last week on a napkin-

Claude (He breaks away from her) I am a napkin. A napkin you are going to throw in the garbage after you have wiped your mouth with me.

Selma (Trying again) I thought you had modeled so many times, it was work. I didn't want you to work for me. That's why I capture you when you're still, doing other things, reading the paper at the breakfast table, writing on the fire escape-

Claude But, no bust of me. No sculpture of me!

Selma I didn't think-

Claude It's time to put down your chisel and hammer and pick up a placard.

White Face No.

Claude Sel, go pack a case for the trip.



Selma Don't tell me what to do.

Claude Go. Pack. Your. Case.

(He crosses to her menacingly.)

Selma Leave me alone!

(They hold a moment)

(Claude storms out with his suitcase. Selma picks up a hammer and chisel and moves towards White Face.)

White Face Hey! Be careful with that. Don't take my nose off!

Selma It's ok baby.

White Face I trust you.

(Selma resumes her work, lights change)

*Scene 12 The trouble with triples.*

The Studio Apartment

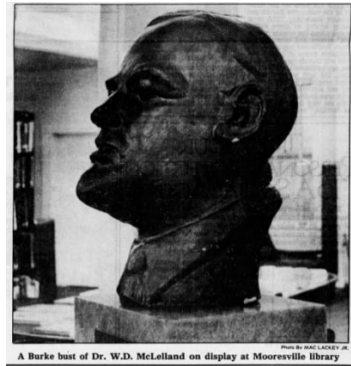
(Selma turns to her clay, the soft refrain of jazz fades as Selma goes to her studio. Three blobs of clay to be worked on, each turns around as Selma sculpts them.)



Duke Ellington, Burke



Frau Keller, Burke



Dr. W.D. McLelland, Burke

(Jazz plays. A head pops up, it is Ellington)

Duke            You are a mighty fine woman, Miss Selma. Your husband is a lucky man. I myself likes a woman who's built sturdy like you.

Selma           Who you calling sturdy?

Duke            Ain't nothin' wrong with sturdy Miss Selma. You know we Black men like our women with some meat on them. When you make love to a woman you want to feel somethin' in your arms, not a scarecrow with a dress on.

Selma           Look Mr. Ellington-

Duke            Duke-

Selma           I ain't got time for flirtin'.

Duke            I ain't stopping you from doing your job.

Selma           How'd you like it if I came flirtin' around you while you rehearsin' or composin'?

Duke            I would say, "Bring it on Sistah."

(Selma gives him a look)

(The jazz is taken over by soulful klezmer. A woman's head pops up looks anxiously over her shoulder at Duke. He doesn't freeze, but looks on)

Keller           I'm here for you to model.

Selma           I'm so glad that you made it out of Germany.

Keller           (Matter of fact, not melodramatically) My husband was burned alive along with the family that hid us. I escaped with our daughter.

Selma           I'm glad you both escaped-

Keller           -she got a gash in her foot, it got infected. Just after we crossed the French border, she died.

Selma           I'll make sure your face tells your story.

(Klezmer music is overtaken with White Christian music. A third head pops up.)

McLelland      Make me look handsome.

Selma           I'll do my best.

McLelland      I realize this isn't exactly a labour of love for you, is it?

Selma I made a deal with the head librarian. I will donate this bust of you to the library, and they will change the policy to allow little Black children to borrow books.

McLelland You're working for free?

Selma Yes, you have to make a deal with the devil sometimes.

(As each character speaks Selma turns from one to the other to sculpt them.)

Duke Why you are spending your time with these whiteys? You should be concentrating on your own people.

Keller She is sculpting me because she wants to make everyone aware of the horrors of fascism.

McLelland She wants Black children getting access to books so that they too can succeed.

Duke I'm celebrating excellence.

Keller I'm drawing attention to the atrocities of the Nazis.

McLelland I'm the saintly Christian opening doors.

Duke I am the pinnacle of success!

Keller I am the warning that can't be ignored.

McLelland I am the conduit to change.

Duke I'm the Harlem Renaissance-

Keller I'm the persecuted Jew-

McLelland I'm access to knowledge-

Duke/ I'm addressing imbalance in recognition.

Keller/ I'm the candle in the darkness.

McLelland/ I'm the practical solution.

Duke/Keller/McLelland Spend more time with me!

(Like petulant children they get louder in their singing)

Duke/ It don't mean a thing if it ain't got swing doo whop, doo whop ....

Keller/ Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam...

Gentleman/ Oh when the saints go marching in, oh when the saints go marching in...

(Selma stops them, exhausted. Lights shift).

*Scene 13 The bugging of Washington*

Split stage Selma's studio and the office

(A secretary picks up the phone and lays the receiver on the desk, she holds a tube with sketches in it.)

(Selma is in her studio working on a sculpture. Tool in one hand and phone in the other.)



"Bust of a Gentleman", Burke

Gentleman You've become a spy!

Selma (To the sculpture.) I'm about to listen in on a conversation. Sounds like some mucky muck up in Washington wants to look at my old sketches of FDR.

Sculpture Maybe they want to exhibit them now that the President has died.

(Selma shrugs)

Lights up on the office side.

(Sinnock enters and Marsha masks the phone so that he can't see it)

Sinnock Thanks Marsha (He takes out the sketches from the tube.) I appreciate you letting me have these. I will get them back to you in a few days.

Marsha What's this all about? All the secrecy and cloak and dagger stuff. Anyone would think you are after state secrets, (goads him) I don't think her designs are all that good.

Sinnock That's where you're wrong Marsha, her work is extraordinary.

Gentleman     You are extraordinary!

Marsha         Why do you need to take the sketches with you?

Sinnock        The Director herself chose me, to do FDR's portrait-.

Marsha        Oh sure because he created the March of Dimes, they want to commemorate him by putting him-.

Sinnock        -on the dime.

Marsha        They want to mark his birthday when everyone is still feeling the loss.

Sinnock        This puts me under a lot of pressure.

Selma          (To the statue) That's not enough time.

Marsha        (Angling to the phone so that Selma can hear clearly) So why do you need Burke's drawings?

Sinnock        It doesn't mean I'm copying it.

Marsha        /Uh huh

Gentleman     /Sure!

Marsha        You asked me to meet you after hours and not to tell anyone.

Sinnock        I just didn't want people getting involved in my concerns. Washingtonians are such gossips. And there are rumors that government offices are being bugged!

(Marsha surreptitiously hangs up the phone. As does Selma. Selma smiles at the Gentleman.)

*Scene 13A     Stolen art*

(The Bas relief changes from the profile of the president but now has the words "LIBERTY and "IN GOD WE TRUST and the initials J.S. on it.)

*Scene 14     Smashed Art*

The apartment studio.

(Selma is working on an abstract nude, Claude enters)



- Selma            Claude, welcome home, I saw some of the march on the news!  
(They hug)
- Claude            You should have been there.
- Selma            I've been working like crazy... I'm tired. I need to sit down.
- Claude            You're tired? (He shows her the soles of his shoes to illustrate how threadbare they are.)  
(She sits and Claude kneels before her.)
- Selma            What are you doing? If you are going to ask me to re-marry you again, you can forget it.
- Claude            Come with me to Memphis-
- Selma            You just got home. Memphis!?
- Claude            To support the sanitation workers in their strike. Rev. King will be there tomorrow night to address the workers. Come with me.
- Selma            Claude-
- Claude            It's not a march this time, you won't have to be on your feet for too long. The working conditions of the sanitation workers get worse every day. They're getting killed, crushed by old malfunctioning equipment and the mayor and the city turn a blind eye. I've been working on this-  
(He pulls out his notebook)  
I call it "Workers of the World Unite."
- Selma            That's great Claude, but you can take your notebook on the road. I need my studio. My work-
- Claude            (Mimicking her) "My work." You hide behind your work to do nothing.
- Selma            If I don't work-

Claude I'm sick and tired of you standing by the sidelines-

Selma If *you* have to go back – go-

Claude Our people are dying and all you do is whittle wood! What's the use of immortalising some people while others are being gunned down on the street?!

(Picking up her mallet Claude goes over to her carving and in three strikes smashes it to the ground, the sculptor is on her knees.)

Selma Claude, go to Memphis and Don't. Come. Back.

(Claude storms out)

(Selma goes to the collapsed statue and they hug. She helps the statue up from the ground. Selma fashions her arm into a black power salute as...)

(Lights shift , split scene)

### *Scene 14A Murder*

(We see Dr. King in a spotlight “addressing” the crowd, as we hear...)

MLK VO ***Somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of the press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for rights.***

(A deafening rifle shot rings out. All three respond as if shot. The sound reverberates throughout the theatre. Lights down on the studio. MLK is in slow motion responding to the trajectory of the shot bathed in gold light .)

### *Scene 14B Despair*

(Cross fade to the apartment where Selma mimics Despair)



Sadness, Burke

Selma (Slowly stands, wiping tearss as the faint strains of organ music is heard)  
Despair You're leaving me?  
Selma I'm going to the funeral.  
Despair You'll miss your client's deadline.  
Selma Yes.

### *Scene 15 Reconstruction*

Doctor King lies in state at the R. S. Lewis Funeral Home, Memphis.

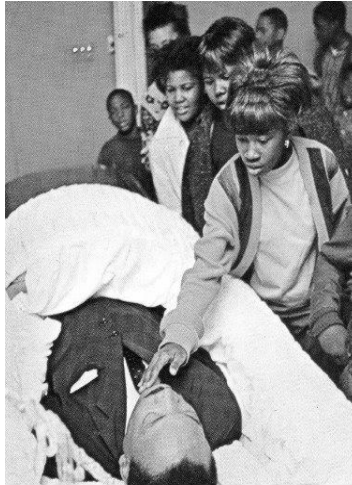
(Organ music louder. The divan becomes a coffin. Selma stands over the body of Dr. King studying his face then crosses to the man standing nearby. He is a man used to working with emotional women, he is patient and understanding.)

Mortician I'm so sorry for your loss. For our loss.  
Selma I understand you are the person who prepared Doctor King for the viewing.  
Mortician (Cautiously) I did.  
Selma You would have done the jaw reconstruction with mortuary wax. You got his jaw line *almost* perfect.  
Mortician (Trying not to feel slighted) You're a mortician?  
Selma I'm a sculptor.  
Mortician I see.  
Selma The material you used for the jaw reconstruction, it's red.  
Mortician Yes.  
Selma It's showing.  
Mortician I did the best I could.  
Selma Then please adjust the colour of the face to cover the reconstruction.  
Mortician People keep touching his face-  
Selma It's not hard to fix.  
Mortician Madam the viewing is in progress we have lines around the block. I can't hold up the proceedings.  
Selma It would be a quick fix.  
Mortician My work on Doctor King has concluded. It's over.



(Pause, stalemate, then Selma opens her purse and takes out some makeup

Selma I'll fix this. (she goes to apply the makeup to Dr, King's face) We shall overcome.



*Scene 16 The art gives advice.*

Lights up on the studio.



Standing Female Nude, Burke

(Selma is working on a sculpture of a nude. The nude seems to carry an invisible sign,)

Statue You have to finish me!

Selma But they *assassinated* him...

Statue But the riots, you won't be safe-

Selma Well..

Statue -Do you want to disappoint another client?-

Selma -And disappoint my people?

Statue There will always be something to march for. And the violence! Claude got his wrist broken. How are you going to finish me with a broken wrist?

Selma (Stands back and looks at her) Somethings not quite right...Maybe you need something to hold... (Selma places a sign in her arms.)  
(The statue steps off the pedestal and hands the sign back to her)

Statue (beat) It's time for you to hold it.  
(Selma turns it around it says "*Justice Now*")  
Selma takes it. Scared looking around she holds it above her head, marching defiantly. Sfx chanting and marching which crossfades to traffic noises)

*Scene 11 That's my face!*

New York Street, a boy with a stack of newspapers.

Vendor Paper! Get your evening paper...

Selma (running over to him) Yes! My friend told me that she saw my photo in the paper. In the march!

Vendor (Nonplussed) Uh huh. Fifteen cents.  
(Selma hands him a quarter, sees her picture)

Selma Yep! Here I am!

Vendor Uh huh. Here's your change.  
(Selma is stunned, she looks at the dime.)

Selma That's my face.

Vendor (Looks over.) Nuh huh. That's FDR.

Selma I did that.

Vendor (Sure you did Lady) Uh huh. You don't want it, you could always give it to me, as a tip.  
(Selma forages around in her pocket and gives the boy a dollar. Her fingers curl around the dime making a fist. Then she opens her fist and studies the engraving.)

Selma J.S.

Scene 18      *The mental battle*



FDR, Burke

(The actor holds up two frames, one gold one silver and switches profiles between them. Selma sits with her back to “them”)

Relief      FDR. 32nd president of the United States. I’m brass.

Dime      FDR. 32nd president of the United States. I’m silver.

Relief      People come to admire me all the time in this elegant building.

Dime      There is one of you and millions of me. I was designed by the chief engraver of the mint himself, John Sinnock-

Relief      Except you weren’t. *He copied her sketches.*

Dime      He didn’t.

Relief      Did. *Same profile, same angle, same hollow of the cheek, same whorl on the ear, same slope of the nose-*

Dime      You have one lock of hair that is slightly flatter.

Relief      Your forehead has one more wrinkle but, your provenance is me.

Selma      (To Dime) Face it.

(The frames overlap and freeze)

Dime      (To Selma) Confront the bastard.

Selma      I guess I’m going back to Washington.

Scene 20      *The sin of Sinnock*

The Federal Mint Office of John Sinnock.

(Selma enters. He is startled, recognizing her right away but pretends he doesn't.)

Selma Selma Burke. Do you have anything you want to say to me, Mr. Sinnock?

Sinnock How did you get in into a secure building?

Selma I did the bas-relief, which you plagiarized for the dime.

Sinnock (Mansplaining) As a *numismatic* sculptor .I reference many sources.

Selma It's *clearly* my portrait.

Sinnock (Pulling rank) I am the Chief Engraver for the United States Mint, perhaps you don't understand how these things work.

Selma I understand that you are getting credit for my work.

Sinnock (Patronizingly) Let me explain. The obverse portrait of the President is a composite of two studies which I made from life previously. I consulted many photographs then I got *approval* from the Secretary of the Treasury-

Selma I don't care if you got approved by every other white man in the government. We both know that the JS should be SB. You will publicly acknowledge this with a press conference and an article of admission for the Wall Street Journal.

Sinnock (beat) I am not inclined to do that.

Selma And I am not inclined to let you get away with this!

Sinnock It's already been minted. (Chortles) Are you going to go up to every man on the street, demand to see his pocket change, snatch it away and reengrave each one? How fanciful and amusing you are.

Selma How immoral and thieving you are.

Sinnock Your's was just one of many images I sourced and as it says on the reverse - E Pluribus Unum – “out of many one”.

Selma And as it says on the obverse “In God we Trust”. I trust god will send you to hell.

### *Scene 21 3 files and an offer.*

FBI Field office, New York

(Selma is waiting in an empty office. She looks out the “window”).

Selma Hey, Lady Liberty!

(Lady Liberty comes into view)

Liberty        Hey Selma!

Selma         I wonder if J Edgar Hoover will want his statue to be as big as you!

Liberty        He has a big ego and a lot of power – He'll want his own Ellis Island!

Selma         In your original model weren't you supposed to be holding the broken chain and shackle to represent our newly achieved freedom?

Liberty        Now they are at my feet.

Selma         I wonder what Hoover will want to symbolize?

Liberty        He belongs to a southern fraternity set up after the defeat of confederacy, how can you immortalize him?

Selma         But he fights corruption, fraud, vice, and pornography – people are complicated.

Liberty        You just came from the Pearl S Buck Centre in Pennsylvania, maybe donate the commission there-

(Hoover enters and goes to his desk and lays out 3 files, one white, one red, and one purple.)

Hoover        We wanted you to come in for a little chat.

Selma         Great, we can chat as I sketch.

Hoover        The Federal Bureau of Investigation is charged with protecting the law.

Selma         I know.

Hoover        We are a law enforcement agency. You are here for an investigation.

Selma         ...You're investigating *me*?

Liberty        Run!

Hoover        Have a seat.

Selma         I don't understand- (she sits)

Hoover        One of the federal government's oldest agencies is The United States Mint.

Selma         Oh. The Mint.

Hoover.       You gained unlawful admittance to a federal building and made charges against a federal employee of this agency.

(They stare at each other for a moment.)

Selma         So no commission. You tricked me.

Hoover.       It's just easier to have you come to the field office-

Selma            It must be a slow day for crime if you're bringing me in. I traveled back to New York, I'd say "on my own dime" but that would be a little too ironic don't you think?

Hoover           We respond to national security risks-You made threats against a government employee.

Liberty           Weasel Face-

Selma            Sinnock.

Hoover           You admit it.

Selma            I admit I told him to go to hell.

Hoover           We were going to let you off with a warning, however upon closer inspection we have discovered that you have been in the company of others known to us.

Liberty           Artists from the Harlem Renaissance? The President of the United States?

Hoover           (Consulting his file.) Your associates seem to include known communist sympathizers.

Selma            Claude is on the side of the workers in the struggle for fair pay and safe working conditions.

Liberty           Are fair pay and safe working conditions counter to the United States Government?

Hoover           One of a 22 person American *Communist* delegation that traveled to *Russia*-

Selma            And to England and Paris and North Africa-

                      (He now gets out of his seat and towers over her)

Hoover           He is flagged in our Racial Matters Program-

Selma            He *is* involved in racial politics-

Hoover           With other communists and the Red threat in America is just as bad as the Lavender threat. He's what we would call a (beat) Lavender Lad.

Selma            Claude is-

Hoover           He's a sexual pervert.

Liberty           So are you for taking the photos. I thought you were against pornography.

Hoover           As well as being morally weak and psychologically disturbed he undermines the traditional family. Security risk... susceptible to blackmail-

Selma            No one would ever blackmail Claude, he never has any money.

Hoover           Yes, he's always out of work because of his habitual drunkenness-

Selma He likes the occasional Jamaican rum.

Hoover And sexual perversion-

Liberty Everyone needs a hobby.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavender\\_scare](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavender_scare) Hoover And you, daughter of a preacher are cavorting with this godless man. Do you want us to start a file on you too?

Selma If you know I'm the daughter of a preacher, you already have.

Hoover Elected officials come and go but Hoover is the constant. Presidents in, presidents out, Democrats, Republicans. *Hoover* runs the USA. It wouldn't serve you well to disobey me. (He pulls out a newspaper clipping, casually) Hey, this looks like you in this march.

Liberty Somewhere I read of..

Selma The freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for rights.

Hoover (With menace) Somewhere I read that J. Edgar Hoover *is* America.

Selma You're telling me to end my association with Claude?

Hoover It's in your best interests – you're not going to be making any more sculptures of presidents. (Sickly sweetness) Of course, should you decide to help *protect* your country. You could report back to us with various information to pad out our files then we will find some lucrative commissions for you.

Selma I hope one day you can meet up with Sinnock in hell.

Liberty Time to leave-.

(She exits)

## Scene 22 *Sparkler art*

A New York rooftop



Photo Matisse, NYC

(It is night, a string of lights illuminates the skyline. Sfx faint hum of traffic in the background. Selma looks out, Henri enters.)

Selma No better place to see the Fourth of July than from a rooftop, Henri.

Matisse Bonjour Selma.

Selma Your letter said you were coming but you didn't say what you're doing in New York.

Matisse A commission for a mural.

Selma (Good natured banter) If only they knew anyone more local-

Matisse You look, how you say? Stressed.

Selma My father just died.

(She holds the lighter and he positions the sparklers until they both light.)

I'm so sorry, but he must have been proud of you...

Selma He thought I was a sinner.

(They "draw" in the air. He makes his famed leaf image; she makes the outline of a body)



Burke



Matisse

He died alone. He still had the little face I carved for him in his pocket. He didn't know millions of my little faces are in everyone's pockets... *and* I just got a call that one of my busts has been vandalized.

Matisse Non!

Selma It's not the first time. My work has been knocked down, vandalized,

Matisse Felicitations!



Selma            Congratulations? Why?

Matisse          People don't destroy *benign* art.

Selma            And most recently my art was stolen.

Matisse          Stolen?! Did you report it to the police?

Selma            It was stolen by the government.

Matisse          People don't steal worthless art.

Selma            Well plagiarized...

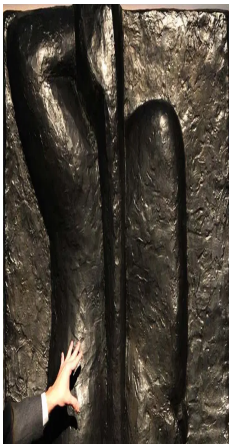
Matisse          People don't reproduce bad art. Let's celebrate your success!

(Fireworks explode reigning colour and sparkles down on them.)

*Scene 23    Discrepancies with a gavel*

The Auction House.

(A female figure facing upstage is being referenced by an auctioneer.)



Nu des dos etat, Matisse



Girl prone, Burke

Auctioneer VO (Bang!) Christies, New York sets a new record! Matisse's cast of his 1930 sculpture of a nude's back. *Nu de dos premier ètat* at 49 million dollars.

(The sculpture repositions, lights shift.)

And here Girl Prone by Selma Burke sold for (Bang!) 28 thousand dollars.

(Selma enters she is disappointed. Herman sidles over to Selma, an auction catalogue in his hand.)

Herman I thought yours was worth more than his.

Selma Thank you.

Herman I want to bid on this one. (He points to the statue.) It's later on the docket.

Selma My *Island Dancers*. (She looks at the couple slowly dancing)



Island Dancers, Burke. John W. Moseley Photo, Temple University

(As the conversation progresses the statues move slowly closer together until ultimately, they are in an embrace)

Herman I've been following you... (catches himself) as an artist for some time. That sounds creepy. But I'm a fan, a big fan of your work.

Selma Thank you.

Herman You know I always wanted to be an artist.

Selma Let me guess -- your parents talked you out of it.

Herman I still create things in a way.

Selma Yes?

Herman I'm an architect. Herman Kobbe.

Selma I know who you are. You ran politically. You're a socialist, aren't you? I think some of my friends backed you.

Herman I didn't win. Socialism has become a dirty word.

Selma Some of my best friends are socialists. My ex-husband was a communist.

Herman I didn't see eye to eye politically with my ex-wife either.

(pause)

Selma So, what are you building now?

Herman I'm working on various projects... I'd be happy to show you some of my blueprints?

Selma Is that the same as 'come up and see my sketches?'

Herman (Laughs) I'll buy you lunch first. You can tell me more about *your* next piece. Would it be forward of me to invite myself to your studio? I'd love to come and see your work.

Selma It's a very small studio.

Herman I could build you a bigger one.

Selma I'd like to move away from the city, not retire but relocate to the country. I'll have to find a lot more buyers – not everyone is a fan like you. Herman.

Herman *How could anyone with a spark of feeling fail to love your work? Perhaps some day I could be of more help in other ways. Maybe fix up a fitting studio for you, with a garden and a birdbath and anything else you find necessary for your contentment.*

Selma (Looks at her watch then at him) I'm free for lunch.

## Scene 24 *Non Jamis*

The art school.



Selma Burke, Adger Cowans, Getty images

(Selma is chiseling away at a statue. Claude enters, carrying his notebook.)

Selma Claude!

Claude        Hi Sel. I saw in the paper. You married the rich, white man.

Selma        No one has ever loved me the way he does.

Claude        I loved you.

Selma        In your way.

Claude        Is he at home for you waiting by the fire?

Selma        He's skiing in Vermont.

Claude        Of course he is.

Selma        I heard you were in Chicago?

Claude        I was looking for a publisher for my new novel *Home to Harlem*.

Selma        I haven't been a nurse for a while, but you don't look so good Baby.

Claude        It's the dropsy.

Selma        I thought they drained your heart last time you were in hospital.

Claude        But my kidneys and....

Selma        Liver... (Looks around)

              (pause)

Claude        I always thought your work was good.

Selma        No you didn't.

Claude        My favourite piece was Light and Shadow. The gold torso... I never told you it was my favourite. I came here to tell you that.

Selma        I assumed you're only here to "borrow" more money.

Claude        You have everything, your degrees that people just hand you every time you turn around, awards, commissions, your art shows, your own school, must be nice.

Selma        Claude, you lose your attractiveness when you're bittah.

Claude        You could think more about supporting your community.

Selma        And by 'supporting my community' you mean 'giving you more money'?

Claude        You got your big shot politician, architect.

Selma        Yes, he likes to build things up. You excel in tearing things down. You destroyed my clay. You smashed my maquettes. And over time you broke me.  
(Pause)

(She picks up her hammer and chisel and sets to work)

Claude        (An appeasement, he goes over to the piece she is working on. He sets down his notebook and takes a step back to give her new work a good look.)

You make nice decorative statues.

Statue        Go to hell.

Claude        I saw that the first time you showed me that little wooden carving of the mother holding her baby. It was very (searches for the word), maternal.

Selma        Get out.

Claude        It's a sweet sentimental-

Statue        Tell him.

Selma        That depicted something *I lived through*.



Mother and Child, Burke

I'll never forget that moment in the dark, wet field I was with our neighbour. She was protecting her baby after coming upon her husband lifeless body, swaying from a lynching tree.

(The statue facing upstage reaches out her hand and lets out an anguished cry seeing her husband.)

Claude            That's an important piece you made.

Selma            I knew that sculptures could be more than art, they become *a record*. Her anguished face holding her son. Protecting him. After my bones turn to chalk, my statue of the two of them can still testify.

(There is a knock. The lights go down on the statue)

                         That will be my student here for her one-on-one lesson.

(Selma pulls herself together.)

                         Come in Annette.

(She goes to her purse and pulls out some bills and hands them to Claude. There is a moment. He thinks about kissing her on the cheek, doesn't. Inadvertently leaving his notebook behind. Exits.)

(Annette enters)

Annette          That was nice of you. You know, if you keep the school door locked then beggars can't come in off the street.

Selma            That wasn't a beggar. That was Claude McKay. One of this country's most gifted writers - a poet of the Harlem Renaissance.

Annette          Oh. (She goes to her backpack and gets a box.) I appreciate you taking me on, I'm having trouble, (she pulls out a sad looking piece of clay) it's always sculpted perfectly in my mind, it just comes out differently.

Selma            You have to have patience with clay.

Annette          I'm just not having a great day, I guess.

Selma            Oh?

Annette          Mommy is a liberal and said any artist who worked with FDR was good enough for her, but Daddy doesn't want me taking art classes. So, to get me to "reconsider my priorities" in life he punished me by revoking my tennis membership at the club. This means I won't be able to attend the Christmas party, which I already have a new velvet dress for. It's midnight blue with willow pattern embroidery... anyway Jimmy won't get to see it. He's my tennis coach and I think he's sweet on me, although my friend Margery says he's sweet on *everyone*. But I love him.

Selma            Well now, that *is* a problem.

Annette          You're an artist, you even have your own art school. It must be nice to be old and not have these types of problems.

Selma I don't have those problems Annette. I have problems finding time to come in here every day to wet the cloths to keep the clay pliable for students. I have students to find for classes, rent to pay on the studio. I have problems finding commissions that pay well, because lord knows teaching won't keep the lights on. My last big commission fell through when I was lied to.

My problem is when I do busts of white folk, I get criticized for not promoting Black folk. When I do busts of Black folk, white folk don't buy them. When I do busts of ordinary folk, I am told serious artists only do famous folk. When I do famous folk, the ordinary folk complain I'm full of airs and graces. When I do celebrities, I get criticized for not immortalizing "serious people" like politicians. And when I do politicians, I'm accused of all sorts of things...

When I create my own work, I'm told it's not like the work of Matisse. When I create work *exactly the same* as Matisse, I get told I'm, "Only copying the greats" and I'm, "not an original".

You have your troubles with Jimmy the tennis coach, I got troubles with Jimmy the Crow. I got problems with segregation and discrimination. I got problems being told the only way to solve this is to march with people holding placards, who have marched so long they done wore out the soles of their shoes. I got problems with white men who run the government, law enforcement, the courts- And one white man in particular who took credit for my portrait that I did of the President of the United States. And when I complained, the FBI start investigating *me*. And this morning when I came to open the studio, a young, white boy spat on me and called me a nigger.

(Annette is aghast. Pause. Selma looks at her art)

Art (softly) She's just a child not all of that is her fault.

(Realizing she has stepped over the line and trying to pull it back to teacher/student) And you know the way I deal with my problems?

(Claude enters to retrieve his notebook, she is unaware of him. Selma crosses to her art.)

I come to my studio, I pick up my hammer and chisel, and I try to carve out a better life for me and for my people and I fashion for myself and others, great, beautiful art for a world that's often ugly.

(Face to face, locked in eye contact with her art.)

And when I show my beautiful art to the man that I loved, he says, "We shouldn't be making beautiful art we should be making art that makes a difference."

Which brings me to my final and biggest problem Annette, I don't know if my art makes a difference.

Claude (softly) It does.

Selma Claude! (He holds up his notebook as an explanation for his return.)

Annette Oh, Miss Selma! I know how you can make a difference. (she goes to her knapsack and pulls out a clipboard) We are collecting signatures. The Social Justice Club at school is fighting racism and we're collecting signatures. This will help.

Selma (not unkindly) No. It won't.

Annette Those Confederate statues that are in the southern states were put up for the glorification of war and justification for... well you know...

Selma Go on...

Annette (Can hardly say the word) Slavery. Some have already been vandalized and spraypainted by more radical groups, but *we* want to do it the ethical way. This is to pressure the state government to take them down. My daddy even signed it and he's a conservative!

Claude And you want to put them in museums?

Annette Heavens no! That would only make them more special -- we want them melted down. You can sign it too Mr...

Claude McKay. Claude McKay.

(Annette passes the petition to him and he signs then holds it out to Selma. Selma looks at the paper and pen and then up at Claude).

Selma It's still somebody's art.

Claude Those things aren't art, they are weapons of oppression and propaganda.

Annette Destroying them is the only solution.

(pause)

Claude If one of those men had lynched your neighbor would you want to walk past it every day? Would you want her to see this constant reminder?

(He thrusts the pen and paper at Selma, she doesn't take it.)

Annette Come on. It's just a signature.

(Long pause Selma turns to her art piece who holds up his hand in the swearing pose. She looks at him and the pose and turns to look at the other two.)

Selma (Holding up her arm. Quietly) Non. Jamais.

Claude (Disgusted) Traitor.



Selma           The solution is to reframe older art, recontextualize, dwarf it, make opposing art, make more art, make even *better* art.

(The art nods in agreement)

I'll fix this my way.

Claude           Will the piece be political?

Selma           Yes.

Claude           In private collection

Selma           No.

Claude           (hopefully) Will it be one of us?

Selma           Yes.

Claude           (Almost holding his breath) Whose bust will it be?

Selma           Not a bust but a full-sized bronze. (she tries out the pose) He will reach out for something just beyond his grasp. He will have one foot as if climbing up.

Claude           (Understanding) Did he make it to the promised land?

Selma           No. He looked over and he knew he wouldn't get there with us, but we know we as a people will get there.

Claude           Not me.

Selma           No, not us. Maybe your daughter.

Claude           (beat) Hope.

(pause)

Annette          I don't understand.

Selma           (directly to her) I know.

(Annette leaves baffled. Claude follows her out.)

(Selma picks up her chisel and hammer.)

(She hits the chisel with the hammer. Sfx the magnification of sound of stone relenting)

(She hits the stone again with more force the noise is louder)

(She hits the stone again and again and again and the sound of stone breaking getting louder and louder and louder. The cracking swells into triumphant music. The lights fade on the stage but then we see a shaft of gold light and standing in it is Dr. King. Selma drops her tools with a loud clang, she is spent.)

*Scene 25*     *Guilt reconciliation*

Her studio

(Patsy is looking at Selma who is polishing Dr. King's butt.)

Patsy            Where did you get the human foot?

Selma            I still have connections at the hospital.

Patsy            You stole human remains?!

Selma            Can't steal what's already mine.

(Pause)

Patsy            Yours?

Selma            I own my body, I have a right to do with it what I will.

Patsy            That's not even true politically, much less legally.

Selma            I didn't like the prosthetic the hospital issued so I carved my own. Going to set my bones back inside it. Then I can sculpt myself whole again.

Patsy            You made your own leg?

Selma            Who else knows it better than me? Well, I still have my vanity. I may have made the ankle a little slimmer.

(She reveals a white plaster of Paris leg, poking up from the boxes, it wiggles its ankle fetchingly.)

Patsy            But you're not a doctor-

Selma            I *am* a doctor. I was awarded eight Ph.D.'s and I *earned* two of 'em.

Patsy            But not in *medicine*.

Selma           Leave. I have a deadline. The unveiling is tomorrow.

Patsy           Unveiling?

King            You aren't the first to sculpt me-

Selma           And I won't be the last -- but you are *my* last.

Patsy           Won't be your last what?

King            I suppose you think doing this work means something.

Selma           It is something. Isn't that better than nothing?

Patsy           Who you talking to? It's either hallucinations or dementia. I'm calling the doctor  
you sound unhinged.

                  (Patsey exits)

King            Are you unhinged Selma Burke?

Selma           Aren't all artists?

King            You are the most eminent Negro sculptor in the USA.

Selma           And, you are the most eminent Negro ever.

King            You won't ever be known. You'll never be adored like I was.

Selma           At least I didn't get assassinated...

King            No, you played it safe.

Selma           (softly) Did I?

King            And now I'm finished, and (he looks at her prosthetic) you're finished-

Selma           Yes. I usually do busts, it's a little strange to have to think about all of your  
anatomy.

King            Well it's been a while since I've been touched there...

                  (she holds his face in her hand)

Selma           And I got your jaw perfect.

King            But there is something -- (he touches his face.)

Selma            There's something about your face... not quite...

King             (laughs) I look a little like-



Rev. Dr. King, Burke



Claude McKay, Carl Van Vechten

(They face out as if to a mirror.)

Selma            Yes, I can see it too. I'm going to get criticized for that. Claude. Brilliant, talented, died without a dime to his name.

King             You don't have a dime with your name.

(She flicks him with her cloth)

Selma            But, I'm worth quite a few dimes, and quarters, dollars too...

King             And all before you married Herman-

Selma            I can't believe I outlived three husbands.

King             And one of 'em white!

Selma            Yes, if Herman were Black I'd still have him. White people, why do they got to go skiing? Black folk have bettah things to do than careen down a mountain with those fool things on. Fool gave himself a heart attack. That man had a big heart. I think it gave out because it was a little bit bigger than most.

Patsey            (coming back with an older mobile phone) Did you fall off the ladder at any point and hit your head?

Selma            Don't keep interrupting me woman. I'm in the presence of Dr. King!

Patsey (exits muttering) I don't know. She thinks she's in the preces of a king...

King Selma Burke why *are* you doing this? You need to assuage your guilt?

Selma Maybe.

King I got the Nobel Peace Prize, what have you done with your life?

Selma I got some awards... The medal President Jimmy Carter gave me in the Oval Office...

King I hope one day we see a Black man sitting behind that desk.

Selma Not just any Black man. You paved the way for one that's noble, intelligent, kind and leads with integrity... People tell me I should have held more signs. Signs come and go. They are usually made of cardboard. I've made you out of bronze, standing on marble.

I have a dream that maybe one day new art will pop up like flowers and populate all parks and streets and no-one will see those other statues.

(Pause, Selma stands back to look at him. He holds out his arms)

(They hug. All the tension seems to drain from her. Standing back to look at him.)

Selma (Big sigh) Thank you Dr. Rev King.

King You've touched my butt -- you can call me Martin.

(She gestures him to his plinth he puts one leg up)

(The lights shift we transition to Marshall Park. It is a bright summer day. Sfx crowd / park She fashions Dr. King's hand into the "Non Jamais" and then continues the pose to him reaching out. The music swells the lights go down on him. She remains in the spotlight; the music swells again. The lights go down on Selma.)



Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Burke

END