



***OTHER PEOPLE'S HEAVEN***  
*by Beau Dixon*



*Study guide for play about  
Viola Desmond's heroic act  
in Nova Scotia in 1946*

**Produced and performed by Firebrand Theatre  
Peterborough, Ontario  
[www.firebrandtheatre.com](http://www.firebrandtheatre.com)**

## Introduction

Viola Davis Desmond was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia on July 6, 1914. She was an African-Canadian who grew up in a prosperous family and who trained to be a hairdresser in Montreal, New York and Atlantic City. She successfully ran her own beauty parlour and beauty college in Halifax, as well as distributing her own line of beauty products around Canada and the United States.

On November 8, 1946, Desmond went to see a movie at the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow, a town north of Halifax, to pass the time while her car was being repaired. She had been travelling around the province on business. She purchased what she thought was a ticket for a downstairs seat in the theatre, but when she went to her seat, she was refused entry because the usher said she had a lower-price ticket for the balcony. Confused, she went back to the cashier and offered to pay the higher price for the downstairs seat, but was told she could only purchase a seat in the upstairs balcony. Undaunted, Desmond took her seat on the ground floor where only white people were allowed to sit. She was forcibly removed from the theatre and arrested. She was eventually found guilty of not paying the one-cent difference in the amusement tax on the lower-priced balcony ticket.

For her defiance of the race rules, Desmond has been referred to as Canada's "Rosa Parks," referring to the black American woman who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, which subsequently started civil rights protests in the United States. Desmond's action took place nine years before Parks', but is not as well known.

This little-known Canadian heroine helped to end segregation in Canada.

## The Play

The play is historical fiction, that is, the essential facts are drawn from history, but the dialogue and some of the details of the plot are from the playwright's imagination, based on what is known of the events. The character of Irene Sweenie has been invented for the purposes of the play.

## Characters in the Play

**Viola Desmond** - African Canadian (Woman Age 32)

**Irene Sweenie** - Caucasian (Woman Age 20-30)

**Elmo C. Langille** - Chief of Police (Man Age 40-50)

## Synopsis

### Scene 1

A black woman is watching a movie in a theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, in 1946. She is tapped on the shoulder by the manager. She doesn't move, but continues to watch the movie. The

man returns with a police officer and both of them pry the woman from her seat and carry her forcibly out of the theatre.

### **Scene 2**

The black woman, Viola Desmond, is sitting upright on the prison bench in a jail cell while a white woman, Irene, is sleeping. Viola is wearing white gloves and is trying to maintain her dignity in an undignified place. When Irene wakes up, she insults Viola by calling her racist names. Viola is confused about why she has been imprisoned.

### **Scene 3**

Langille, a police officer enters to see why there's so much commotion in the cell. Viola asks to make another phone call to her husband, and requests a pillow from Langille, both of which he denies. Langille tells Viola that she has committed a crime, but refuses to tell her what the crime was. Viola defends herself to him by saying she did nothing wrong. Langille tells her to take it up with the judge.

### **Scene 4**

Irene tries to find out from Viola why she's in jail. She asks her if she snuck into the theatre without paying, but Viola says she didn't. Viola insists that she doesn't know why she was arrested.

### **Scene 5**

It is 1 a.m. and both women are still being held in the cell. Langille enters. Irene wants to know when she can get out, and Langille tells her she has to wait for her lawyer to call. Irene was arrested for shoplifting a bottle of perfume from a department store. Langille tells Viola she committed the crime of defrauding the government.

### **Scene 6**

Viola begins to cry. Irene is sympathetic to Viola's plight, and a certain camaraderie starts to develop between them. Viola tells Irene that she owns a beauty shop in Halifax, and produces a line of beauty products that she distributes around the United States and Canada. Irene is visibly impressed by this. Viola tells Irene how she came to be in New Glasgow, north of Halifax. While travelling on business heading towards Sydney, Nova Scotia, her car broke down on the highway and she was forced to stop to seek help.

### **Scene 7 - Flashback to events of the previous day**

Viola enters a service station, where she is virtually ignored by the attendant, who continues to talk on the phone while she waits. When he finally speaks to her, he treats her badly, and even though he appears not to be busy, he says he can't fix her car until the following morning, which means Viola must stay in the town overnight.

### **Scene 8 – Flashback to events of the previous day**

Viola checks into a nearby hotel, and to pass the time in an unfamiliar place, she goes to the Roseland Theatre to watch a movie. Because she is near-sighted, she needs to sit close to the screen and asks for a ticket in the downstairs section. Unbeknownst to her, the cashier gives her a ticket for upstairs, a less expensive seat, and when Viola proceeds to sit downstairs, she is refused entry, ostensibly because she has the wrong ticket. Confused, she goes back to the cashier to rectify the mistake, but is refused a downstairs ticket. The cashier says, "I am not permitted to sell a downstairs ticket to you people." Viola goes to a downstairs seat anyway and

sits down. When the usher calls out to her, she continues to watch the movie. The usher returns with Langville, the chief of police, and both forcibly remove Viola from the theatre.

### **Scene 9**

Langville reads Viola a warrant for her arrest, saying that she has not paid the amusement tax on her theatre ticket. Viola denies the charge, saying that she was willing to pay the difference in price between the upstairs and downstairs seats. She claims she was removed from the downstairs seating section because of her race. She says, “There is no such thing as Other People’s Heaven”. Viola tells how it’s the worst racism she has experienced in Canada and the United States and how hard she has worked as a business person to be respected in the community. Irene, now Viola’s ally, encourages Viola and says to Langville that it was because of Viola’s colour that she was dragged out of the theatre like an animal. Viola says that the town of New Glasgow is covering up racism with a technicality (that she refused to pay for a higher priced ticket, which was not true.) When Irene is told that she is released, she decides not to go, in solidarity with Viola. Irene says that she won’t leave until Viola leaves.

## **Questions and Activities**

1. At the beginning of the play, Irene Sweeney, Viola Desmond’s prison mate, treats Viola quite badly, calling her racist names. By the end of the play, Irene is defending Viola to the police officer and refuses to leave the cell unless Viola is released along with her. How do you account for the change in Irene’s attitude towards Viola?
2. Write a monologue from Viola’s point of view that would reveal the inner struggle she may have experienced before deciding to take a stand for her rights. Take into account her position in society, her being in a strange community, her confusion over why she was arrested.
3. At the beginning of the play, Viola is wearing white gloves and remains sitting straight on the bench while in the prison cell. Compare her demeanour to Irene’s and discuss what Viola’s appearance reveals about her inner character.
4. The end of the play is left to the audience’s imagination. As a class, improvise what you think might be the last scene, with interactions among the characters of Viola, Irene and Langille, the police chief. Think about the motivation behind each character, and try to portray that in the scene. The details of the action can be decided on ahead of time, or could be made up during the improvisation.
5. Even though Viola Desmond’s story was known locally, it has not been widely known throughout Canada until recently. Discuss why it is important to be aware of her story. Think of an example of a present-day act of heroism and research what the outcome was.
6. Viola Desmond has been called Canada’s “Rosa Parks.” Research the incident in Montgomery, Alabama where Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white man. Many believe that that incident sparked the civil rights movement in the United States. Find out as much as you can about that incident and the subsequent protests, and make a presentation to the class.

7. Have you personally experienced discrimination because of your race, age, sex, sexual orientation, religion, or for any other reason? If so, write about what happened and how you felt at the time. If you haven't experienced discrimination, find someone who has and interview them about what happened and how they felt.
8. Think of a recent incident in the news that you think had a racist motive. Find out what happened to the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s).
9. Find out what life was like for black people in Canada in the 1940s.
10. In December 1995, the Parliament of Canada declared February as Black History Month, following a motion by the Honourable Jean Augustine, M.P., the first Black Canadian woman elected to Parliament. Find out more about Jean Augustine, as well as other black Canadians who have made contributions to Canadian society, and present your findings to the class.
11. Do you think there is racism in Canada today? Stage a debate in your class, with each side giving examples to support their position
12. Choose a character from *Other People's Heaven*. Think of four main emotions or adjectives that describe your character and decide on a physical action that relates to each choice. Using tape, map out four boxes on the floor in front of you and number each box. Designate one of the emotions or adjectives to each of the boxes. Take one of your character's monologues and practice the lines using the chosen emotion/adjective while physically standing in the appropriate box while doing the corresponding gesture. When you feel confident, find a partner who will call out the box's number to you at random and then perform the right emotion/adjective and action in the correct box when its number is called.
13. Voice projection is an important part of presenting a play. Beau Dixon, the writer and director of *Other People's Heaven*, suggests this exercise to actors who want to make their voices louder: "Put your back against a wall, bend your knees and pretend you are sitting in an imaginary chair. Focus on speaking from your lower back muscles, not your throat. Say words that have vowels and begin with consonants, such as "baby, bo, boo, or shout out "go team go!" in your loudest outside voice. Each sound should start out high and drop down lower, all sounds coming from the lower back, and using the leg muscles to project your voice. This exercise will help make your voice stronger without damaging it."

## Glossary

*Detain:* to hold or keep in custody

*Defraud:* to cheat, or deprive of something by deception

*Beautician:* one who gives beauty treatments, such as to skin, hair and nails

*Sepomade:* a greasy or waxy substance that is used to style hair

*Summary conviction:* a less serious offence, also known as a petty crime, where there is usually no trial

*Racism:* racial prejudice or discrimination

*Skidaddle:* (*slang*) to move away from, beat it, or get lost

## Further Resources

Backhouse, Constance, *Racial Segregation in Canadian Legal History: Viola Desmond's Challenge, Nova Scotia, 1946*, Faculty of Law, University of Western Ontario., Dalhousie Law Journal

Brand, Dionne, *Bread Out of Stone*, Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994

Staton, Pat, Fine-Meyer, Rose and Gibson, Stephanie Kim, *Unfolding Power: Documents in 20th Century Canadian Women's History*, A compilation of primary documents (diaries, letters, advertisements, essays, photographs) including "Viola Desmond" p. 111, Toronto: Green Dragon Press, 2004.

McTair, Roger (Director), *Journey to Justice*, Montreal: National Film Board, documentary, 47 minutes, recipient Best Documentary Award, 2001 Reel Black Awards, 2000

Johnson, Marcia, *Living in Hope: Viola Desmond's Story*, (Audio CD), starring Klea Scott as Viola and Andrew Moodie as her husband Jack Desmond, featuring original music by Joe Sealy, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, docudrama, 2007

Section15.ca/features/people/2008/01/29/viola-desmond, article on website by Frances Rooney.  
www.bccns.com/viola.htm - website of Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, profile of Viola Desmond

<http://blackhistorycanada.ca/timeline.php?id=1900>, Black History Canada, Historica, timeline

*Other People's Heaven* by Beau Dixon  
Study Guide by Joanne Culley



# Evaluation

Firebrand Theatre welcomes your feedback on *Other People's Heaven*, the play, as well as the study guide. Your comments will help us continue to improve our productions for our audiences. Completed evaluations can be submitted by mail to:

Firebrand Theatre, 189 Lake St., Peterborough, Ont. K9J 2H4

**Please read the comments below and write in a number from the following scale:**

**1. Needs work    2. Adequate    3. Good    4. Excellent**

## The Play

1. Was the content of the play appropriate for the age and grade level of the students? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Was the language accessible to the students? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Describe your students' response to the play. \_\_\_\_\_
4. What other subjects in Canadian history would you like to see developed in a play?

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## The Study Guide

1. Were the activities and information in the guide useful before and after the performance of the play? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which information, questions or activities did you find useful?

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3. Further comments.

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