

# Theatre Review: 'Thurgood' at Theatrical Outfit

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## By Manning Harris

Theatrical Outfit is running a smooth, polished version of the one-man play "Thurgood," inspired by the life of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American to sit on the nation's highest court. The play runs through Oct. 16.

In this season of political and social strife, it's a joy to contemplate the life and words of a courageous, wise, and witty man, and appreciative audiences are inhaling this experience like a whiff of pure oxygen. The show has been a virtual sell-out, and if you hope to score a ticket, call the theatre or go online immediately.



Geoffrey D. Williams in Thurgood. (Photo by Christopher Bartelski)

"Thurgood" is written by George Stevens, Jr., and directed by the accomplished actor Eric J. Little and features a superb performance by Geoffrey D. Williams in the title role.

The play is clearly a labor of love for Theatrical Outfit, and they have left no stone unturned to give the audience a memorable evening.

For example, there is an exhibit of rare photographs, documents, and letters, many of which are on loan from the Atlanta Historical Society, featured in the upstairs foyer of the theatre. I found myself quite moved reading a telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King to Justice Marshall, sent just after his confirmation to the Court in 1967. Of course, Dr. King was assassinated the next year, 1968.

Needless to say, the odds were against Thurgood Marshall, the great-grandson of a slave, becoming a Supreme Court Justice. But through his resilience, tenacity, intelligence, and determination, it happened. He studied law at Howard University Law School, the main setting for the play; and as an attorney, successfully argued before the Supreme Court the landmark case of *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954. As you recall, this decision brought about the desegregation of schools in the United States. This ruling is still being implemented today.

It is risky staging one-person shows because they inherently lack the dramatic tension of actors acting together; and as fine as "Thurgood" is, it is not immune to this pitfall.

But to overcome and transcend it, you must have an outstanding, charismatic actor and a script so compelling that the audience is transported to the life onstage. Fortunately, this play does not shortchange us in either category; it works, beautifully.

For Broadway, where economics is everything, having a famous actor is a virtual *sine qua non* for success in a one-person play. So it's all the more reason to sing Mr. Williams' praises, because despite an extensive résumé, he's not yet nationally famous (though he may well soon be). Yet through his wit, charm, subtlety, and power he wins us over. More to his credit: He allows Thurgood Marshall to win us over.

I loved R. Paul Thomason's simple, elegant set and André C. Allen's inventive, almost hypnotic lighting. Director Little is able to have his star use the levels most effectively; as someone once said, there's a simple falling into place that takes one's breath away.

Can you think of a better, more stimulating way to enjoy a history lesson? I can't.

The undeniable fact is "Thurgood" has got the goods. A film I like has the line, "It's the times; what ugly times we live in." Not here; "Thurgood" reminds us that life can be joyful, and sometimes the good guys win.

For tickets and information, visit [theatricaloutfit.org](http://theatricaloutfit.org).

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