

Mountaintop Reveals Dr. King's 'Humanness'

Written by Rev. Barbara Reynolds
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Backstage at the play *Mountaintop*, Angela Bassett kicked off her shoes and Samuel L. Jackson sported a battle-worn hat, showing no trace of the riveting star quality that had captivated the audience only minutes ago and had lines of fans awaiting autographs outdoors. Both were touchable and huggable, showcasing a dimension in their own interaction, much like their characters on stage, that no matter the layers of fame and fortune, underneath we all are still human.

That quality of the humanness of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., portrayed by Jackson, was the central message of the play *Mountaintop* in an imaginary scene taking place in Room 306 in a Memphis motel, where he encounters a mysterious angelic maid (Angela Bassett). In real life, that motel is where King returned after delivering a powerful prophetic sermon proclaiming that, like Moses, he may not get to the Promised Land with his followers but he certainly had looked over and viewed it from the Mountaintop. In the play, Dr. King wrestled with real fears and agonized over mistakes and imperfections, helped or maybe hindered in his efforts by the spellbinding maid, Camae.

Before attending the play, I shuttered at what boundaries the play might cross in dealing with a modern flesh and blood man, who is also carved in stone on the National Mall. There is a thin line between fiction and reality when dealing with people vs. icons. An expressed goal of the 30-year-old *Mountaintop* playwright Katori Hall was to reach for the "human touch."

I have seen the words "human touch," become a cover to set the stage for exploitative money-grabbing sensationalism. I believe that was the motivation behind the close encounters Ralph Abernathy said he witnessed between Dr. King and women in the Memphis motel on the eve of King's death in Abernathy's autobiography *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*. Family

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members and staff said the depiction was false.

Mountaintop made great leaps of the imagination as it compressed many acts—real or made-up—into one single night that in the morning of April 4, 1968 changed history.

In Mountaintop, audiences saw scenes showing a Dr. King that some close relatives—who did not want to be quoted—did not recognize or would not validate. One scene showed King chain smoking a Pall Mall, sharing a drink from a flask with the maid/angel Camae, where both in a fit of glee exclaimed “F...the White man.”

A smoking, drinking, cussing Dr. King? Heaven Forbid. Is some fiction just a guise for negative re-invention? In watching the play I kept telling myself this is fiction. This is imaginary. Blending of reality with fiction is what theater does. “Chill,” I told myself. Besides, the audience loved it; the actors were incredibly brilliant.

Jackson said, “The minute Dr. King comes on stage and uses the toilet, you know we are talking about a real person not an icon. In fact, I try to be that kind of real person, riding the subway for example. But with a big smile he said, “Fame does help, however, when you are trying to get a good seat in a top restaurant”. That shouldn't be a problem for Jackson. His resume includes more than 100 films, yielding nearly \$7.5 billion for Hollywood, making him about the highest-grossing actor of all time, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

Angela Bassett, one of the nation's most gifted actresses, whose credits include portraying Tina Turner in “What Has Love Got to Do With It,” is deserving of a Tony Award for her incredibly flawless portrayal of Camae who helps Dr. King come to grips with the bullet awaiting him just outside the motel balcony. She is flawless as she pours out a flurry of words in a power-packed soliloquy about the steps ahead in the fight for civil rights.

Equally remarkable is the play was written by 30-year-old African-American playwright Katori Hall, which first made its debut in London last year. A graduate of Columbia University and the Juilliard School, she has won scores of honors, including the Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting award.

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At the end, Jackson delivers memorable lines challenging the audiences to pass the baton to continue the fight for human rights after which film clips roll of King's life retracing his greatness as a leader/savior/martyr. That Dr. King was one of the greatest public figures of our age and "just a man," makes his life easier for everyday folks to emulate," he said.

Was Mountaintop too much fiction? Is it easier to follow in the footsteps of a man who makes very human mistakes, even if they may be fictionalized? Go see for yourself. It is set to end on January 22 when Jackson exits to start filming in Django Unchained, directed by Quentin Tarantino.

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