



MAN WHO WAS KING: (left to right) Samuel L. Jackson as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., & Angela Bassett in 'The Mountaintop.' Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The Mountaintop reveals little about MLK



THE MOUNTAINTOP

Written by Katori Hall

Directed by Kenny Leon

Open run

Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre

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By Scott Harrah

The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is an American historical icon who, just like President John F. Kennedy, will always be somewhat shrouded in mystique because he was assassinated. Regardless, there are volumes of real-life information about “MLK” (as he is often called), so it is perplexing why 30-year-old playwright Katori Hall chose to focus instead on an imaginary recounting of the civil-rights leader’s last night on earth for this drama, winner of the 2010 Olivier Award for Best Play in London.

Even with the star power of such acting heavyweights as Samuel L. Jackson as Dr. King and Angela Bassett as Camae, a maid in the Memphis motel where he spent his final night on April 3, 1968, *The Mountaintop* tells us so little about MLK, and that is truly a shame considering the idea of a stage play about such an historical figure is thought-provoking indeed.

Mr. Jackson is a bona-fide movie star, but he has little Broadway experience, other than being an understudy in *The Piano Lesson*. Does he have the requisite stage presence to bring Dr. King to life for live theater? It is difficult to say, considering that playwright Katori Hall mostly gives him unremarkable dialogue. The play only tells us that Dr. King was afraid of thunder, liked to smoke Pall Malls, was a womanizer, and had a problem with foot odor. Oh, yes, and he chats with God. These are superficial details that unfairly portray Dr. King as one-dimensional, and we know there was much more to the man.

Ms. Bassett as maid Camae is, as always, the consummate actor. However, it takes awhile for her to get into the role in the beginning of the show, portraying Camae as a girlish, naïve maid who is star struck by Dr. King, a man she has only seen before on TV. As the one act progresses, Bassett’s Camae ultimately steals the show as she has far more powerful lines than what Mr. Jackson is given. In fact, the final scene in *The Mountaintop* is one of the most superb moments we may likely see this season on Broadway, but all the glory belongs to Ms. Bassett as she delivers a prophetic soliloquy. Ms. Bassett’s eloquent delivery is dynamic, but she also totally dominates the stage here, making the story seem lopsided. Perhaps both the playwright and director Kenny Leon are to blame here, but this fact alone is puzzling indeed in a drama that is purportedly about Dr. King.

Great plays, particularly when the subject matter is about true-life characters and events, should make audiences leave the theater feeling invigorated because we have learned something historical that is

entertaining and rings with veracity simultaneously. *The Mountaintop*, despite the valiant efforts of Ms. Bassett and Mr. Jackson, reveals almost nothing about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and there must be countless anecdotes about him. Unfortunately, not even one is contained in this disappointing and intellectually unsatisfying venture that simply does not do justice to the legacy of Dr. King.

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