

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Play portrays King as a man, not just a symbol

By Ruth Ross
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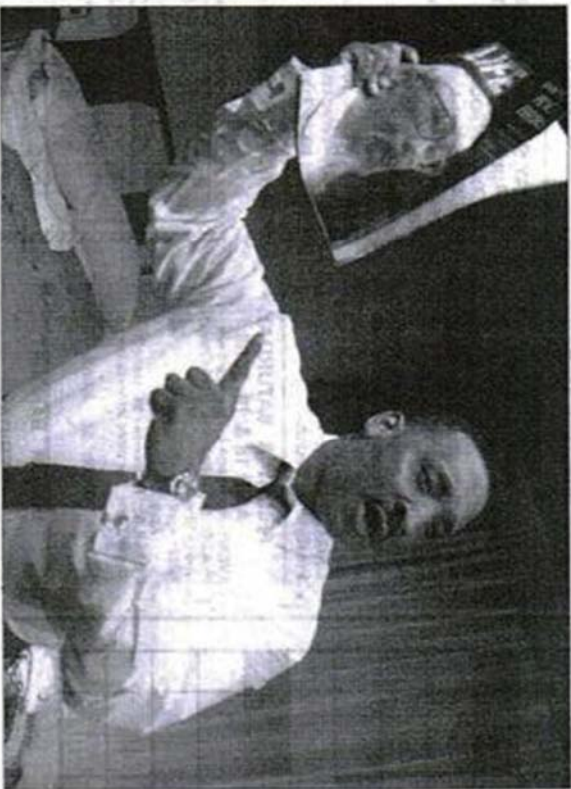
Amidst a spate of politicians' speeches commemorating the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. 40 years ago — one even had Sen. John McCain apologizing for his vote against Martin Luther King Jr. Day — the current production at Luna Stage, "The Man in Room 306," stands out as an extraordinary piece of theater and art.

The play, written and performed by Craig Alan Edwards, received its world premiere at Luna Stage in 1995, has been performed at various professional and university theaters across the country and is the only play ever revived by this local troupe. In its most recent incarnation — once again, directed by Cheryl Katz and starring Edwards — "The Man in Room 306" is a stunning tour de force that is not only timely but reveals a more human side to the great civil rights leader that few people know or remember.

The set by Charlie Cocoran, which has the audience enter the theater through the balcony door and a replica of King's motel room, perfectly evokes the time and place inhabited by King in the hours before he gave his stirring speech to the Memphis sanitation workers and then met his death at the end of a bullet shot by James Earl Ray.

With its half-eaten meal, unfinished game of solitaire and crumpled paper, the scene suggests a life lived and interrupted.

Jill Nagle's atmospheric lighting and sound designer Andy Cohen's use of late '60s



Craig Alan Edwards is Martin Luther King Jr. in "The Man in Room 306," directed and performed by Edwards and also directed by Cheryl Katz, which runs through May 4 at the Luna Stage, 695 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair.

music enhance the experience.

But the evening belongs to Edwards in the performance of a lifetime. With makeup by Jennifer Snowden and vocal intonation and physical mannerisms uncannily like King's,

We get a glimpse of his relationship with his grandmother, who instilled a love of big words in her precocious grandchild; of his overbearing and opinionated father, also a preacher, who appears to have his son's life mapped out for him yet who admonishes him to "play it safe;" and his lively, sometimes neglected, wife, Coretta, who worries that the one suit he owns might disintegrate from constant wearing.

Edwards reveals a man who would rather read the newspaper sports section than write a speech for the next day's match, a man who dreams of being a major league baseball pitcher, a man who delights in playing practical jokes and having them played on him.

In contrast, Edwards' King is a man haunted by the memories of the four little girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing, by the death of the 16-year-old boy in the march just the day before, of the Mississippi children so poor that all they ate for lunch was a quarter of an apple and some crackers.

Edwards conveys King's struggle with his personal doubts and limitations in a stirring scene that has him on his knees, weeping and singing a hymn to God, seeking forgiveness and, ironically, asking the Lord to "take him home" — presumably to heaven.

Finally, Edwards' spot-on delivery of King's final speech, in which he prophetically declares, "I have been to the mountain top and I have seen the Promised Land... I may not get there with you," is both stirring and sad.

He communicates the power of the words

so beautifully that one weeps for what might have been if King had not been murdered.

By humanizing the iconic Martin Luther King Jr., Edwards and Luna Stage have performed a great service to theater-goers and the general public alike.

For one thing, we are reminded that many of our idols are human and have feet of clay, whether they be our preachers, our politicians or our parents.

For another, forgiveness of mistakes is important if we are to move forward to the Promised Land, whatever that is for us, individually or collectively.

The play's title says it all: "The Man in Room 306" is the story of a man, not a symbol. As such, this production, which runs through May 4 at Luna Stage in Montclair, is a "must see," appropriate for an audience including both teenagers — who might not know much about Martin Luther King Jr. other than what they've read in history textbooks — and those old enough to remember seeing him on television or, perhaps, marching with him in Washington, D.C. Don't miss it.

"The Man in Room 306" will be performed Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m.

Located at 695 Bloomfield Ave. in Montclair, Luna Stage is wheelchair accessible and has assistive listening devices and pre-show hours for the sight impaired upon request. For information and tickets, call the box office at 973-744-3309 or visit www.lunastage.org.