

Poignant, powerful 'Man in Room 306'

by Peter Filichia, **Star-Ledger** Staff
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PIERFRANCESCO BACCARO

"The Man in Room 306," written and performed by Craig Alan Edwards.

The Man in Room 306

Where: Luna Stage Company, 695 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair

When: Through May 4. Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m.

How much: \$20 Thursdays, \$25 Fridays and Sundays, and \$30 Saturdays. Call (973) 744-3309 or visit lunastage.org.

Of course, seeing a play about Martin Luther King on the 40th anniversary of his assassination would have to be mighty powerful. Friday's night's audience at Luna Stage Company in Montclair certainly found that to be the case. But Craig Alan Edwards' "The Man in 306" would be a mesmerizing theatrical experience any day of the week.

Edwards, with a strong assist from his able director Cheryl Katz, created this 90-minute intermissionless work 13 years ago. The show then had its world premiere at Luna's original theater at Oak Place. It was impressive then, and even better now in Luna's new digs. Charlie Corcoran is one reason why. He has designed not just the antiseptic, cookie-cutter interior of Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn., but the cinder-block exterior, too. This way, theatergoers get the sense that King allowed himself only the most modest accommodation budget, and that he preferred to spend his money for more productive ends.

Edwards takes us to April 3, 1968, the last full night of King's life, when ominous thunder and lightning kept him from taking a much-needed nap. He starts thinking out loud, takes a (too long) phone call, then segues into directly addressing the audience. That's a bit clunky; after all, he didn't have a crowd listening to him in his motel room that night.

What does work, though, is when he starts talking aloud to J. Edgar Hoover. The FBI chief, of course, isn't there, but his electronic surveillance equipment could well be.

What's refreshing is that when King ruminates on his past, he doesn't just pick self-aggrandizing highlights. Lest we think his fellow blacks always appreciated his methods and goals, he recalls a surprisingly unsuccessful visit to Harlem.

The future? He's planning for it. Even such a simple moment as his getting on the phone and making an appointment for next Thursday packs a poignant wallop. So does his reaching for a cigarette, noting that he should quit. "This will be my last one," he says -- an observation that very well might have turned out to be true.

Edwards does a fine job of giving audiences King the man, not King the plaster saint. He shows us King was once the little boy baseball fan, and now the adult who isn't above playing a childish practical joke on his colleague, Ralph Abernathy. Most daringly, the playwright doesn't shy away from the stories that King was unfaithful to his wife on many of his business trips.

At times, the material could seem calculated if Edwards weren't so in control of it. King ruminates that Malcolm X was only 39 when he was assassinated. "39!" he cries in pained outrage. This comes not long after he's established that he's 39 himself. Nevertheless, Edwards' delivery makes the observation seem as if he thought of it that very second, and the spontaneity keeps the line from feeling hokey. Indeed, Edwards and Katz have worked hard to show a fundamental truth about human nature: People of greatness can feel defeated, and come close to reaching that threshold. What King does when he's at his lowest is illuminating. So is what happens afterwards. Theatergoers may feel so exhilarated by what they see that they too could feel they've been to the mountaintop with Martin Luther King.

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