

Talkin' Broadway Review:

NEW JERSEY

by Bob Rendell

Martin Luther King, Jr. Revivified Forty Years Later

The Man in Room 306 is a one man show which depicts the 39-year-old Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination. The current production opened at Luna Stage on the 40th anniversary of that night.



Craig Alan Edwards

Of course, any play about the Dr. King has to be political. And, unless it were most perverse and revisionist, it would have to pay homage to this great man who labored to achieve equality for his people without violence and without demonizing the country which had imposed massive inequality and injustice upon them. Given the tenor of the times and the virulence of the forces opposing him, Dr. King's leadership was extraordinary and a great gift to all Americans. *The Man in Room 306* certainly pays tribute to this.

However, the distinction which sets this play above being a play that's good for you, and makes it a play that's truly gripping and inspiring is the fact that the centrality of the play is an exploration of the personal, inner life of an imperfect man who came to be driven by a divinely inspired vision and sacrificed his life in pursuit of it. Obviously, no one can precisely know the inner life of another. However, author-actor Craig Alan Edwards has created a Dr. King who is, without reservation, as believable as he is inspiring, and as human as he is magnificent.

The setting is Dr. King's room at the Lorraine Motel in Jim Crow Memphis. The meticulous setting is placed so that we face the façade of the modest motel as we enter the theatre. We then pass through the door to Room 306 and enter into a fully detailed, hyper-realistic motel room before proceeding to our seats, which are on two contiguous sides of the set. We hear over the bedside radio that Dr. King is leading Memphis' largest ever civil rights demonstration. Some dissident demonstrators have rioted, the police

have employed tear gas against the demonstrators, and a 15-year-old demonstrator has been killed. Dr. King is awakened from a troubled sleep by the sounds of rain and thunder. He wants to write a new speech, but he is too exhausted and troubled to get very far. At first, he takes a phone call. Then he talks a bit to himself. Before we know it, he is talking to us. The transitions are smooth and natural. There is nothing jarring or false as we eagerly embark on a 90 minute journey through the life and mind of Dr. King.

We learn of Dr. King's love of baseball; his need to feel free of a dominating father; his courtship of his wife, Coretta; his regret for dalliances and neglect of family while traveling on behalf of civil rights; the difficulty of coping with surveillance and harassment by the F.B.I.; the reason why he felt he had to speak out about Vietnam despite pressures not to do so; his sense of guilt over the death of the young demonstrator; and of his premonition that he will not long survive.

The Man in Room 306 was developed by Craig Alan Edwards with the assistance of director Cheryl Katz here at Luna Stage which presented its premiere production in 1995. It has since been performed at theatres and universities around the country. Among other acting assignments, Edwards has often performed this play and a program of the speeches of Martin Luther King. Despite this, Edwards brings a sense of freshness and spontaneity to his performance. There is a fire and intensity in his performance that convinces us that he passionately cares about the ideas about equality and reconciliation, and belief in the American dream that characterize Dr. King. Director Cheryl Katz has likely done much more, but if her only contribution had been to give Edwards the freedom to reach into himself to bare Dr. King's soul, it is a laudable accomplishment.

The play concludes with a partial recital of the "I've been to the mountain top" speech that Dr. King delivered on the last night of his life. Although some news analysts have written recently that white Americans have no reference point with which to understand the tone and content of black church services, many of us do have a reference point and it is the sermons and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Craig Alan Edwards and Luna Stage have done all of us a service by returning their author and his words to us with such compelling vigor.

The Man in Room 306 continues performances (Thurs. 7:30 pm/ Fri. & Sat. 8 pm/ Sun. 2 pm) through May 4, 2008 at Luna Stage, 695 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair, N.J., 07042. Box Office: 973-744-3309; online: www.lunastage.org.

The Man in Room 306 written and performed by Craig Alan Edwards; directed by Cheryl Katz

Photo: Pierfrancesco Baccaro