

‘The Mountaintop’ turns history into sublime theater



Avondina Willis (foreground, with Sarah Cruse) is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the night before his assassination in Memphis in the moving and illuminating Actors' Theatre production of 'The Mountaintop.' Photo by Jana Marcus.

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1 COMMENT

“Exquisite” is not a word theater critics throw around lightly. Yet that is exactly the word that describes the Actors’ Theatre production of “The Mountaintop” which runs through Oct. 15 and, if the universe is just, if should sell out every performance.

Katori Hall’s 95-minute “re-imagined” version of Martin Luther King Jr.’s last night (performed without an intermission) is completely mesmerizing with absorbing, touching acting and Eric Gandolfi’s tight direction that keeps the audience focused on the two lone performers at all times.

Though a big bear of a man with little resemblance to MLK, Avondina Willis has the swagger, the energy and the voice to convince anyone he is that revered figure. Then in sashays the remarkable Sarah Cruse as the impudent motel maid Camae, who gives the reverend Dr. King a run for his money in every way possible.

This is a wordy play, and the two actors spend the entire time in a rather commonplace motel room which represents room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Yet there’s a lot of action going on between the actors (and the ear-splitting thunder outside), so the setting never feels claustrophobic.

It’s April 3, 1963. King has just returned to his motel room, somewhat ruffled and exhausted after delivering what’s known as the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech at Memphis’s Mason Temple. He was in town on behalf of the city’s black sanitation workers who, he said, deserved to “get their due.”

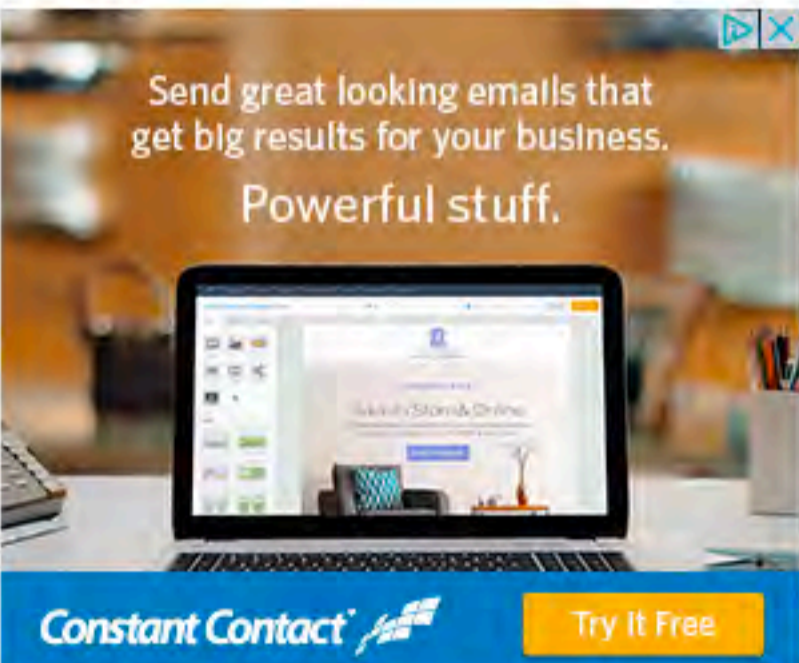
Instead, King died there – at the Lorraine – on April 4.

From this nugget of information, Hall created her entire play, starting out with straightforward facts, then meticulously weaving in bits of the surreal, some of which are spiritual and some make-believe. Although the surprising turn of events at the end are invented, they help make sense of things that really made no sense during that racially troubled time.

So if that sounds topical today, all the better. But it’s also heartbreaking that so little has changed in the 49 years since King was assassinated.

Playwright Hall deservedly won the 2010 Laurence Olivier Award for best new play for “The Mountaintop.” Yet without thoughtful direction and meaningful acting, it likely would be difficult to sit through.

Willis is a wondrously likeable King – thoughtful and wise at times, lighthearted and a bit roguish other times. And Cruse is a scene-stealer from the moment her Camae recognizes King needs more than just a cup of coffee. She’s definitely worthy of the company she’s been sent to keep. (No wonder King wants room service to last longer than it should!)



Some special effects in this production – especially the earth-shattering thunder that roars through the theater several times – add another dimension. A couple of others are best left unspecified less they lose their surprise element, but credit is due sound designer Bonnie Ronzio and lighting designer Carina Swanberg. The video montage created by Gandolfi also adds a sobering, realistic touch toward the end of the play.

Kirk Gandolfi’s modest motel room is grounded in reality, a visual reminder of King’s humility. No

grandiose hotels or luxurious suites for him. He even jokes that he’s stayed at the Lorraine so often his room is known as the “King-Abernathy Suite,” a reference to his closest friend and fellow African-American civil rights movement leader, Ralph Abernathy.

Abernathy never appears in the play but is referenced several times because he’s left the motel to buy a pack of Pall Mall cigarettes for MLK (his favorite smoke). It turns out that Camae not only has some “Pell Mell’s” (her pronunciation) which she shares with King, she also pulls several other surprises out of her pockets.

Hall’s rich dialogue is simply spellbinding. At one point King dejectedly tells Camae that the talk he gave that day wasn’t well attended. “Folks just don’t care,” he laments. She retorts, “No. Folks afraid of gettin’ blown up.”

Later, Camae tells him, “Walking will only get you so far, preacher man,” to which MLK retorts, “We’re marching for a living wage, not a goddam TV!”

When King shows his human side by telling Camae that she’s pretty, she grins demurely and says “You already told me three times.” He protests that he’s only mentioned it twice, but she says coyly, “Preacher K, you said it two times with words, and one time with your eyes.”

He tells her that he’ll likely die from smoking, but the wise-beyond-her-years Camae tells him that “civil rights will kill you before those Pell Mell’s.”

One of the best scenes comes when the brash maid puts on King’s extra-large suit jacket and smelly shoes, jumps atop one of the twin beds and does an impressive impersonation of the civil rights leader’s way of speaking, ending when she emotionally calls for a “new day.”

That’s powerful, evocative, compelling theater. Don’t miss it.

Katori Hall’s ‘The Mountaintop’

When: Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m and Sundays at 3 p.m., through Oct. 15

Where: Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

Tickets: \$25 general; \$22 senior/student

Details: www.sccat.org