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CATEGORY ARCHIVES: THEATER REVIEWS

## The Mountaintop

Posted on [October 2, 2017](#)



By Philip Pearce

On an afternoon just before the Las Vegas gun massacre, said to be the biggest in modern American history, I sat in Actors' Theatre Santa Cruz watching a play set on the afternoon just before Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down in a Memphis motel.

Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* is a strange work, less a speculation on how King might actually have spent his last hours on earth than an extended kaleidoscope meditation on a man facing up to the irony of being both a flawed human being and a national saint.

It's set in Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel as an exhausted King shouts out the door into a thunderstorm, sending his roommate Ralph Abernathy in search of cigarettes. He then phones room service for a cup of coffee. It arrives in the hands of a hotel maid with an attitude named Camae.

They then spend the better part of the play's running time (the program says 90 minutes, but it lasted just under 105 on Sunday) smoking (she supplies the Pall Malls), chatting, teasing, challenging, fighting, getting to know each other.

Avondina Wills as King and Sarah Cruse as Camae give a lot of energy and activity to an extended two-hander segment that would challenge actors more seasoned and experienced than they are. Director Erik Gandolfi moves them around vigorously, but the shifts and permutations of their flirtatious sparring continue long after we have a pretty clear picture of who they are. He is exhausted and frantic, suspicious that the room may be bugged, sensitive about his personal appearance and hygiene, affable but deceptive in a phone call home to Coretta, terrified that every thunderclap is a gunshot. His chambermaid visitor is pretty, provocative, potty-mouthed, and shows puzzling flashes of folk wisdom and seems to know a lot about "Preacher King."

The first portion of Hall's script presents the dark and sloppy side of Martin Luther King so relentlessly that you welcome Cruse's quick-witted jibes and kittenish emotional fireworks. Apart from a tender moment on the phone with his daughter in Atlanta, Wills makes you wonder whether all the soaring eloquence and passion of King's public persona are just ingredients of a hollow facade.

The closing third of *The Mountaintop* solves that puzzle. Just when you want to cry "Enough, already!" the script erupts in a plot twist that shows King at his finest and drastically repositions everything you've thought you knew about what has been happening thus far. No spoiler I, that's all I'll tell you. But the final third of this weird and wonderful play is fascinating, iconoclastic and beautifully acted.

Whether it is also thematically convincing and believable is a question I can't at this point deal with.

The production continues weekends through October 15th.

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