Humanizing a Legend: â??The Mountaintopâ?• at Utah Shakespeare Festival

Description

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CEDAR CITY, UTâ??*The Mountaintop,* currently staged at the **Utah Shakespeare Festival** (USF), delivers a profound and thought-provoking portrayal of **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.â??s** final night. Crafted by playwright **Katori Hall**, the play is set in the infamous Room 306 of the **Lorraine Motel** in **Memphis** on **April 3, 1968**, the night before Kingâ??s assassination. The story begins with a weary Dr. King encountering a mysterious and beautiful yet equally hilarious maid, **Camae**, whose true identity and purpose unfold gradually, revealing profound insights into Kingâ??s legacy and humanity.

Pulitzer Prize, **Olivier Award**, and two-time **Tony Award** nominee **Katori Hall** is the Playwright of *The Mountaintop*. Better known for her musical, ***Tina: The Tina Turner Musical***, her writing excels in humanizing a revered figure like Dr. King. The dialogue blends humor, poignancy, and philosophical reflection, tackling themes of mortality, legacy, and the ongoing struggle for social justice. The play does not shy away from portraying Kingâ??s flaws and fears, making his character more relatable and his achievements even more remarkable. The play premiered in London to critical acclaim, winning the 2010 **Olivier Award** for Best New Play â?? the British equivalent of winning a **Tony** in the U.S. â?? before it opened on Broadway.

Camae offers Dr. King a cigarette in a motel room in Utah Shakespeare Festival's The Mountaintop. Abdul-Khaliq Murtadha as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Alia Shakira as Camae in the 2024 production of *The Mountaintop.* (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

> â??A warts-and-all portrayal of Dr. King is important because thereâ??s this extraordinary human being who is actually quite ordinary . . . I feel as though by portraying him with his flaws and foibles, we, too, can see â?? as human beings who have these flaws â?? that we, too, can be Kings; we, too, can carry on that baton that he has passed down to us.â?•
> ***~Katori Hall~***

In an interview with NPR, Hall said, â??I grew up always having his [Kingâ??s] voice in my ears, and in my heart and in my mind.â?• However, channeling Kingâ??s well-known voice can be a challenge for actors: â??I always tell an actor who is about to play King, â??Itâ??s more about capturing the essence of him; itâ??s more about capturing the charisma.â?? â?• In USFâ??s production, you get both.

> NPRâ??s *All Things Considered*: Interview with Katori Hall

Abdul-Khaliq Murtadha, portraying Dr. King, masterfully captures the complexity of Kingâ??s character, balancing his public persona as a civil rights icon with the private vulnerabilities of a man burdened by his mission. Murtadhaâ??s portrayal is heartfelt and multifaceted, showcasing Kingâ??s charisma, humor, and moments of doubt. **Alia Shakira**, playing Camae (named after the playwrightâ??s Mother and Grandmother), delivers a powerful performance, transitioning from a seemingly ordinary hotel maid to an unusual celestial guide, adding a dynamic and moving counterpoint to Kingâ??s character. Shakira is a strong comedic actress whom the audience immediately falls in love with. Impressive, considering that Murtadha is impersonating one of the most extraordinary people to ever live and does an exceptional job at it.

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The interplay between realism and supernatural elements is an unusual aspect of this play that makes Hallâ??s writing unique. For example, at one point in the play, King opens up his hotel room door in an attempt to escape Camae, and out of nowhere, snow flies inâ??remember, we are in Memphis, Tennessee, and it is April, so that is crazy. However, the transition between these two can occasionally feel uneven. But overall, Director **Cameron Knight** does an incredible job with this.

> Camae in a maid's uniform stands with a hand on her hip, smiling, in The Mountaintop.
> Alia Shakira as Camae in the 2024 production of *The Mountaintop.* (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

With a keen eye for intimacy, **Knight** immerses the audience in what feels like a deeply personal conversation **Knight directed a similarly stunning adaptation of **The Tempest** (2022) in the same theatre, featuring **Jasmine Bracey** as Prospero two years earlier*. **Jo Winiarski**â??s scenic design creates a simple yet evocative setting that captures the confined and tense atmosphere of the motel room. **Jaymi Lee Smith**â??s lighting design and **Joe Payne**â??s projection work are instrumental to this play and Knightâ??s vision; they enhance the supernatural elements of the narrative, particularly during Camaeâ??s revelations. The sound design by **ien DeNio** adds a crucial layer, heightening the emotional intensity and underscoring the playâ??s pivotal moments. Costume design by **Jeffery Lieder** places us effectively in 1968. I loved looking up to the sound and lighting booth to see Stage Manager **R. Christopher Maxwell** dancing to **Childish Gambinoâ??s** â??This is Americaâ?• as the audience exited the theatre.

> A wall of projected photographs and headlines from the civil rights era fills the stage in The Mountain
> Abdul-Khaliq Murtadha as Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 2024 production of *The Mountaintop.* (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

There were so many profound statements made through this play. For me, one that stands out was when Camae brought up MLK Jr.â??s daughter Bernice.
CAMAE. The truth ainâ??t gotsta to be fair. Itâ??s the truth.
KING. But why you?

CAMAE. Believe you me, I ainâ??t want this job. First day? Bring over you? The Kang? I ainâ??t wanna do it. But God been gettinâ?? these prayers from a littlun named Bunny. â??Please, God, donâ??t let my daddy die alone.â?• When I heard it â?¦ Well, it just â??bout broke my heart. I just had to come â?¦

KING. You know her nickname â?¦ Bernice, my sweet Bernice. My baby girl spoke to you?

CAMAE. Her prayers are powerful. I can tell sheâ??s yourâ?? n. She gots a way with words. A gift. Soundinâ?? like she gone be a preacher one day. I donâ??t like chirren too much, but she â?¦ she somethinâ?? .

KING. My Bunny, my baby girl. Even she knows â?¦

CAMAE. Yes. I gotta take you to the other side. Look, I know you afraid, Preacher Kang â??

KING. How you know Iâ??m afraid?

CAMAE. Because â?¦ You should be.

A large projection of Dr. King's face looms over the motel room set in The Mountaintop. 2024 production of *The Mountaintop.* (Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024.)

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Up until this point in the play, we know little about why Camae is there to speak to King. I appreciate that Hall chose to highlight the faith of a child instead of Kingâ??s faith. What a powerful statement of hope for the future. The interplay between **Shakira** (Camae) and **Murtadha** (King) enhances the dramatic tension and underscores the emotional weight of the scene. Camae reprimands King while also providing him with comfort. As she slowly exposes who she is and why she is there.

I have followed Kingâ??s daughter, **Dr. Bernice King**, on social media for some time now, and she is indeed following in the footsteps of her father, providing a powerful voice for justice and equality for all.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Bernice A. King (@berniceaking)

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The Mountaintop, currently playing at the Utah Shakespeare Festival, is a powerful and moving production that offers a fresh perspective on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.â??s legacy. Strong performances, combined with thoughtful direction and design, create a compelling exploration of a historical iconâ??s humanity. The play successfully invites the audience to reflect on Kingâ??s enduring impact and the ongoing relevance of his message.

At an after-the-show seminar and talk-back, theatergoers gave overwhelmingly positive feedback. Some of the reactions included comments like â??Absolutely amazing,â?• â??Very moving,â?• and â??Very powerful,â?• which speaks to the showâ??s emotional and thought-provoking nature. One of the most poignant reactions came from 83-year-old Veteran **Bob Van Steenburg**, who I learned was deployed, serving our country in Vietnam during Kingâ??s assassination.

> I came out of that play wanting to talk to someone about itâ?¦I am an old white man, who lived in that era. I wanted to talk with a Black man who lived in that era. I wanted to talk to a with a young Black person who didnâ??t live in that era and the same with a young white personâ?¦I had to talk to someone about all my feelings and thoughts about that play. It just made me want to engage with somebodyâ?¦thats what that play did to me.
>
> ~Bob Van Steenburg~

The power of this play lies in its ability to humanize a figure often seen as perfect, reminding us that, despite his flaws, Dr. Kingâ??s contributions to peace, love, and justice are invaluable. In these politically divided times, *The Mountaintop* serves as a vital reminder of our shared humanity and the importance of building bridges through understanding and dialogue.

> â??Weâ??ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesnâ??t matter with me now. . . And Iâ??ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!â?•
> ***Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

â??Iâ??ve Been to the Mountaintop!â?• (April 3, 1968 â?? Memphis, Tenn.) Video from **The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change**â??**YouTube**
https://www.npr.org/2024/02/07/1228320048/black-history-mlk-speeches-martin-luther-king

Content Advisory

An inspirational historical fiction, this play includes explicit language, including several uses of the â??fâ?• word, uses of an offensive racial slur, and mature themes regarding infidelity, sexual content, and violent imagery. May not be suitable for pre-teens.

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Venue: Eileen and Allen Anes Studio Theatre, Located in the Beverley Taylor Sorenson Center for the Arts

Sponsored by the Guild of the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Address: 101-199 W University Blvd, Cedar City, UT 84720

Dates: Select dates until October 5, 2024, at 2:00 PM and 8:00 PM

Tickets: $30â??60

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2. Educational Reviews
3. Reviews
4. Shakespeare
5. Theatre

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1. "This is America"
2. Abdul-Khaliq Murtadha
3. Alia Shakira
4. April 3
5. Bernice King
6. Bob Van Steenburg
7. Camae
8. Cameron Knight
9. Childish Gambino
10. Dr. Bernice King
11. Dr. Martin Luther King
12. I've Been to the Mountaintop
13. ien DeNio
14. Jasmine Bracey
15. Jaymi Lee Smith
16. Jeffery Lieder
17. Jo Winiarski
18. Joe Payne
19. Katori Hall
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Date
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Date Created
2024/07/26
Author
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