

Dr. King is a vividly human hero in this Luna Stage production

ARTS
BY THOM MOLYNEAUX
for The Montclair Times

Opening on the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the Luna stage production of "The Man in Room 306" pays tribute, not to the myth or icon, but the man.

In Craig Alan Edwards' well-researched and brutally honest script, and in Mr. Edwards' effective portrayal of King's flaws and weaknesses as well as his strengths, the actor/author has taken Dr. King off the pedestal and brought him down to earth. His Dr. King walks among us — still a hero, but a flesh-and-blood very human hero.

Using the intimacy of the Luna Stage space and Charlie Corcoran's detailed set of that fateful room in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, the director, Cheryl Katz, stages the show with a fluidity and affinity for the material that keeps the audience riveted, from the opening thunder and lightning storm that startles the sleeping King, to the final crackling radio reports that broadcast his death.

Katz brings the audience into the story before the show even starts. To get to your seat, she has arranged it so that you have to cross the motel balcony, where you know a sniper's bullet will tell the Rev. King before the night is over, and walk through room 306 with its messy furniture, laid out deck of playing cards, half-eaten food and open Coke bottles. This is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., up close and personal.

Craig Alan Edwards knows that at this point in his life, Dr. King is a marginalized figure in the civil

rights struggle. His opposition to the Vietnam War had upset other civil rights leaders who thought it muddled their message and would lose them support, and his advocacy for nonviolence was anathema to younger blacks and proponents of Black Power.

Putting his focus on poverty ahead of racism did not sit well with other leaders, but Dr. King didn't think it made much sense to win the right to sit at a lunch counter if once you're sitting there you don't have enough money to buy a burger and coffee.

King is in Memphis to support a sanitation workers strike. The workers, who have no rights, are so poorly and erratically paid that even though they are working, they still depend on welfare to survive.

The campaign is not going well. At a demonstration the previous night, a young boy was killed. King's staff is despondent; they are ready to give up. Dr. King is being reviled in the press and on TV and radio. We even hear Sen. Robert Byrd call him a troublemaker — "Someone who gets other people killed, then sneaks off."

The responsibility he feels for people who are killed or hurt in his campaigns, and the failures that lately beset him, cause Dr. King to look at his life and his work.

Edwards as King tries to make us understand the man and his mission. His self-examination is open and honest. He shares with us his fantasies — of being a baseball player like his hero Satchel Paige or an opera star, even singing and acting for us an aria and death scene from his favorite opera. We watch him deal with J. Edgar Hoover and the "bugging" FBI. He

GO AND SEE

"The Man in Room 306," plays through May 4, at Luna Stage, 695 Bloomfield Ave. The drama is written and performed by Craig Alan Edwards and directed by Cheryl Katz.

Performances are on Thursdays at 7:30 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets range from \$20 to \$30 with discounts available for students and seniors.

For reservations, call the box office at 973-744-3309, or visit online at www.lunastage.org.

lets us see the practical joker and the boy and young man who felt crushed by the heavy shadow of his powerful preacher father. We learn that he agreed to become a preacher as a way of getting out of a jam with the elder Rev. King.

As he goes deeper, we not only learn of his dreams but also of the nightmares that haunt him. He is most horrified by the vivid image of the four little girls who were killed in the Birmingham bombing. In his sleep, he sees the children's hair burst into flames, the skin on their faces begins to bubble and melt, and beneath the skin he sees not their skulls but the faces of his own

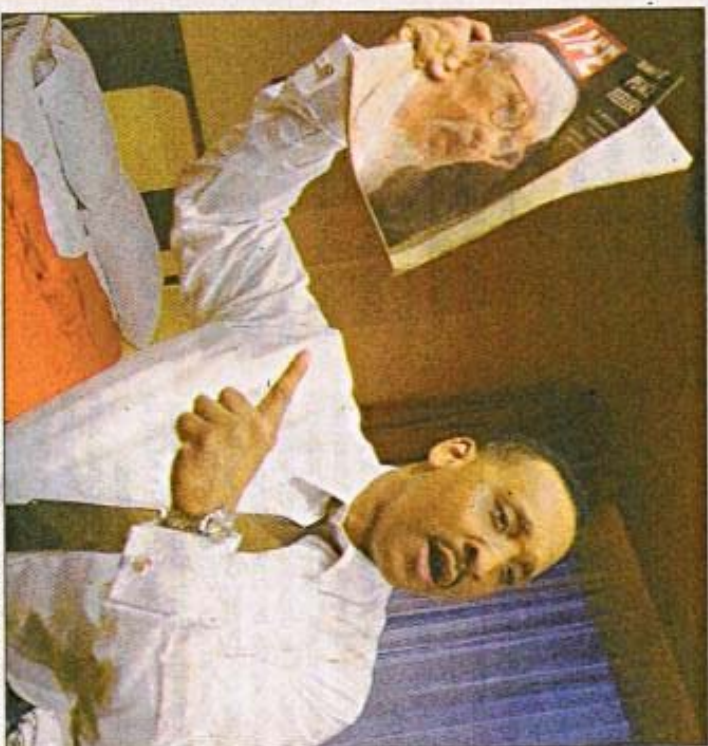


Photo courtesy of Pierfrancesco Baccaro

SHAPING THE DREAM: Craig Alan Edwards portrays Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in "The Man in Room 306," being performed through May 4 at Luna Stage, 695 Bloomfield Ave. The play is written and performed by Edwards, and directed by Cheryl Katz.

four children. Finally he confronts his greatest weakness and flaw, his womanizing. He has to acknowledge his unfaithfulness to Coretta, the young girl he married over his father's objections, the mother of his children and the woman he still deeply loves.

This soul-searching, this weighing of personal vice and personal virtue, venial behavior and idealistic aspirations, brings Dr. King to his knees in prayer. In a dramatic, emotional scene he begs God's forgiveness and puts his trust in His hands. Making his peace with God somehow makes the two events that follow — his famous, "I have been to the mountain top" speech that night, and his assassination the next morning — not tragedy but triumph.

The sniper's bullet ends the life of the man in room 306 and begins the myth of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.