THE THEATRE

TICKET TO PARADISE

Katori Hall on Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s final hours.

BY JOHN LAHR

artin Luther King, Jr., may have be the subject of a Broadway show. Katori Hall's "The Mountaintop" (directed by Kenny Leon, at the Bernard B. Jacobs) puts the great man in Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel, in Memphis, and asks us to imagine the last few hours before he was assassinated on the balcony outside its door. As the play opens, it's raining; King (the admirable, compelling Samuel L. Jackson) shouts to Ralph Abernathy to get him some Pall Malls, calls room service, and goes to the bathroom. "We hear him urinate," the stage direction reads, clueing us in to the author's strategy: we are going to get up close and personal with the martyr. He has, we soon discover, smelly feet; and, according to Hall, those rank feet are made of clay. What are King's sins? Cigarettes, dirty socks, and a sweet tooth for women—in this case, the shapely, impertinent maid, Camae (Angela Bassett), who delivers his late-night coffee and is as fast with the service as she is with her down-home double-entendres. "Well, I been called quickie Camae befo'," she says as she enters. Her real seduction, in the ninety minutes that follow, turns out to be of the audience, not of King.

In 1950, Zora Neale Hurston called attention to the dominance in American literature of the stereotypes of the "'exceptional' Negro" and the "quaint" Negro, and argued for a depiction of black life in all its ordinariness. Sixty years on, Hall, who is also an actress, is presenting what looks like a progressive departure in drama but is, in fact, a reversion to type; her twist on the old narrative trope is that King, the exceptional man, is shown to be normal, while the quaint maid, who behaves like a refugee from the chitlin' circuit, turns out to be exceptional. (She's an angel who has been delegated to transport King to Paradise.)

"The Mountaintop" is a fantasy disguised as a naturalistic tale. But, because the fantasy doesn't kick in until midway through the story, Hall is faced with an impossible dramaturgical problem: how to keep Camae onstage after she has delivered King's coffee. We are told that this is Camae's first day on the job. "Wanted to come in early," she tells King, conscientiously. Nonetheless, instead of working she hangs around in Room 306. She has to, because Hall needs a device to provoke King into speech, if not drama. The character has no apparent need to stay onstage, nothing active and truthful to motivate herunless she is trying to bed the martyrin-waiting, a notion that the play toys with and, thankfully, rejects. "Shuga, shush," Camae says to King, in response to his transparent come-on. "You just a man. If I was you, I'd be starin' at me, too." Instead, what we get is vamping: Camae tells jokes, swigs from her hip flask, swaps cigarettes, jumps onto King's bed in King's jacket to give her own oration, and has a knockdown, drag-out pillow fight with the minister. "You lil' pulpit poet you. I likes you," she improbably tells him. When Bassett is properly directed, she is one of our finest actresses (see her in the late Brian Gibson's "What's Love Got to Do with It"); here she has been encouraged to go broad, and she carries on like Moms Mabley. "Must be muthafuckin' grand to mean so much to somebody," Camae says to King. "Shit. GODDAMN must be grand." Hall's glib dialogue is meant to play as street-smart sass; to my ear, it plays as pandering.

In fairness to the production, it should be said that when "The Mountaintop" was staged in London in 2009 it won the Olivier Award for best new play. The night I saw the show, a large

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portion of the audience stood and cheered. But even on its own terms, "The Mountaintop" makes no sense; it's a mess disguised as meaning. Take the vexing issue of the Angel Camae. True, in the naturalistic portion of the play there are little hints about her identity. "I'm a magician," she says, producing a cigarette when King thought she had none. "I ain't yo ordinary ole maid," she adds. At one point, she addresses King by his actual name—Michael—which almost leads to her being ejected from the room as a spy, or an "incognegro," as King calls her. But all this begs the question: If she's an angel come to lead King to the other side, why all the foreplay? Why not just skip the disguise and take him? When the play does finally lurch into magical realism, King and the audience have the same thought. "Where are your wings?" he asks. Bassett grabs her breasts. "These'll get me anywhere I need to go," she says. The line gets a laugh, but the image, like the play, is preposterous.

In the dark night of his soul, King behaves as nonsensically as Camae. After their pillow fight, he rolls around on the bed tickling Camae's corporeal body. ("Watch out, my piss gone burn you! Tssssssss!" she warns.) He gets on the phone to beg God—a woman, natch-for more time. When he ascends to Heaven-in the only sensational moment of the evening, engineered by the director and by David Gallo's superb projection design—the set fragments before our eyes, as if caught in a vortex of time, and images of racial struggle and of those who have fought for justice sweep upward into the starry sky. But, just when you thought the speechifying was over, Hall drops all pretense at drama and buttonholes the audience with direct address. Camae unleashes a tone poem of historical lament, which goes, in part:

Berlin walls Apartheid falls Robben Island sets Mandela free Rodney King screams: "Can't we all just get along"

King, of course, has the last inspirational word: "The baton may have been dropped. But anyone can pick it back up. I don't know where in the race we

are, but pick up that baton and pass, pass, pass it along." Of the real King's oratory, James Baldwin wrote, "He does not offer any easy comfort and this keeps his hearers absolutely tense. He allows them their self-respect." By serving up this pablum, Hall does the opposite: despite her passionate good intentions, she condescends to King

Isaac), who holds a key to the family's unhappy, shared secret: Althea's talented, artistic twin sister, Andi, hanged herself long ago, while Althea and Daniel (Andi's boyfriend at the time) were upstairs having a little extracurricular teen-age rumpy-pumpy.

Knowing, witty dialogue comes easily to Kazan; structure does not. She has cre-



Jackson and Bassett as the martyr-to-be and a motel maid in "The Mountaintop."

and to the audience. The problem is not that the play sheds the wrong light on King; it's that it sheds no light.

Zoe Kazan, one of the best of the crop of young American actresses, is also a playwright and screenwriter. Her second play, an examination of sibling rivalry, "We Live Here" (directed by Sam Gold, at the Manhattan Theatre Club's New York City Center, Stage I), showcases both her strengths and her weaknesses. In an airy, elegant New England house, a family convenes for the wedding of the older daughter, Althea (Jessica Collins). The younger and more neurotic daughter, Dinah (Betty Gilpin), invites the bride-to-be's former heartthrob, Daniel (Oscar

ated a number of interesting characters, but she doesn't manage to make them dramatically revealing. Although the production features lovely performances by Amy Irving, as the bright, passive-aggressive mother, who opens her daughter's wedding presents, and by Gilpin, who nervily tries to wrest approval from the world, the play has no second act; it fizzles out with more plot points unanswered than the Warren Report.

The M.T.C. did Kazan no service by giving "We Live Here" a full production. For an actor as gifted as she is, stage behavior is natural; penetration, which requires the wisdom of years, is hard. At twenty-eight, Kazan has time to figure it out. I look forward to the next play. •