



Theater Review: ‘The Mountaintop’ by Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre

Intriguing look at King’s last hours in SCAT’s ‘Mountaintop’

AVONDINA WILLS AS REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., AND SARAH CRUSE AS A MOTEL MAID, IN ‘THE MOUNTAINTOP’ BY KATORI HALL. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

BY **LISA JENSEN**
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We all know how the story ends. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., crusader of the Civil Rights Movement, tireless advocate for social justice and racial equality through peaceful protest, inspiration to millions, was shot to death outside his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

Those are the facts. But what may or may not have occurred on the night of April 3, Dr. King’s last night on earth, is a matter of pure conjecture. That’s the challenge taken up in *The Mountaintop*, the award-winning 2009 drama from Memphis-born playwright Katori Hall receiving its local premiere in an intriguing new Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre production at Center Stage.

A Columbia grad who received her MFA from Harvard, then graduated from the playwriting program at Juilliard, Hall has the audacity to imagine King’s final hours as a dialogue between the road-weary civil rights leader and a pretty young motel maid on her first day on the job. Hall surprises the audience with a portrait of King that dares to be both laudatory and iconoclastic, viewing him as more human than saint, while celebrating his profound effect on the fight for freedom and justice for which he finally gave his life.

The play takes its title from the words of King’s last speech, delivered the day before he died. Beset by death threats, in words now both famous and eerily prophetic, King said, in part, “I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But . . . we as a people will get to the Promised Land.” Taking her cue from these words, Hall builds her play slowly but steadily to its satisfying conclusion.

The SCAT production, well-directed by local stage veteran Erik Gandolfi, begins with the civil rights leader returning to his motel room after delivering this speech to the striking sanitation workers he’s come to town to support. King (played with energetic presence by Avondina Wills), eager to get out of his shoes and get to work on the next speech he’s writing, has sent his roommate, Ralph Abernathy, out to the corner store to buy a pack of the Pall Malls he’s trying to quit smoking.

When he calls room service for a cup of coffee, it’s delivered by a starstruck young maid named Camae (Sarah Cruse). As luck would have it, she has a couple of Pall Malls in her pocket; he persuades her to have a smoke with him, and they bring out the flirt in each other—even though she has to keep apologizing for swearing in front of a preacher whenever her salty street vocabulary slips out. But he finds her charming; when he asks why she became a maid, she says, “I’m better at cleaning up other folks’ messes than my own.”

The stage seems to be set for debate along gender, class, and political lines. And for awhile, that’s how it goes, especially when they discuss the violence of the Black Panthers vs. King’s allegiance to peaceful protest. But there’s a seismic shift when Camae’s true nature and her purpose are suddenly revealed. It’s too good a plot twist to give away here, but it gives Hall’s play its slyly subversive edge as it ramps up toward its moving conclusion.

Wills endows King’s solid, steady persona with very human grace notes of both anxiety and acceptance. Cruse plays Camae sassy at first, making the most of Hall’s often hilarious dialogue—especially when she puts on King’s jacket and shoes to deliver her own speech on “how to deal with the white man.” But she effectively deepens the character to anchor the play. (A slideshow projection toward the end of the play was a little glitchy on opening night, but Cruse’s delivery of Camae’s commentary was vivid enough to carry the moment until the visuals kicked in.)

Hall’s play is a refreshing take on a story we think we already know. Kudos to SCAT for bringing it to town.

The Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre production of ‘The Mountaintop’ plays weekends through Oct. 15 at Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Visit sccat.org.

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Lisa Jensen grew up in Hermosa Beach, CA, watching old movies on TV with her mom. After graduating from UCSC, she worked at a movie theater, and a bookstore, before signing on as a stringer for the chief film critic at *Good Times*, in 1975. A year later, she inherited the job. Thousands of reviews later, she still loves the movies!

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