

Mr. Phil Lerman  
Fox TV  
5152 Wisconsin Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20016

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Dear Phil,

An undated Times clipping in today's mail reminds me that after writing you in haste I'd intended writing you again. The haste because I'm to be admitted to Johns Hopkins for what I hope will be only five days and I want to keep up to date before that happens. It was in talking about your show to others that I said what I should have said in the letter, despite what I regard as diminishing it, it is still the best commercial TV has done with any of the political assassinations.

**'Who Killed Martin Luther King?'**

Fox, tonight at 9; 8 central time

Possibly inspired by the renewed commotion over conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Fox Broadcasting has resurrected a conspiracy theory about the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The thesis — advanced by Mark Lane, the veteran conspiracy theorist, and Harold Weisberg, an assassination buff, and supported by the sometime comedian Dick Gregory — fingers the Federal Bureau of Investigation for setting up James Earl Ray, who was convicted

of the crime.

Ramsey Clark, a former Attorney General and no great admirer of the F.B.I., says the evidence against Mr. Ray, who is shown denying any guilt, was strong. The Rev. Jesse Jackson does not exactly take a position but comes out decisively in favor of truth. The program offers dramatic re-enactments meant to demonstrate that it would have been difficult for Mr. Ray to do the deed from the bathroom of his motel. Attention is called to a figure in the bushes.

The hourlong special will be of particular interest to viewers who put confidence in Mark Lane, Dick Gregory, television re-enactments and Fox Broadcasting.

I presume the clipping is of the 22d. It allows me to illustrate, partially, what may have seemed unreasonable to you (pl), my insistence on not being on any show with anyone who theorizes any assassination conspiracy.

One reason, as I told you, is that it usually means I am used to accredit them when I oppose

them, meaning what they do and say. I'll not argue with you about your doing that with me. Instead I ask you to see for yourself how in the paper of record your show led it to put me down as a conspiracy theorist, which I've never been ("Fox Broadcasting has resurrected a conspiracy theory...") It says of this theory, "The thesis— advanced by Mark Lane, the veteran conspiracy theorist, and Harold Weisberg, an assassination buff..." and then it links me with Dick Gregory, too, in his assassination nuttiness, "supported by the sometime comedian Dick Gregory—" to which it adds, nothing omitted in quotation "fingers the Federal Bureau of Investigation for setting up James Earl Ray...." As you know, I told you the exact opposite and never ever suggested anything else or anything like this.

This is hurtful to me and to my reputation particularly because the Times is believed and is the paper of record. And not a word of it is true. (about me.)

Don't tell me you didn't say it. That is not the point. You made it possible by doing what you said you'd not do as a condition of my appearance.

Nothing we can do about it now but perhaps you can see that when people like me don't care about being on TV and in my case why, which I told you, it is not without reason and with me it is from experience now added to.

Best to you all,

Harold

Next week in Memphis, the ever-fuzzier line between fact and fiction, justice and show biz, history and entertainment, courtroom and television studio, will be blurred still further. That's when Home Box Office puts James Earl Ray on trial for the 1968 killing of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Everything about the ersatz trial, which will last for 10 days, is scrupulously genuine. It will take place in a genuine courtroom, feature a genuine prosecutor and defense lawyer appearing before a genuine (former) judge, be decided by a genuine jury. And, unlike Showtime's 1986 trial of Lee Harvey Oswald or Geraldo Rivera's trial of Joey Buttafuoco next Monday, there will be a genuine defendant: Mr. Ray will be questioned via satellite from his very genuine prison cell in Nashville.

Moreover, the three-hour distillation of the trial, to be broadcast on the 25th anniversary of the King assassination on April 4, may be genuinely entertaining. The only question is whether, for all the care with which it has been created, the program will produce anything genuinely new.

Mr. Ray has never testified in court, having pleaded guilty in 1969 in exchange for a 99-year term that spared him from the risk of the electric chair. But almost before the ink on the deal had dried, he asserted he had been the innocent victim of an elaborate set-up, orchestrated by a shadowy character named Raoul, and that he had been coerced into confessing. His pleas fell on deaf judicial ears — until, that is, HBO granted him certiorari.

In its promotional literature, HBO predicts that "Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray" will be a "historic event." However the unscripted proceeding turns out, company propagandists say, this "no holds barred" trial is sure to produce revelations, and maybe make history.

"This could be our one best chance to get at the truth," said the program's producer, Jack Saltman of Thames Television, who "tried" Kurt Waldheim for Nazi war crimes.

The first task confronting the program's legal consultant, Burt Neuborne of New York University Law School, last April was whether enough uncertainty hovered over the King killing to make it interesting television. After immersing himself in the literature and debriefing William Pepper, Mr. Ray's lawyer since 1985, Mr. Neuborne concluded that there was. "I'm just dead flat certain we don't know all the facts," he said.

Like many years, he speculated that Mr. Ray, a career petty burglar who was arrested in London some weeks after the assassination, could not possibly have acted alone.

His second task was to insure that to the extent permitted by the passage of time and the exigencies of television, the production approximated a bona fide trial. Mr. Neuborne selected the lawyers, Mr. Pepper for the defense and, as prosecutor, W. Hickman Ewing, a former United States Attorney in Memphis. As judge, he chose Marvin E. Frankel, who sat for 13 years in the United States District Court in Manhattan. None is complaining about the pay, though none will say just what it is.

For the last several months, in person and by fax, the parties and the court have been picking jurors, reviewing procedures and discussing evidentiary matters, all to insure that things move smoothly once the cameras roll. Each side will have but 27 hours to present its case, with the minutes kept by chess clock.

Each side will present only a fraction of the witnesses who would have been called at a real trial, and not just because time is spare. Many simply have disappeared; the bulk of the time spent by investigators Mr. Ewing has hired has not been spent ferreting out new facts, but tracking down old faces. Some aren't interested in participating. Many more, from the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, who stood near the prostrate Mr. King on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel after the shooting, to the officer who found the weapon, have died.

Perhaps to keep up the suspense, HBO has not made Mr. Ray's lawyer available for interviews. Thus, it is impossible to say whether the defense has tracked down the elusive Raoul or found anything else that might be exculpatory. G. Robert Blakey, onetime chief counsel to the House Select Committee on Assassinations, doubts he has, but says he will not tune in to see.

Mr. Blakey, whose committee heard Mr. Ray tell his story, said that while Mr. Ray's accomplices, if any, remain murky, his role as triggerman is not. "As long as we have so many hours of television time to fill, this might be better than a soap opera, but not by much," he said. "James Earl Ray did it, period. He's where he belongs."

Why then would several distinguished lawyers participate in such a project? "Some people are mesmerized by television," he replied, "particularly when they are on it."