

TELEVISION REVIEWS

Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray

(Sun. 4), 8-11 p.m., HBO

Taped by HBO Showcase, Thames Television and Channel 4. Exec producer, Roger Bolton; producer, Jack Saltman; director, Clive Halls; lighting director, Ray Nicholson; editor, Alan Ritchie; audio, Clive Sweet, Peter Stoddart, Stephen Ayres; music, Richard Mitchell, Simon May.

With: W. Hickman Ewing, Dr. William F. Pepper, James Earl Ray, Hon. Marvin E. Frankel.

The three-hour length may scare prospective viewers away, and historians may dispute many of the premises, but conspiracy buffs should delight in the way the alternative scenario of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is presented. This unscripted show also provides hours of minutiae, punctuated by moments of courtroom drama, as flaws in the case against James Earl Ray are explored.

Buffered by narration and moderation by Charlayne Hunter-Gault of PBS' "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour," the mock trial features former federal prosecutor W. Hickman Ewing and defense attorney Dr. William F. Pepper, who has been Ray's "unpaid attorney" for the past five years.

The special airs on the 25th anniversary of the April 4, 1968, assassination of the civil rights leader.

"Guilt" purports to answer the questions: Was Ray a patsy, duped and framed by the government, and did the fatal shot come from a vacant lot adjacent to Ray's hotel rather than the second-floor bathroom window, as alleged?



Charlayne Hunter-Gault hosts "The Trial of James Earl Ray," who is on the TV screen on left.

Many of the witnesses duplicate their testimony given before the 1978 U.S. House Committee on the assassination, but unlike that forum, here they are cross-examined; Pepper is a skilled fact-elicitor who gets many of those testifying to admit deficiencies in either their investigations or observations.

These highlighted errors seem to provide slivers of reasonable doubt, as does the introduction of evidence supporting governmental intervention. (These accusations have been steadfastly denied by those close to the investigation.)

The failure of ballistics evidence to link Ray's rifle to the shot that killed Dr. King, as well as the testimony from several credible sources observing an individual in the vacant lot at the time of the shooting, were all issues raised during the 1978 investigation.

But it's interesting to hear under examination the testimony of former N.Y. Times reporter Earl Caldwell, who never previously testified about his observations of a coverall-wearing man in the vacant lot, though he offered them in several articles at the time.

Equally interesting is the testimony from Ray. Although he has aired his versions of events on shows such as "60 Minutes" and "Gerald," he has never been effectively

grilled in a courtroom setting.

Ray's testimony is delivered via satellite from Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, where he's serving a 99-year term.

The courtroom styles of both defense and prosecution counsel are admirable. Ewing's Southern-accented, efficient presentation couples perfectly with his homespun demeanor, a sort of Perry Mason meets Matlock. He is a perfect fit for this program.

Defense counsel Pepper proffers a factual, emotional defense, by turns adamant and conciliatory.

The multicamera shoot, directed by Clive Halls and taped at the Shelby County Courthouse in Memphis, preserves the sanctity of the courtroom.

Two-shots of attorneys standing near witness during examinations — a staple in TV dramas — are not used, nor is the asking of loaded questions only to be withdrawn on the heels of an objection. These and other aspects indicate that, for all intents and purposes, this a real trial and not a scripted, telefilm drama. —Adam Sandler