

TELEVISION

Conspiracy theorists tackle King killing



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Ray Richmond

*Special fails
to prove who
pulled trigger*

Conspiracies, conspiracies, conspiracies. Doesn't anyone act alone anymore?

John F. Kennedy's assassination was, of course, the result of a still-unclear conspiracy involving (take your pick) the CIA or Mafia or Cuban extremists or an assortment of bad, unconnected people who enjoy firing guns from grassy knolls.

Robert Kennedy was killed by political enemies of one stripe or another. Sirhan Sirhan merely took the patsy rap.

At 9 tonight, Fox trots out a special that effectively acquits the



Treel Williams, seated, stars with Grace Zabriskie, Steve Failsback and Hal Holbrook in "Bonds of Love," Sunday on KCBS.



Sela Ward and Peter Dobson star in "Killer Rules," at 9 p.m. Sunday on KNBC (Channel 4).

presumed killer of Martin Luther King Jr., James Earl Ray. And of course, the point of "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" that airs on KTTV (Channel 11) is that King was the victim of — all together now — a conspiracy!

It might have been the FBI that pulled the trigger in this case, since J. Edgar Hoover seemed to have it in for King. Yet, "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" doesn't really make a case for who done the deed, merely who didn't.

The hour, hosted with dramatic intensity by "Boyz N the Hood's" Larry Fishburne, is actually quite well-produced. This is no tabloid sleaze-a-thon. It makes its points with balance and logic.

Bolstering the argument's credibility is expert testimony, interviews and a chillingly realistic dramatic re-creation of King's murder as the great civil rights leader stood chatting with aides (including the Rev. Jesse Jackson) on the second floor of a Memphis motel nearly 25 years ago.

The conclusion is that Ray could have been the triggerman but probably wasn't, since his "assassin's nest" perch in a nearby flophouse would have been awkward. A further point is that the only eyewitness account connecting Ray to the scene was that of a drunken man with poor eyesight.

Moreover, the dumping of Ray's rifle and possessions on a neighboring sidewalk had the earmarks of a frame-up. (For his part, Ray has maintained his innocence since

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briefly pleading guilty after his capture. He's never stood trial for the crime.)

There's more, of course. "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" needs to fill up an hour, after all.

But in its zeal to take Ray off the hook, the documentary fails to come up with a truly plausible alternate scenario. Conspiracy theories rarely do. It is, however, intelligently presented food for thought.

Good stock in 'Bonds':

Treat Williams — as a mildly retarded romantic? I don't think so.

You have to believe Williams to fully enjoy the TV movie "Bonds of Love" that airs at 9 p.m. Sunday on KCBS (Channel 2), and he's simply not terribly convincing as an overprotected man burdened with a slow wit who falls in love with a "normal" woman.

That woman is portrayed by Kelly McGillis with an affecting raw energy. Her superior work helps the film soar, until its

irritating penchant for heart-tugging bathos does it in.

In "Bonds of Love," Williams is Robby Smith, a gentle soul whose loving parents (well-played by Hal Holbrook and Grace Zabriskie) have sheltered him from life in a well-meaning gesture to keep him from being institutionalized.

Their careful control evaporates when Robby meets and falls for a woman (McGillis) with a checkered past. She's been divorced twice and had her children taken from her by the authorities for alleged neglect.

This naturally sits rather poorly with Robby's folks, who figure any woman — particularly a tainted one like this — is out to either humiliate or hurt their boy. No good can come of it.

But Robby's in love, and so is she. And no one, including his well-meaning law officer of a brother (Steve Railsback), can keep them apart.

"Bonds of Love" alternates between tenderness and gushy melodrama, and it does so in a fashion that's transparently manipulative. It helps little that

the star-crossed tale drags to such a predictably maudlin conclusion. It would have been easier to take if Williams were more adept at playing a mentally challenged man struggling to live his own life. A nice career move, inadequately executed.

Bending the 'Rules': The TV movie "Killer Rules" that airs at 9 p.m. Sunday on KNBC (Channel 4) is an example of a concept that had to look positively foolish on paper but somehow works on screen.

I mean, publeeze! Here we have a London investment executive who doubles as a mob hit man ("Shannon's Deal's") Jamey Sheridan. He is assigned to rub out a woman (Sela Ward of "Sisters") who is being protected by a U.S. Justice Department operative (Peter Dobson).

So what happens? The investor/killer falls in love with his target. So does the Justice Department guy. And then, just for added spice, we subsequently learn that these guys happen to be brothers separated at birth.

Oh sure, that sounds like a mighty conceivable scenario. More plausible possibilities are hatched on Jupiter.

Yet, "Killer Rules" works because of its attention to style, playing with the same riveting pacing of the finest mystery thrillers.

The film also has the added advantage of a rich Italian backdrop that somehow fuels the sense of intrigue. It deftly weaves

elements of dramatic tension and romantic passion into the mix, pulling it off with a laid-back charm reminiscent of Sheridan's best "Shannon's Deal" episodes.

All three of the major protagonists perform splendidly in "Killer Rules," and paired with Robert Ellis Miller's classy direction, they create a viewing experience that's far faster than anyone had a right to expect.

THE FACTS

- The show: "Who Killed Martin Luther King?"
- When: 9 tonight.
- Channel: KTTV (Channel 11).
- Hosted by: Larry Fishburne.
- Our ratings: ★★

- The show: "Bonds of Love."
- When: 9 p.m. Sunday.
- Channel: KCBS (Channel 2).
- Starting: Treat Williams, Kelly McGillis, Steve Railsback, Hal Holbrook and Grace Zabriskie.
- Our ratings: ★★

- The show: "Killer Rules."
- When: 9 p.m. Sunday.
- Channel: KNBC (Channel 4).
- Starting: Jamey Sheridan, Sela Ward, Peter Dobson, Sam Wanamaker, Riccardo Gallone and Anita Zagana.
- Our ratings: ★★

★★★★ — don't miss it; ★★★ — worth your while; ★★ — has its moments; ★ — if you must; ○ — don't bother.