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On the Air

Gumbel, Getting Tough on His Second Try

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It wasn't as rowdy as Dan Rather's shouting match with George Bush during the 1988 presidential campaign, but yesterday's encounter between Bryant Gumbel and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy on NBC's "Today" show was heated to the boiling point.

Gumbel was questioning Abernathy about the most controversial passages from his new autobiography "And the Walls Came

Tumbling Down," in which Abernathy describes sexual misadventures of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The "Today" anchor took a stronger advocacy position than is usual in news interviews, and the discussion filled two six-minute segments of the program instead of the standard one.

The portions detailing King's escapades "could just as easily have been left out," Gumbel told Abernathy, adding, "One could argue that your writings prove nothing." When Abernathy responded to criticism

from such other black leaders as Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson by in turn criticizing them, Gumbel said with an astonished look, "I'm not sure I'm hearing all this."

If some viewers thought the interview was too harsh, it was a replacement for a previous, un-aired interview Gumbel did with Abernathy that apparently was too soft. Gumbel acknowledged on the air during the live interview that he'd taped another one with Abernathy a week earlier in Atlanta, but that

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he had never brought up the parts of the book that had made the headlines.

Abernathy noted that Gumbel "didn't even mention" the sexual portions of the book then. "That's a good point," Gumbel told him. "That's a good point. And I intentionally passed on it. Does that make me less than honest?"

After the interview, co-anchor Jane Pauley, who called it "a fascinating half hour of television," told viewers Gumbel had been "soul-searching all morning" about ignoring the hot topic during the first interview. Gumbel, citing Pages 434-436 of the Abernathy book, said, "I did not feel that those three pages, and the manner in which the innuendoes were made, were of sufficient importance to make it a major point of what was an extended interview with Reverend Abernathy."

It sounded as though Gumbel had either devised an elaborate rationalization for missing a big story, or that he was censoring the news because he found it distasteful. Neither of these

alternatives is much prettier a picture than Abernathy's unsavory disclosures.

But Gumbel's performance yesterday was gutsy and tenacious. He was aggressive but courteous. "You have to know this would hurt Martin's wife, Martin's family," he told Abernathy, and he warned that the revelations would give "great comfort to those who would like to demean the memory of Dr. King," asking, "Why did you give them the weapon?"

Abernathy repeated explanations he has given in other interviews—that he was trying to portray the humanity of King—and said his book was "nothing but the truth, so help me, God."

The NBC switchboard in New York tallied 39 calls yesterday complaining about Gumbel's treatment of Abernathy and three calls registering approval. NBC spokesman Curt Block said the response constituted a "small reaction."

Karen Mender, a spokeswoman for Harper & Row, publishers of the Abernathy book, said the company had no complaints about the interview. "Reverend Abernathy made his points. It was fair for both sides," and Abernathy was not upset, she said.

Indeed, on the air, Abernathy did not appear ruffled or offended by Gumbel's persistence. And when the interview was over, Abernathy said, "Thank you, Bryant. God bless you, and you have a good day."