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TV REVIEW

Conspiracy Prominent in 'King'

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Watching "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" (at 9 tonight on Fox, Channels 11 and 6) may seem like a macabre way to honor King's birthday, but producer Philip Lerman's investigative report is based on the assumption that King's spirit has not yet been put to rest. Lerman is certainly convinced that the civil rights leader's convicted assassin, James Earl Ray, was not the man who pulled the trigger in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968.

The program never quite escapes the shadow of the conspiracy industry that has been in a heavy growth phase since Oliver Stone's "JFK." Lerman even includes on-camera remarks by Mark Lane, the granddaddy of conspiracy theorists and author of "Rush to Judgment." Lane believes that, if the wheels of justice roll in the right direction, the "real" killers of King can be caught and convicted by the 25th

anniversary of the murder.

But, as in "JFK," what is "real" here soon becomes blurry. Host-narrator Larry Fishburne takes us to the site of the Lorraine Motel, where King was staying in room 305 (now preserved as a civil rights memorial). Soon, we're treated to skimpily produced recreation footage, both of King and his aides and of Ray aiming and firing through the bathroom window of a boarding house.

Nothing, though, is as it seems. Author Harold Weisberg claims it would be impossible for Ray to shoot standing on a bathtub. Witnesses including reporter Earl Caldwell claim seeing figures in bushes near the motel. (The recreated film of Caldwell's point of view is the quintessential image of dark, elusive conspirators.)

Even Ray's initial guilty plea is said to be illusory: Weisberg and others claim that Ray's attorney, Percy Foreman, forced Ray into a guilty plea. (Though Ray later repented the plea, he had by then sacrificed his right to a jury trial, and is now serving a 99-year term.)

So, who killed King? It might be found in the case records and, you guessed it, the case records are closed until the year 2027. Mark Lane's new campaign, it seems, is to get them re-opened.