

King plot basis of Hill thriller

By Kirk Honeycutt

With the furor over "JFK" still a recent memory, political pundits and film critics alike will soon get to chew over a new political thriller about an alleged plot to kill Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and subsequent cover-up of his assassination.

Leonard Hill Films, long a lead-
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ing independent supplier of network television movies, has set its first feature film, "Slay the Dreamer," to begin filming April 5, the day following the 25th anniversary of the King murder.

The film is based on a screenplay by Mark Lane and Donald Freed, who previously collaborated on the story for Dalton Trumbo's Kennedy assassination drama, "Executive Action" (1973). Cast and director have not been announced.

In an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, Hill said an independent theatrical feature was the only avenue for such controversial material.

"There is no way to do this film on TV," Hill said. "The networks are too constrained by the homogenizing demands of advertisers and their own corporate concerns about government oversight to take on a picture this explosive."

"Also, a film script such as this would not be developed for the studios. This script is not the product of committee-think; it did not go through the usual hierarchy with creative-executive input."

Hill said he self-financed the script and is financing the production through foreign sales. He is currently in discussions with po-

tential domestic distributors.

Hill is quick to distance "Slay the Dreamer" from Oliver Stone's methodology in "JFK."

"Stone elected to tell the Jim Garrison story and as a result found himself with strangely few allies," he noted.

"Garrison (in 'JFK') is credited with things Garrison historically didn't do, and other figures are accused of things they may not have done. 'Slay' purposefully tells its story through the eyes of a fictional protagonist. We're not trying to rewrite history, we're trying to dramatize history."

Hill was vague as to the structure of the script, but he did say the fictional character is a yuppie lawyer whose investigation of a case several years after King's assassination sheds light on events that took place in 1968.

Freed is a historian and playwright ("Veterans Day"). Lane is the best-selling author of such assassination conspiracy books as "Rush to Judgment," "Plausible Denial" and "Murder in Memphis" (co-authored with Dick Gregory).

The project evolved, Hill said, as he and Freed worked on an ABC movie about Jimmy Hoffa three years ago. Freed introduced Hill to

Rev. James Lawson, whose eyewitness account of the King murder got the producer interested in the case.

Lawson served as Dr. King's liaison with the Memphis sanitation workers whose demonstration the civil-rights leader came to Memphis to support.

Public interest in the King assassination should be provoked by the airing later this month on FBC of a one-hour documentary "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" produced by Phil Lerman.

"There will be strong, broad-based support for the factional contentions that underlie our drama," Hill said.

In 1979, the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives concluded that "there was a likelihood that the murder of Dr. King was the result of a conspiracy."

James Earl Ray, the man jailed

for the King murder, never went to trial. (He pleaded guilty to a lesser charge.) Ray, who was represented by Mark Lane before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, continues to assert his innocence.

In his preface to Ray's book, "Who Killed Martin Luther King?," Rev. Jesse Jackson writes, "I have always believed that the government was a part of a conspiracy, either directly or indirectly, to assassinate (King)."

Spike Lee's current film "Malcolm X" also makes subtle allusions to government involvement in a conspiracy to kill that black leader, assassinated in 1965.

"It is the contention of our film," Hill said, "that King became a dangerous man to reactionary elements in this country when he went beyond civil rights to crusade for human rights and equal opportunity for the poor." □