

'King,' a Controversial Portrait

Despite Some Tinkering With Reality, the Shortcomings Often Seem Unimportant

By Tom Shales

"King," NBC's six-hour, three-part film on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, starts out as a cumbersome and heavily-handed situation tragedy, but eventually evolves, in about its fifth hour (to air Tuesday night), into a stirring and absorbing portrait of a man and a mission perfectly matched.

Even at its conclusion, however, "King," which begins with a two-hour telecast Sunday at 9 p.m. on Channel 4, doesn't inspire the tremendous emotional release one hopes for and expects. This is probably because writer Abby Mann mounts a high horse of sanctimonious preciousness at the start and insists on parading his own

credentials as a proudly guilty liberal.

It doesn't make King any more heroic a figure to portray John and Robert Kennedy as spineless vacillators on the civil rights issue; Bobby is depicted as something of a quivering neurotic who doesn't find his courage until very late in the game. Mann is the champ of moralistic revisionism

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and over-the-shoulder judgments, of proclaiming with piety now how people in another time behaved or should have behaved.

Much later, Mann drops coy hints of a conspiracy by Memphis authorities—and, implicitly, the FBI—in the as-

sassination of Dr. King. A documentary-style drama on prime-time network television does not seem just the forum for raising such speculation, especially in a surreptitious, half-whispered way.

Mann is a slickly skilful dramatist, however, and "King" might have matched the riveting impact of "Roots," if only the script had been shaped by a competent director. It wasn't. The film was directed by Mann himself and it's safe to say that the director and the author managed to bring out some of the worst in each other.

Worse, Mann has found new ways to abuse the already questionable tactics of the TV docu-drama. Not only is actual newsreel footage intercut with

the speculative narrative, but occasional new scenes were shot in black and white and with hand-held cameras so that they would look like newsreels, too.

Julian Bond, Ramsey Clark and, of all people, Singer Tony Bennett pop up as themselves, and this seems a gambit to bolster the illusion of authenticity, and a disreputable one at that. Mann was clearly in a messianic mood, but at times he seems more concerned with advertising his own concern, and his own real or imagined credibility, than in telling King's story faithfully and movingly.

Dubious emphasis plagues the film. The role of Coretta Scott King in the

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