

NBC's King

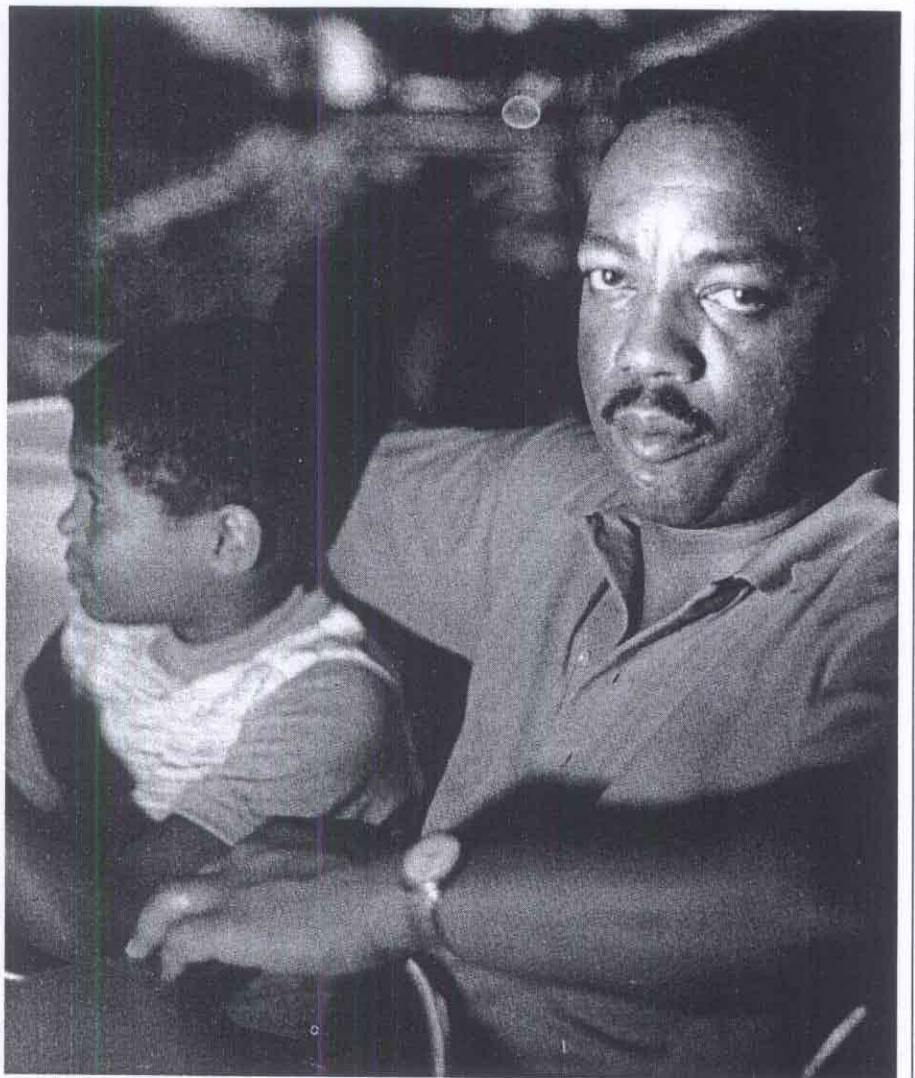
*More Drama
Than Documentary*

BY JILL NELSON

King, nationally telecast by NBC on three successive nights in mid-February was a \$5 million attempt to cash in on black history, repeat the success of ABC's *Roots*, and pay tribute to the great black leader. To the chagrin of NBC executives, it failed in the ratings game. It captured little better than a third of the audience held spellbound by *Roots*, and may or may not have succeeded in its portrait of King, depending on whom you talk to.

From the start, *King* was bound to run into controversy. Director Abby Mann worked closely with King's wife Coretta, U.N. Ambassador Andy Young, and Mrs. King's lawyer, Stanley Levison. But others close to King, like Southern Christian Leadership Conference president Hosea Williams and King's right hand man Ralph Abernathy, were not consulted. They have attacked the film for its distorted portrait of the "real" King. Williams, quoted in *Politicks* magazine charged: "Not only has King been portrayed as a weak, indecisive leader, the people closest to him have been ignored while people who did nothing but carry his bags have important roles." The prominent place given to Stanley Levison, who is white, gives the impression that "King took his orders from white people on how to run his movement," Williams said.

Abby Mann, according to *Politicks*, dismisses Williams as an "anti-Semitic fool," and Ambassador Young, in *The New York Times*, attributed the various criticisms to "personal grievances about



The TV movie portrayed King and those closest to him as central to the movement. But what of the others?



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being left out," (Williams had been omitted from the film altogether.)

This storm of charges and counter-charges could not help but heighten the anticipation a "docu-drama" on King might be expected to create in the normal course of things.

As it turned out, *King* was a poignant and often powerful, if not necessarily honest, evocation of Martin Luther King's life and involvement with the civil rights movement. Visual recreations of the Montgomery bus boycott, the integration of Birmingham schools, and the Selma-Montgomery march recalled the determination, courage, and strength of those blacks and whites who daily risked their lives in the cause of black civil rights. The hoses, snarling dogs, and white faces contorted by hatred, the murder of Viola Liuzzo on a dark country road in Lowndes County, Alabama, made palpable the fear and anger as well as the hope and hard-headed optimism that seared those years into the consciousness of a generation of Americans.

The acting, generally fine, was highlighted by Paul Winfield's loving portrayal of Dr. King. His uncanny physical resemblance to King added considerable credibility and emotional impact to the production, disguising what might otherwise have been insurmountable weaknesses in the script.

The film does give prominence to Stanley Levison and this suggests that King was heavily influenced by Levison. Mann oddly portrays King as more upset at having to fire Levison (when the FBI tried to tar Levison with "communism") than he is by the murder of four black children in Birmingham, whose deaths he poetically describes as a "down payment on freedom." Firing Levison—not the murder—causes the movie King to question the total worth of the movement. This is a strange disproportion, given King's real priorities.

With the exception of Rosa Parks, whom even Mann cannot deny sparked the Montgomery bus boycott, the images of black women in *King* are either absent or negative. Mrs. King emerges as a woman of hazy and contradictory values, fluctuating between being a traditionally supportive wife, a bourgeois hinderance, and a partner in the movement. In one scene, Dr. King's mother confesses that when her son was a little boy she almost did something that "black women do to their sons; make them less."

According to Barbara Deming, a writer and activist who was arrested in Birmingham in 1963, organizers in Birmingham

approached "one black group after another trying to rally troops for the integration campaign, without success. It was among high school girls that they found their first real response." Deming points out that in King's own book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, he acknowledges that it was the Women's Political Council in Montgomery, "calling each other back and forth on the phone immediately after the arrest of Rosa Parks, who decided there should be a bus boycott."

The most bizarre thing about *King* is that it takes a man who was at the center of one of the most important American political movements in modern times and manages the remarkable feat of depoliticizing him and the movement around him. The film subscribes to the Great Man theory of history, ascribing almost every important advance in civil rights in the 60's solely to Dr. King. While the film could not reasonably be expected to include everyone—the numerous groups and grouplets, the lesser leaders and legions of organizers, the thousands of people who put themselves on the line in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia—it is also impossible to dismiss criticism of its narrow focus as the disgruntled complaints of people who were left out.

"What I found wrong with the show," said Howard Zinn, formerly on the executive board of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, "was the over-emphasis on King the personality, the reduction of an entire mass movement to the charisma of one individual." No mention is made of the fact that the Freedom Rides were initiated by CORE and the activity of SNCC, both in the Atlanta department store desegregation struggle and in Lowndes County, Alabama, is minimized. Julian Bond is shown beseeching Dr. King to lead the struggle in Atlanta, when in fact that struggle was already in progress.

King portrays Dr. King solely as a moral catalyst, without whom the movement could not have happened. In reality, King's charisma and image were often used by him and other civil rights organizations to gain media attention, and secure popular and political support for other less visible, more radical organizations.

We would never know from the film that there were other strategies than the ones King eventually adopted, some more militant, some less so, advocated by other groups. For example, the 1963 March on Washington was originally planned as a major disruption, applying non-violent disobedience tactics perfected in the

South. SCLC, CORE, and SNCC were pressured by the Kennedys, the NAACP, and potential funding sources to abandon these tactics in favor of a traditional march and to get everybody out of Washington by sundown. John Lewis, Executive Director of SNCC in the 60's, acknowledges the political pressure put on King: "It was money from certain liberal quarters in America, the influence of political support from certain church groups and others and from the political establishment that had a moderating effect on what form the march took." Lewis characterizes this change in form as both "pragmatic and idealistic," yet *King* suggests that Dr. King's actions must be understood in strictly moral terms.

King ignores the strategic context in which King and the civil rights movement developed. In trying to show him as "just a man," trying to show the human side of King, the film consistently portrays him as consumed by self-doubt, fear, and indecision. It ignores political realities that King was aware of and, in some instances, responsive to. During the course of the whole six hours, he is either smack in the middle of the action or paralyzed by moral agonies. The space in between, the space in which King the political person made political decisions, is absent. Decisions are either unexplained or explained in a solely one-sided, moral context. The film falls into a pattern of six or eight unrelated scenes separated by morbid interludes in which King fancies himself (and at the same time resents) being a modern day Messiah.

To romanticize King and ignore reality in an attempt to fit him into a heroic mold as a tortured and alienated individual is to deflect understanding of the man, the movement, and deny the possibility of ordinary people taking progressive action. To replace them with sentimental and passive nostalgia for the good ole days when some of us believed that letting crackers beat our heads would earn us our rights, that unjust suffering would be rewarded, mocks the real sacrifices that real people made.

With all its distortions, *King* still offers a rough but often moving image of an important man and movement in American history. The task of clarifying this picture falls to those who recognize that King was not the whole, but an integral and beloved part, of the civil rights movement. A movement of ordinary people whose example engulfed the hearts, minds, and sometimes lives of many others, radically altering some of the basic premises of American society.