The Washington Star
Portfolio
C-7
WASHINGTON, D.C.,
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1978

# King on TV: Can 'Advancing the Story' Be Justified?

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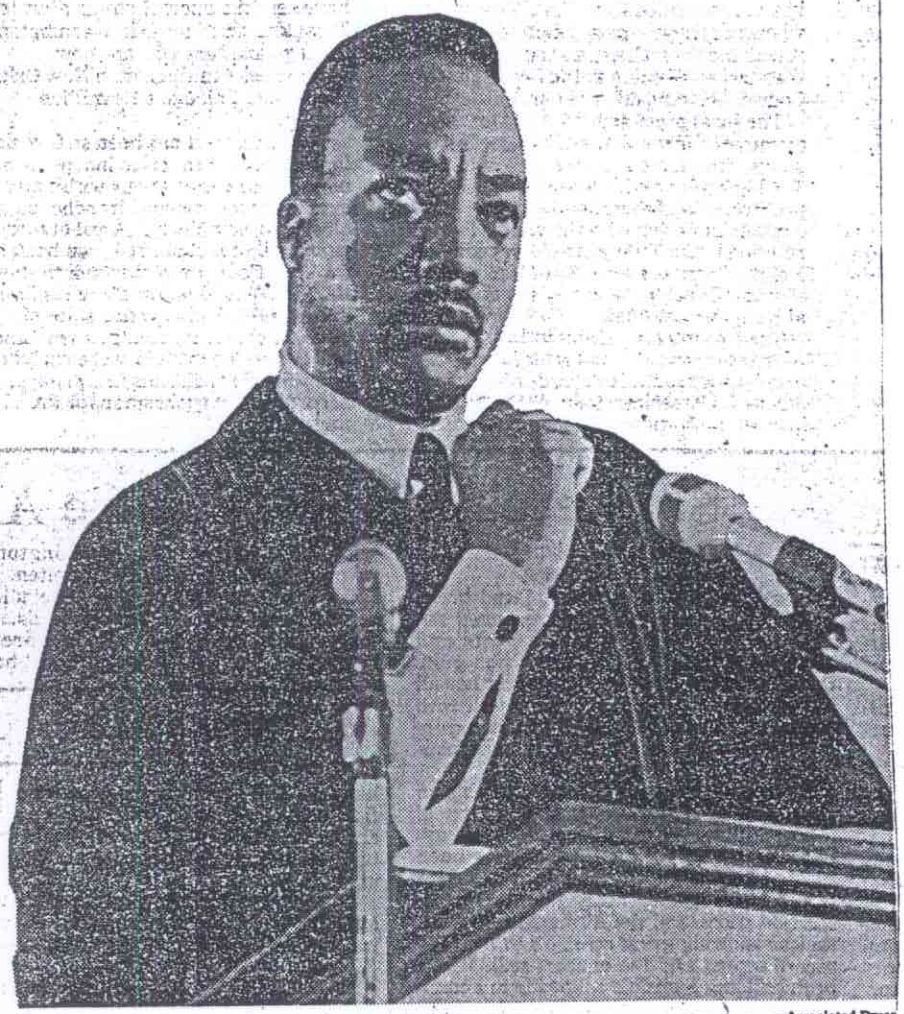
The most important fact you need to know about "King," the NBC miniseries that begins Sunday night (WRC-4, 9 p.m.) is that it is *not* an entirely accurate portrayal of the life of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

If that realization doesn't trouble you, prepare to sit back and enjoy a virtuoso perfomance by Paul Winfield as King.

In spite of the physical dissimilarities of the two men — Winfield gained 35 pounds to try to more nearly approximate King's round face and stocky figure — the actor captures many of the nuances, mannerisms and speech patterns of the civil rights leader. The preparation and energy he apparently invested in the part shine through like a beacon.

Be prepared, also, for a capable rendering of Coretta Scott King by Cicely Tyson, who, lacking her character's physical stature, manages to recreate her moral and intellectual strength.

And be happy that, except for what seems an excessive length — six hours — with several slow spots, the production is excellent, the writing good, the camerawork and editing crisp and the large supporting cast superior.



—Associated Press

*Paul Winfield as Martin Luther King Jr.*

**BUT IF THE REALIZATION** that this is not an entirely accurate rendition *does* bother you, take note of the advisory at the beginning of each two-hour episode that says the show is "a dramatization based on the life and the accomplishments of one man. In some instances, dialogue, action and composite characters were created to advance the story. Actual newsfilm is used in some sequences and combined with new footage shot especially for this production."

The series follows the basic outlines of King's career faithfully enough.

Sunday's episode takes King from his days as a ministerial student in Boston, through his courtship and marriage to Coretta Scott, to his early days as leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, after which he becomes a target for the FBI.

The height of King's career is dramatized in Part 2, which airs Monday, beginning with the Birmingham desegregation campaign and ending with his receipt of the 1965 Nobel Prize.

Part 3, on Tuesday, traces King's downfall as he focuses on Northern racial problems, speaks out against the Vietnam War and dies in 1968 at the hands of a sniper.

**WITHIN THIS BASIC OUTLINE,** writer-director Abby Mann, acting on what he says was a mandate received from King in 1966, has re-arranged the chronology of some events, added a few characters who never existed and made up a couple of incidents that never occurred to "advance" the narrative.

At other points, persons who really existed (such as Malcolm X) are brought in without identification, so that once you guess who they may be, you then wonder whether Mann has put words in their mouths.

The result is confusing and disturbing as you try to sort out who's real and who

isn't, what happened and what didn't, whether King really said what Mann has him saying. Familiar lines from King's more famous public addresses are, of course, exerpted verbatim, but Mann says he had to fill in with created speechifying in some other instances.

At issue is whether you can take the life of a figure as recent and as well-known as King and rewrite it. It may not be fair to the viewer and it may throw the still-fresh history out of focus.

**IN THE FIRST EPISODE**, for example, two New Yorkers, "Damon Lockwood" a black writer and lecturer, and "Stanley Levison," a labor lawyer, arrive in Montgomery to get in on the embryonic bus boycott. I racked my brain trying to remember a Damon Lockwood.

Mann explains: "He's a composite character who represents the intellectuals who helped King a great deal in the beginning, but who later turned on him over Vietnam."

The lawyer, it develops, represents persons who were accused of being Communist infiltrators in the FBI's attempt to discredit King.

Neither was an actual person, but the viewer doesn't know that.

**THERE ARE OTHER** such divergences.

In a scene right after the successful spring, 1963, campaign to weaken segregation in Birmingham, for example, King learns three girls have been killed by a bomb thrown into a church. A later scene evokes the August, 1963, March on Washington.

In actuality, the March on Washington had already taken place when four girls were killed in the Birmingham church bombing in September, 1963.

In another episode, a white man listens to King sermonize in his church and calmly walks up to the pulpit and slaps and punches the pastor, who uses the opportunity to re-emphasize his philosophy of non-retaliation. While there are several documented cases of King being physically abused by angry whites, I can't find a record of such an incident in his own church.

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# KING

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Later, Mann sidesteps the FBI-fostered question of King's involvement with other women by having Mrs. King answer "no," when her husband offers to tell her "the truth about the rumors."

Is this, in fact, what Mrs. King said to her husband? Better, perhaps, not to bring up the subject at all, than to leave it unresolved.

**ONCE YOU ACCEPT** that these scenes may not jibe with actual events, you can't help wondering how much of the dialogue of the other figures has been created: from President Kenendy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy down to Bull Connor and J. Edgar Hoover.

It may be these questions, once raised, rather than any revelations of King's own doubts and fears, that have caused controversial reactions to the film on the part of some of King's associates.

Certainly it is legitimate to attempt to show King as a three-dimensional human, a man who never got over being frightened of violence, a man who seemed resigned, at the end, to his fast-approaching doom.

But is it right to jumble the context? Mann says it is.

"To some extent, the chronology is composed," he says. "I never believe in distorting any character, but if something happened one year (in real life), it could be shifted to another year (in the film), as long as the character remains consistent.

"Structurally," Mann says, "You say to yourself, here's a man taking on the whole country and finding out that the country is sicker than he thought You want to show his growth, so you build it as you would any play. After you have the information, of course."

**THE UPSHOT:** another docu-drama that is neither total documentary nor total fiction.

This "faction" technique can work well in the case of figures farther back in the shadows of history — an excellent biography of Harriet Tubman by Arlingtonian Marcy Heidish that would make a marvelous movie readily comes to mind. But it is much more difficult to pull off with someone like King.

This season's earlier attempts to create exciting television drama out of current events — last fall's "Washington Behind Closed Doors" and this week's "Ruby and Oswald," for example — seem to bear out the contention that modern history is far stranger and more surprising than any attempt to "dramatize" it could ever be.

Perhaps the record should be allowed to stand as is.