

The Anguish of Reliving the Martin Luther King Drama

By JOHN M. WILSON

"It was as if someone hit me in the stomach. I folded. It was shock, and I couldn't get it together in my head. I was sick . . . for weeks . . . for months." Cicely Tyson was remembering her reaction to the news of the assassination on April 4, 1968, of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Recently the actress relived those painful memories in the course of filming "King." Miss Tyson

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plays Coretta Scott King and Paul Winfield co-stars as the late civil-rights leader in the three-part made-for-TV movie which will be presented tonight, tomorrow and Tuesday from 9 to 11 P.M. on NBC.

Miss Tyson and Mr. Winfield envision an audience response to "King" stronger than that of "Roots," which last year drew the largest TV audience in history. Mr. Winfield said he expected the film to "straighten out the jumbled history" of the civil-rights struggle and to attract a broad audience of blacks and whites alike.

In a joint interview they said they approached their characterizations from different emotional perspectives. Mr.

Winfield's primary allegiance had been with Malcolm X, the militant black separatist. "I must say, I was less moved by Dr. King's death," Mr. Winfield said frankly. "I was personally much more upset by the death of Malcolm X." Yet the filming of "King" proved in the end to be a deeply personal experience, he added.

Mr. Winfield prepared for the role by studying a number of films and home movies of Dr. King and by talking with former King staff members. He was surprised to find that, as vivid as their impressions were, each saw Dr. King in a very personal way. "Nearly everyone had a very different impression—I mean, directly opposed."

"I chose to portray his more human frailties," said Mr. Winfield, "or at least, more human qualities. They are important in illuminating the story—to show how incredible pressures were put upon him, how he reacted, and was still able to do what he did."

Mr. Winfield's resemblance to Dr. King, particularly during scenes of famous orations and other episodes burned into public memory by newsreel coverage, may seem striking. Yet he said he avoided a conscious impersonation, although he did put on 30 pounds for the role. "It's impossible to do the man justice—his deep, rich baritone voice and tremendous breath control were brilliant just from an acting point of view. I couldn't have done it. Dr. King's father said to me, 'There was only one Martin.' As an actor, I had to be free to expand here, add there."

Mr. Winfield's approach was "technical," while Miss Tyson realized she could not "divorce the kind of emotions I felt as a result of what happened in the 1960's. I think I was able to channel my feelings into the problems Coretta faced during those difficult years." Miss Tyson retraced the route of the Selma march, visited a church that had been bombed, and spent several days with Mrs. King, "discussing her life with him, her feelings." She used padding to approximate Mrs. King's figure and insisted on lightening her skin tone "because the difference between light and dark skin was so significant in the 1950's."

"I wanted to capture the aura of the woman. To the public, she appears to be a very calm, controlled lady. I wanted to know what was behind that. It was rewarding for me to see her human side—to see her yell at her kids once in awhile, or go into the kitchen and pick up a pot or wash a dish." Indeed, "King" shows a Coretta King who was primarily a homemaker, kept away from the danger that always surrounded her husband in public. Yet she remained "a woman of tremendous control," Miss Tyson said. "I asked Yoki [her oldest daughter, Yolanda] if she'd ever seen her mother cry, and she said she thinks she did—once."

The re-creation of the shooting of Dr. King, Mr. Winfield said, "was probably the hardest thing I've ever done. We all had a kind of rapport during the filming because of what we'd been through together as blacks, and people got quieter and sadder. I ended up in the middle of one scene lying there and crying. I don't think that sense of loss hit me until years after his death. Only King said, 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.' There is no-

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body saying anything like that anymore."

The film, written and directed by Abby Mann ("Judgment at Nuremberg"), incorporates what Mr. Mann has called "new revelations"—based on his own research in Memphis—about the stripping of security around Dr. King just before his death. The film also examines questionable activities of the F.B.I.—bugging, infiltration, tapes sent to Mrs. King, alleging extramarital activities on the part of her husband—and

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the anti-King behavior of a number of well-known public officials. The late Robert Kennedy is portrayed as a brash, ambitious Attorney General who opposes Dr. King for political reasons. "There's going to be a lot of anger," aroused by such material, Mr. Winfield predicted.

Paul Winfield's own anger over continuing injustice toward blacks was evident in his comments about overt segregation in Los Angeles (his hometown) and the "usual" Ku Klux Klan harassment experienced during the filming of "King" in Georgia. He and Miss Tyson acknowledged that blacks have made progress in the film world since Dr. King's death, but both feel television still lags far behind other industries. "What's needed for blacks is *balance*," she said. "You have the 'Jane Pittmans,' the 'Roots,' the 'Kings,' but then you have a rash of nonsensical shows that have no meaning whatsoever," making reference to the broadly comic programs like "Good Times," "What's Happening" and "The Jeffersons."

Dr. King's real legacy, said Mr. Winfield, is hard to measure. "Before Dr. King, black people were really invisible. We weren't there—it was as if we existed on another planet, aliens. He brought us to a curiosity and an interest in who we were as a people. . . ."

"A curiosity and a recognition of self-

worth," Miss Tyson added. "This man—small in stature—seemed to project to black people as a *giant*. They would many times refer to him as Jesus. The fact that he was black and he was able to move in the way that he did, and accomplish things in the way that he did, gave us a sense of pride, hope and a desire to do more for ourselves. Prior to that time, many of us wouldn't hope because it seemed that no matter what you did and how well you did it, you could only go so far and no further. Realizing that you are to be deprived of your rights, as a human being, because of the color of your skin is maddening. It's too frustrating and has been for the entire race for too long. What's important to me is that there was a man during my lifetime who was able to make me feel my worth as a human being."

She turned away for a moment to look out a window, and her lower lip trembled noticeably. "I found that a lot of kids today don't really know who Martin Luther King Jr. was. It's sad that they don't realize that a lot of things they take for granted today, that they assume are rightfully theirs, are things that he lost his life for. If nothing else, this film will make them aware of who Dr. King was and what he was all about. And that's extremely important. He's a man who must never be forgotten."

"King" is the third time Mr. Winfield and Miss Tyson have worked together. They received Academy Award nominations for their performances in "Sounder" and co-star again in "A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich," a film which opened recently in New York to mixed reviews.

"King" spans Dr. King's life from his 1952 courtship of Coretta Scott to his murder in Memphis in 1968. A number of civil rights leaders—notably the Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Joseph Lowery, current president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Dr. King founded—have spoken out against Mr. Mann's conception of Dr. King as "weak," "cowardly" and Uncle Tom-mish. But Mr. Mann, who is also executive producer, claims his critics saw only a four-minute segment (since cut) during the filming of "King" last summer in Georgia. Other black leaders, including members of the King family, have come to Mr. Mann's defense. ■