

TV: 6-Hour 'King,' Drama of Civil Rights Drive

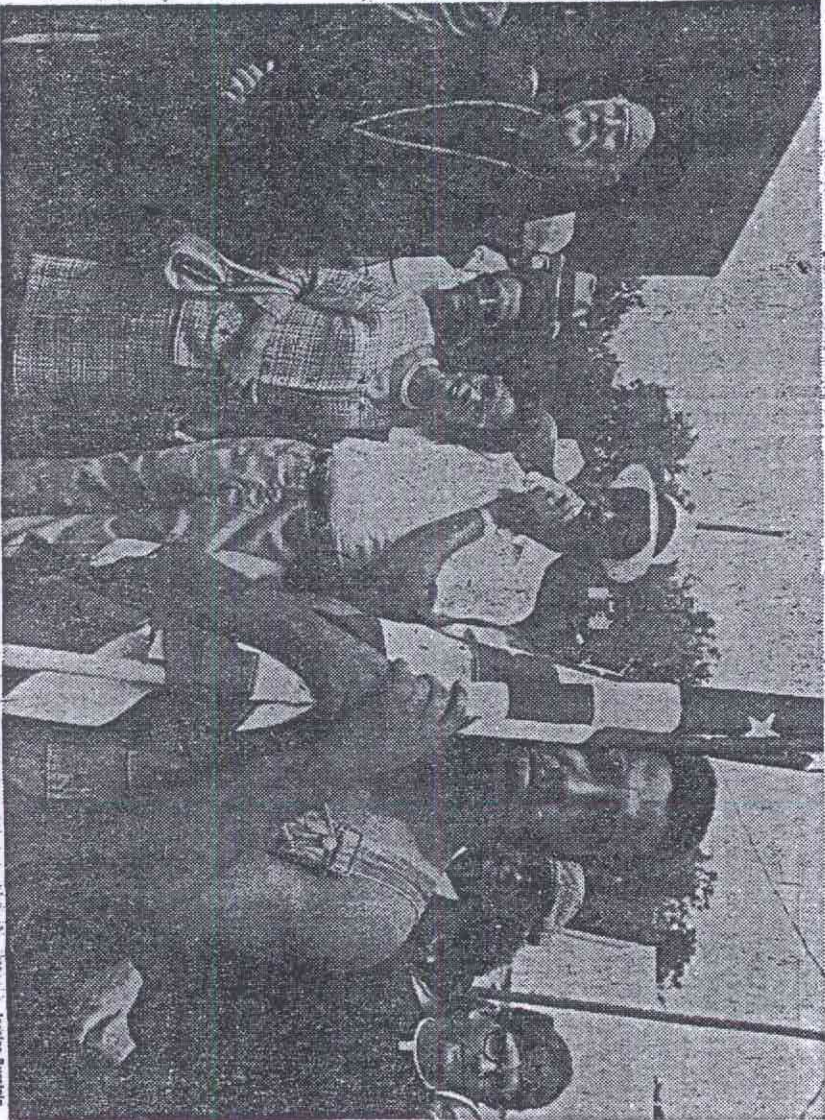
By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

"KING," a six-hour "documentary" drama being presented by NBC-TV in two-hour segments, on consecutive nights, begins Sunday at 9 P.M. Already the production is caught up in an unusually blustery swirl of vested-interest criticism and potential controversy. Written and directed by Abby Mann, whose previous scripts include the film, "Judgment at Nuremberg" and television's "The Marcus-Nelson Murders" (which gave birth to "Kojak"), this new project, reportedly costing nearly \$5 million, traces the life of Martin Luther King Jr. from the 1953 courtship of his future wife, Coretta, to his murder at a Memphis motel in 1968.

As a portrait of Dr. King, this is inevitably a portrait of the civil-rights movement, specifically, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Perhaps a degree of factionalism is unavoidable in any movement, and that is where vested interests enter the picture. Hosea Williams and the Rev. Dr. Ralph D. Abernathy, current leaders of S.C.L.C., are contending that Mr. Mann's script inflates the roles played by, among others, Mrs. King, Stanley Levison, a white King aide who is now Mrs. King's lawyer, and Andrew Young, now United States Chief Delegate to the United Nations.

Undoubtedly the S.C.L.C. leaders have a point. The character of Dr. Abernathy is decidedly minor in the film, and Mr. Williams is excluded altogether. But Mr. Mann, in New York this week for a special screening, insists that his sole purpose was to capture Dr. King as a man. He included and emphasized only those elements that he thought essential for illuminating his central subject—Dr. King and his unshakable belief in nonviolence.

The role of Mr. Levison becomes prominent, then, as an illustration of Dr. King's basic decency. The late Robert F. Kennedy suggested that Mr. Levison be dropped from the movement because the late J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, searching for smear material, was preparing to accuse the lawyer of being a Communist. Dr. King reluctantly let Mr. Levison



Paul Winfield, in white hat, as Martin Luther King Jr., and Cicely Tyson, next to him, as his wife, Coretta, in "King," to be shown on Ch. 4 Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

Jessie Burstein

go, but later invited him back after nothing had come of the Hoover tactic.

Some observers argue that this preoccupation with Mr. Levison in the film suggests that Dr. King had to rely on a white man for his guidance and eloquence. But the film does no such thing. Time and time again, Dr. King is shown to be almost fiercely independent, sometimes going counter to the advice of all his aides. The best example is provided by his opposition to the Vietnam War.

Beyond factional ego battles, the film quite intentionally runs into explosive controversy with a clear implication that the F.B.I. was to some degree involved in the King assassination. Mr. Hoover is portrayed as a harassing, racist psychopath fighting the specter of "black insurrection." Black anti-King demonstrations in Memphis are shown to be on the F.B.I. payroll. And, hours before Dr. King's death, black policemen responsible for his safety are suddenly transferred to new beats. One

later says: "It just don't happen that way—they'll never make me believe it was coincidental."

Purely as "docu-drama," "King" does not avoid the familiar pitfalls of the treacherous form. It is conceded at the outset that "in some instances, dialogue, action and composite characters were created to advance the story." At times, newsreel footage is combined with dramatization to produce a black-and-white blur of fact and re-created fact. Time sequences are violated.

A brief but powerful scene between Dr. King and the late Malcolm X, a

Black Muslim leader, the first scene that Mr. Mann actually wrote in his 12-year project, is made to take place at a time that would be one year after Malcolm's death. Mr. Mann presses his defense: "If you don't distort the people, if you don't distort what they say, it doesn't matter where you insert the material." But the demands of televi-

sion, with its peculiar mixture of news and entertainment, are justifiably more rigid than the subjective choices of a dramatist.

Does "King" capture Martin Luther King Jr. as a man? To a remarkable extent, yes. Paul Winfield's performance as Dr. King is extraordinary in most respects. Although the actor can't quite duplicate the magnificent resonances of Dr. King's public speaking, he fully embodies the determination, inner strength and dignity of a born leader. He commands respect even when clowning around in a pillow fight.

As Coretta King, Cicely Tyson is disappointing, once again reverting to an irritating primness that seems to have seriously infected her acting recently. But most of the supporting cast is good, notably Howard Rollins as Andrew Young, Kenneth McMillan as Eugene (Bull) Connor, the Police Commissioner of Birmingham, Ala.; Dick Anthony Williams as Malcolm X, Al Freeman Jr. as Damon Lockwood (one of the composite characters), and especially Ossie Davis as Martin Luther King Sr., a tower of beleaguered tranquility.

Mr. Mann's script is weakest when dealing with Dr. King's private domestic concerns, which rarely amount to more than obligatory interludes between servings of the main business at hand. The major dramatic thrusts are obviously contained in the sweeping movements of Dr. King's public life—Montgomery to Birmingham to Selma to Chicago, from busing to voting rights to the Vietnam War to the nation's poor.

For the Kennedy's, he was usually taking action too soon. For the F.B.I., he was always doing too much. For some of his own colleagues, he was not diplomatic enough. His Vietnam protests, they said, alienated President Lyndon B. Johnson and "put a slur" on black patriotism. For the country in the end, he was one of the most dynamic and important leaders of the century. This is the message that comes through clearly in "King."