

'King': Historical Fact or Hollywood

By Jeff Prugh

Los Angeles Times

ATLANTA—The scene is the mid-1950s, in the home of a young Montgomery, Ala., minister named Martin Luther King.

Several gun-carrying black militants stand menacingly before King. They are angered by the slaying of a black by a policeman during the historic Montgomery bus boycott, which King and his followers have organized in protest against racial discrimination.

"You want a gun?" King asks. He removes a rifle from a drawer and hands it to them. "Here. Take this."

The black men appear puzzled. King is a man who had preached nonviolence.

"It's my gun," King says. "Take it! I don't want it! I don't want it! Take it!"

The episode is from the script of the forthcoming five-hour NBC television movie, "King." The picture is scheduled to be shown for three days running in February. The episode is one of many that have triggered controversy over the just-filmed version of the slain civil rights leader's live story.

Dr. Ralph David Abernathy, who marched and went to jail for civil rights causes with King, and some executives of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which King founded 20 years ago, have called for a nationwide protest against the film.

They complain that the script is "exploitative" and "inaccurate," and that it portrays King—played by actor Paul Winfield—as a "weak, cowardly, frightened" leader.

One SCLC official, Tyrone Brooks, charged that King came across "not as he really was, but as an Uncle Tom being led around by white men."

To which Abby Mann, who produced, directed and wrote the film, replied: "That's absolutely the most ridiculous thing I've heard! Here is a man who knew he was going to die in Memphis, just for fighting for a few cents more pay for garbage workers. That is an Uncle Tom?"

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, who is played by actress Cicely Tyson, said it was "highly premature" to assess the film in its pre-editing phase.

She said the movie was a "drama and not a documentary. Therefore it should be judged as such. No one



could be more concerned than I about how my husband's image is being projected or the authenticity of the film in general."

Also potentially controversial are portrayals of President John F. Kennedy and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. Both publicly supported King during the 1960s, but one portion of Mann's script, for example, makes Robert Kennedy's backing of King appear more politically than morally motivated.

It depicts a heated exchange between Robert Kennedy and the late FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover. In the script Kennedy scolds Hoover for spreading a "character assassination" monograph and "scurrilous gossip" about King to high-level government officials. This portion, Mann said, is based on interviews he had with Robert Kennedy's successor, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who plays himself in the picture:

HOOVER (dryly, bitterly): "I appreciate the high moral tone of your tenure, Mr. Kennedy. Except that you authorized wiretaps on your friend Dr. King yourself. I have it in your own handwriting."

ROBERT KENNEDY: "Yes. I did. I was wrong to have authorized them. I was thinking that my brother was

mixed up with Dr. King in the public mind and I was afraid that if Dr. King were discredited my brother would be discredited. But my brother's no longer alive, and I have nothing to protect now...

"So besides getting back every one of those monographs, I want a letter from each of the persons saying that they never read it. I want that in writing. Is that clear?"

As for the gun scene involving King in Montgomery, a storm is raging over its authenticity.

Abernathy, who was regarded by many as King's closest adviser, argues that the scene is fiction. "Dr. King never owned a gun," Abernathy said in an interview.

Mann contends that King was in fact a gun-owner. "Abernathy ought to know better," Mann said. "Dr. King even wrote in one of his books that he owned a gun."

Indeed, in "Stride Toward Freedom," King's account of the Montgomery movement, King wrote that he and Mrs. King were concerned about his image as a champion of nonviolence. They decided, he wrote, that he should not use "weapons of violence for my personal protection" and chose to get rid of "the one weapon we owned."

Whether "King" is historical fact or

Fiction?

Hollywood fiction depends on who interprets it.

Abernathy, who said he would try to prevent NBC from showing the film or seek changes in the script, is unhappy that although he was a top adviser to King, in the film he is upstaged by Stanley Levison, a white New York lawyer who was one of King's personal friends.

"Mr. Levison came into the movement later, but mainly as a fund-raiser, not an adviser," Abernathy said. "But, more important than whose role is underplayed or overplayed, I am deeply concerned about Dr. King being portrayed accurately.

"I don't think, as black people, we can afford anybody tampering with our history. First impressions are lasting, especially for young people who never knew Dr. King. Our people have so few heroes, and Dr. King is the most powerful black leader of all—the most peaceful warrior of the 20th century."

The controversy now has become so bitter that another of King's close followers, the Rev. Hosea Williams, an outspoken Georgia state representative who last week was elected executive director of the SCLC, attacked the film as "an attempt by a small clique of Jews—not all Jews, mind you—to economically exploit the life of Dr. King."

That brought an angry retort from the southeastern chapter of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, which called Williams' "use of anti-Semitism uncalled-for, irrelevant and offensive."

The Anti-Defamation League added that Williams "denigrates the good name and memory of Dr. King, who was among the nation's leaders in fostering greater understanding and goodwill between blacks and Jews."

Mann, who is Jewish and who produced the Academy Award-winning film, "Judgment at Nuremberg," said that King had asked him, shortly before his death, to produce a picture on his life. He has worked eight years on the project, he said.

Of Williams' charges of Jewish exploitation, Mann said: "Nothing could be further from the truth. I was with Dr. King at the height of the black power movement. Wherever he went, he always said that the future had to be better for black people as well as white people."