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Latest King film shows black leader courageous

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — During filming last summer, the television biography of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came under attack from some associates of the slain civil rights leader.

King, they said, was portrayed as frightened and cowardly. Not so, countered Abby Mann, writer and director of "King" for NBC, which airs in two-hour segments on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

"There may be flaws in this film," Mann said then, "but showing him as a coward is not one of them. At moments he may be afraid, but that makes him all the more courageous."

The criticism has died down, although Andrew Young, the United States' U.N. ambassador and a former King associate, flew to Los Angeles in early January to defend the film.

When the controversy began last August, Mann and Paul Winfield, who plays King, were interviewed on the set. A few weeks before the air date, Mann was sought out again.

He said: "I don't know how the public is going to react. It could roll off the nation's back like water off a duck, or it could disturb a lot of people."

Mann said the film's treatment of a number of national leaders, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in particular, is not flattering. He said Hoover used the FBI in a personal vendetta to discredit King.

"What I would like for it to do is for

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people to say I'd like to be like King," Mann said, "instead of like the violent characters we see in the movies. Non-violence is a dangerous and revolutionary policy. It would be marvelous if that picked up again. It's the story of a man who tried to carry out the precepts of Jesus — which is the most dangerous thing you can do."

Winfield plays King, Cicely Tyson is Coretta Scott King and Ossie Davis is the slain man's father, Dr. Martin Luther King Sr. Roscoe Lee Browne, Art Evans, Ernie Banks, Howard Rollins, William Jordan and Cliff DeYoung also star.

The three-part drama takes King from his days as a ministerial student to his assassination in Memphis in 1968.

Winfield said last August that he was awed by the thought of playing King. "It was inhibiting at first," he said. "But I said if they didn't buy it in the first five minutes they wouldn't buy it at all. That's how I got over the numbing fear."

On the set representing the Oval Office of the White House, where King met with President Lyndon B. Johnson, Winfield said he did not play King as a saint or as a man who never made mistakes.

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