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Screen: The Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King Jr.

By ROGER GREENSPUN

"KING," an account of the public career of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. compiled and edited from several kinds of documentary footage by Ely Landau, is scheduled to play tonight only at many theaters throughout the country, including more than 50 in the boroughs of New York City. A longer version of the film will eventually be available for purposes of study, but for most moviegoers the theatrical version, which runs for almost three hours, may well seem long enough.

In fact it is too long, exactly to the extent that it includes a number of cameo guest appearances by such stars as Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster, James Earl Jones and others who mostly look at the camera and very sincerely recite verse. But the

The Program

KING: A FILMED RECORD MONTGOMERY TO MEMPHIS, a full-length documentary compiled and produced by Ely Landau; music by Coleridge Perkinson. For one night only in theaters throughout the Metropolitan area. Running time: 177 minutes.

rest of "King," except for a few relevant national-affairs stock shots (Vietnam; Lyndon Johnson's Civil Rights bill), sticks close to its subject, and for its pains achieves a density and shapeliness that is rare in any movie—let alone a documentary committed to the sequence of actual events.

Those events begin with the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, when Dr. King was 27 years old, and they end shortly after his murder in Memphis, in April, 1968. Between, come the confrontations in Birmingham, the 1963 March on Washington,

the three Selma voter-registration marches, the housing protests in Chicago, and finally the Memphis sanitation men's strike, which led to Dr. King's death. Even from this short distance, it is good to be reminded of recent history, and what that history, as it generates pride or even mere dramatic urgency, owes to black men in America.

Although it makes some attempt to distinguish Dr. King and his nonviolence from the black militants who came after him, and although the distinction is accurate, the film strongly suggests the continuity of Dr. King and his successors in a drive toward a viable group identity. Dr. King's strategies, seen here in rich and spacious detail, seem to have been designed less for winning civil rights as such than for the use of civil rights as a means to human dignity. In

Dr. King's platform and pulpit manner (of which there is a good deal) that bid follows a traditional Christian rhetoric for which religious belief and self-dramatization go hand in hand. The manner seems flamboyant, and a little old-fashioned. But it was a real form of communication, and for a while it worked.

When it begins not to work, after the fire hoses of Birmingham have been replaced by the lawn sprinklers of Chicago, it strains toward a sense of fulfillment (with many quotations from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic") that really does seem hollow. The film catches this shift with great precision and insight, just as it faithfully records only only bitter victories (for example, the Birmingham jail) but also victorious-seeming defeats (for example, the descent of the celebrities for the end of the third Selma march: a Nichols and May comedy routine, Harry Belafonte singing about the girl in Kingston Town.)

But the truth of "King" is ultimately a ceremonial truth, of symbolic gestures, crowds, surging response. I know nothing to compare it with except Leni Riefenstahl's magnificent "Triumph of the Will"—not, of course, in tone or content, but rather in its comprehension of history as drama. But "Triumph of the Will" was history staged for the camera, and "King" is history understood by the camera. "King" attempts no analysis. It raises reportage to the power of ritual, and for all its lapses it is a most solemnly beautiful film.