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Theater: *The Mountaintop* (Sort of) Scales The Heights

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The Mountaintop ** 1/2 out of ****

BERNARD B. JACOBS THEATRE

Camae is a full-service maid -- and not the sort of full-service you might uneasily expect in a play set in a hotel room and featuring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Samuel L. Jackson) and a very attractive woman. Played broadly but with gusto by Angela Bassett, Camae has an endless supply of Pall Malls and a dash of liquor for your coffee. In *The Mountaintop*, we get a glimpse of the private King, and Camae is the person who loosens him up with her salty tongue, mild vices and truth talking.

Katori Hall's play comes from London loaded with the Olivier for Best Play, but it's a modest affair and, taken on its own terms, entertaining. King has returned to the Lorraine Motel on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated. King just delivered his "Mountaintop" speech, one of his most stirring orations and now he simply wants to relax and smoke and wind down.

Camae bustles into the room with his order of coffee and they begin to chat. With a storm brewing outside and our knowledge that this is the last night of King's life, it's natural to expect some soul-searching and worries for the future from King. They banter, they chat, and they bicker just a little. King makes a loving phone call home to his wife and worries about his acolytes and the Cause. (Jesse Jackson might want to skip the show; two of the biggest laughs come at his expense.)

For the first half of the play, that's it and it's enough. Jackson has an easy authority on stage; he evokes

King's famous cadences mostly when delivering the lines of a sermon he is working on about why the United States is going to hell. Camae seems more of a "character" than a person at first, but Bassett wins you over with her unassuming charm.

She savors the show's two key speeches. The first takes place when King asks her what she would say to the striking sanitation workers of Memphis. Camae gets a full head of steam as she whoops it up, ultimately leaping on the bed and letting loose blue language that hilariously and pointedly gets her anger and frustration across. It might be more Malcolm than Martin, but King likes it.

As the show moves away from this workmanlike beginning, it loses focus a little. Hall too consciously seizes the moment of King's final night on earth for a reckoning. But the two actors keep the humor and humanity flowing amidst increasingly strained comic territory. At the finale, the stage bursts apart and Camae delivers a potent glimpse of the future of America forged in part by King. It's another rip-roaring monologue, and who knows what Bassett might have done with it if allowed? Instead of letting Bassett take the stage and engage our imagination the way theater excels at, we're bludgeoned with a multi-media stream of video and photographs meant to illustrate the flow of history. The technology simply overwhelms the moment. The audience wants the play to take us to church; instead this production took us to an IMAX movie.

None of the play's missteps should overshadow two engaging performances by Jackson and Bassett or the fact that Hall has certainly delivered what should be a commercial crowd-pleaser and has the makings of a serious talent. The tech elements unfortunately underline the mythic elements that weigh the story down, complete with ominous thunder and the like.

The set is mostly that hotel room, reportedly recreated down to the minutest detail. That makes it puzzling they should display a mock-up of the Lorraine Hotel on the curtain raiser that looks nothing like the actual one, which is now the home of the [National Civil Rights Museum](#).

A photograph of the real location would have looked just as evocative and been rooted in reality. It's a pity *The Mountaintop* didn't do the same.

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Follies *** 1/2
Hair ***
Hero: The Musical * 1/2
Lake Water **
Master Class w Tyne Daly ** 1/2
Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***
The Mountaintop ** 1/2
Newsies **
Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2
One Arm ***
The Select (The Sun Also Rises) ** 1/2
Septimus & Clarissa *** 1/2
Silence! The Musical * 1/2
Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2
The Submission **
Sweet and Sad **
Unnatural Acts ***
We Live Here **
Zarkana **

NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame *** 1/2
Crazy, Just Like Me ***
Cyclops: A Rock Opera *
Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon ** 1/2
F---ing Hipsters **
Ghostlight **
Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating) * 1/2
Kissless * 1/2
The Pigeon Boys ***
Time Between Us * 1/2

FRINGEFEST NYC 2011

Araby *
The Bardy Bunch **
Books On Tape ** 1/2
Civilian **
Hard Travelin' With Woody ***
Leonard Cohen Koans *** 1/2
The More Loving One **
The Mountain Song *** 1/2
Paper Cuts ***
Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow ** 1/2
Pearl's Gone Blue ***
Rachel Calof ** 1/2
Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending **
2 Burn * 1/2



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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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