

By Joanne Wallace

# The Man Behind the Myth

## Kevin Hanchard on playing Martin Luther King, Jr.

**K**evin Hanchard has played his share of challenging roles, on both stage and screen.

His classical credits range from Oberon/Theseus to Antipholus and Feste. His portrayal of Booth in *Topdog/Underdog* for The Shaw and Obsidian Theatre two seasons ago snagged him one of his two Dora Mavor Moore nominations. When he's not onstage, he's busy playing Detective Art Bell in the hit BBC America series *Orphan Black*. But none of this prepared him for the call asking if he'd like to play Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"It's an amazing opportunity," says Kevin. "But I'd be lying if I didn't say it was daunting to think of playing such a man."

### Laying bare a mountain of mythology

*The Mountaintop* is a one-act play by African American playwright Katori Hall, set on the night before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. This was a bitter time in King's life. The Civil Rights Movement was losing steam, black militants were frustrated by King's insistence on non-violence, and King himself was under FBI surveillance, thanks to his unpopular pacifist views on the war in Vietnam.

The play opens after King has delivered his last great oration, the speech now known as "I've Been to the Mountaintop." It was delivered to a crowd of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968. On that night, spent and exhausted, King retires to room 306 in the slightly down-at-heels Lorraine Motel - a place where the real-life King and his entourage routinely stayed in Memphis.

But this night is different. Soon after the curtain rises, King meets a sassy, potty-mouthed maid named Camae, who seems remarkably unimpressed with the great "Preacher Kang." What happens next is extraordinary, with King and Camae engaged in a rapid-fire battle of wits that effectively lays bare the mountain of mythology surrounding this



preacher's son from Atlanta, Ga. By evening's end, the two have delivered a smart, funny, moving and ultimately redemptive portrait of the real man behind the icon who changed the course of American history.

### "I have to find myself in Dr. King"

When Kevin was offered this role, he knew there'd be both advantages and disadvantages to playing a real-life character. Certainly the good included plenty of research materials, and Kevin says he's been "up to his eyeballs" in YouTube videos, DVDs and books about King and the Civil Rights Movement.

"It's easy to go to the Internet and study his mannerisms, his cadence, how he held himself," says Kevin. "But we don't want to shackle ourselves entirely to this. The story we're telling is about the man no one ever knew, so who knows what he really sounded like in private? He never showed that, ever."

The actor's deeper job is to dig under the surface of whatever character he's playing, whether "real" or not. So for Kevin, the point of the research is absorbing the surface data so it oozes out of him, almost unconsciously. After that, the real work begins.

"I have to find myself in Dr. King. It's one thing to just put on someone else's clothes. But to bring a sense of truth to the story, you have to find parallels and corollaries between your life and that of the character."

For Kevin, those parallels definitely exist. Like King, Kevin grew up in a hard-working Christian household. "Playing a man of deep faith is not a stretch for me. I know what a devout minister is, and I know what it is to have God at the forefront of your life."

Kevin is also 39 and a father of four, just as King was at the time of his death. "When the script calls for Dr. King to speak of his love for his wife and his kids, what do I need to do other than say the words? It's just there for me."

### Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., warts and all

But what about the issue of playing such a larger-than-life character - a man revered by millions as an American hero?

There's no doubt the man audiences will meet in this production is startlingly different from the noble figure presented in history books. This is Martin Luther King Jr., warts and all - a Baptist preacher who sneaks cigarettes, guzzles coffee and ogles pretty maids. How does an actor manage the expectations an audience might bring to the theatre of how King should be presented?

Kevin admits there is definitely an irreverent quality to this depiction of King. But he's adamant it's for good reason. "There's something to this piece that allows you to see he was just a man - frightened, vulnerable, exhausted, and prone to all the same vices we all are. But at the same time he fought through and beyond that, and never lost faith."

Credits:

### A call to action

Kevin is confident audiences will find much to enjoy in this production. "People should be prepared to enjoy an evening of great theatre, even if they don't know much about Dr. King. Yes it's about him - but it's a human story, and accessible to everyone."

He also feels it delivers something more: a call to action for each of us to honour King's memory by carrying the mantle he left behind. "On one hand Dr. King was an ordinary man. But he still did amazing and powerful things. And I am constantly aware that any opportunities I have today and the life I've been blessed to live are due to the many sacrifices and accomplishments of this man."

"That power to rise above our ordinary selves and accomplish greatness lies in each one of us. To truly honour his memory, we need to take up that responsibility, standing up against injustice wherever we find it."

*The Mountaintop* runs July 17 to September 7 in the Studio Theatre, before moving to Toronto. Presented by Obsidian Theatre, it will run from September 27 to October 14 at the Aki Studio

**"...and He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."**

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,  
in his last speech before being assassinated April 4, 1968



### 1964 - 2014: 50 YEARS OF CIVIL RIGHTS

Fifty years ago, the United States passed its landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex or national origin.

The bill was inspired largely by John F. Kennedy's 1963 "civil rights speech", delivered in response to a series of protests in the African-American community, especially the May 1963 Birmingham campaign led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.