

MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY SCREENING

January 17, 2011

KING: A FILMED RECORD...MONTGOMERY TO MEMPHIS

Monday, January 17

3:00 p.m.

1970, 185 mins.

Archival 35mm print for the Academy Film Archive.

Introduced by Richard Kaplan

Produced by Ely Landau. Associate producer, Richard Kaplan. Edited by Lora Hayes and John N. carter. Music supervisor, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson. Bridging sequences: Sidney Lumet and Joseph Mankiewicz.

Readings by Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee, Ben Gazzara, Charlton Heston, James Earl Jones, Burt Lancaster, Paul Newman, Anthony Quinn, Clarence Williams III, Joanne Woodward. and Richard Kaplan.

From "It Is Frighteningly Easy to Hate" by Ellen Holly, *The New York Times*, March 15, 1970:

The documentary footage is stunning. Mercifully, there is no added commentary. The events are allowed to speak for themselves. The soundtrack bursts with vitality—the roar of police motorcycles, bombs, burning crosses, ambulances, night sticks crunching into human bone, gospel shouts, the massed crowds before the Lincoln Memorial at the 1963 March on Washington and, most thrilling of all, the speeches of the man himself, including a miraculously unearthed tape, taken by chance, of that first meeting in which the decision to boycott the Montgomery buses was made. As for the images, if film is a mirror, we should all go see it, for, black or white, we will never look and see ourselves that beautiful or that innocent again.

King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis documents a transcendent moment in American history when an extraordinary man, through sheer force of personality, managed to convince black and white, Jew, Catholic and

Protestant, that if we all gave our best we could root out America's cancers once and for all and make her whole. You have only to see the film to see why the movement had to end. Human beings are human beings. They can behave this way only for a while. But the cancers ran deeper, were harder to root out than we knew, and only a saint or a fool can behave this way forever. How glorious it was while it lasted.

A line of black citizens stand in orderly rows on the courthouse steps to register, are beaten back with billies, line up again, are beaten back, over and over. None raises a finger to defend himself. Patiently they reassemble, and there is something unbearable about the fact that each of them, to receive this mauling, has dressed in his Sunday best.

A line of young white clergymen link hands during a demonstration. Eventually, some of them, like Reeb and Klunder, will die. They know that and one or two of them look frightened. It just makes it all the more remarkable that they are there. But they are there in the streets to give witness to a living Christ instead of intone the merits of a dead

one from the safety of a suburban pulpit—or Madison Square Garden.

Time passes and innocence vanishes.

When Dr. King became one of the first leaders in this country to speak out against the war in Vietnam, he promptly got his knuckles rapped and we all learned, if we didn't know already, that we live in a system that doesn't believe in nonviolence, only in black nonviolence. Time has taught us that Dr. King, who said "Now," was a good man but not a prophet, that maybe Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma was the prophet. In one sequence of the film Clark leans out of a shadow and the sun glints on the button he wears in his lapel. It says "Never."

Well... perhaps.

An hour after a screening of the film, I spoke with Coretta King. The experience she had just been through was overwhelming but there were no tears, no swollen face. When you see her, it is immediately clear that this is not the widow of a dead man but the wife of a living idea. She sees the death and the life as all of a piece, all about one thing, service to mankind, and there is no denying that on those terms the death took place in the best possible way at the best possible time to be of the most possible use. The Egyptian-looking eyes that seem so brooding and poetic in photographs, in person come intensely alive with her total commitment to her husband's beliefs. Although they are now familiar to us, she makes them seem fresh and exciting and, beyond that, possible. The idea of loving one's fellow man looks like a cliché on a printed page. Hear it out of her mouth and it seems wholly different. However much cynicism you bring to her presence, inevitably you leave with less.

I do not share Coretta King's faith in human nature. Although some gains were made because Dr. King awakened America's Christian conscience, other gains were made because the power structure made a cold-blooded calculation and decided to embrace him as the more palatable alternative to the militants. To know that is to know that the black man must never trap himself in any single method. Although I personally choose Dr.

King's way, there are many ways, and each man must choose his own.

What I do share with Coretta King is her conviction that her husband was one of the greatest men this country has ever produced. It is impossible to overestimate his importance. Black militants who see him as an Uncle Tom or whites who see only the Christian elements in his doctrine both fail utterly to grasp his full significance.

It is easy—frighteningly easy—to hate. Most particularly if you are black. It is almost impossible to do otherwise as the list of oppressions, frustrations, injustices, lunatic priorities, moral ambiguities and insults to intelligence grows longer and longer.

Where do we turn?

To a President who cannot summon up one shred of empathy for the young or the black or the poor?

To the courts? There was no need for the Nixon Administration to be embarrassed by Carswell's 1948 speech. We knew what we were getting all along. We knew that, in line with Nixon's Southern strategy, the only vacant seat on the highest court of the land was being held for a "Southern conservative." We know that the term "Southern conservative" is a euphemism for "White supremacist." What difference whether the bottle of poison is honestly labeled with a skull and crossbones? We are going to have to swallow it anyway. Aren't we?...

Some whites revere King for the Christian overtones in his doctrine, others for the hope he holds out to them that they will be spared a reaping of the whirlwind they have sown. As a black, I revere him for a very different reason. By suggesting that we make an effort to transform our hatred into love, to render ourselves benign rather than malignant—however illusory the success of that alchemy—I think he offers us a mental discipline that helps to reverse the terrible erosion of personality that normally takes place in us as we are constantly abraded by a hostile society.

Leaders die. Their images slip into a pleasant blur. Not so for King. His history will be unique. Those of us who wish to avoid the

incapacitating paralysis of hatred will have to focus ever more intensively on the man and his ideas, devour every book or film that helps us to do so. Not lose him image or permit it to blur, but burn it into our brains with a branding iron. The necessity

to do that is inescapable. It is one of the only means we have of attempting to remain loving, fluid and functioning, in a society that, with each passing day, provides those of us who are black with a fresh cue for rage.

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