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THEATERWORKS duplicated in exact detail the room at the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King stayed the night before he was assassinated. "The Mountaintop" centers on an encounter between King (Jamil A.C. Mangan) and the motel's maid, Camae (Courtney Thomas).

AT THEATERWORKS

TIME CAPSULE

The Set of 'The Mountaintop' Recreates King's Motel Room

By **FRANK RIZZO**
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Audiences at Hartford's TheaterWorks production of "The Mountaintop" will be transported in time and place, not just by the power of the script, staging and actors, but by the specificity of place: a dingy '60s motel room in Memphis, with soiled carpeting, faded drapes and a very special guest.

Katori Hall's play is set at the Lorraine Motel on April 3, 1968, the last night of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life. Earlier that day he delivered his "I've been to the mountaintop" speech at the Mason Temple. On April 4, he was assassinated on the motel's balcony. King was 39.

For the production, Room 306 is recreated in exacting detail.

"A set design is always a character because it creates the atmosphere," says Evan Adamson, associate scenic designer with David Gallo for the Broadway production of "The Mountaintop." He who is overseeing TheaterWorks' design. The play is in previews and opens Friday, continuing through May 5.



SET DESIGNERS aged a new doorknob to recreate the worn one from the Lorraine Motel.

"I don't think it would work if it's just any door or window," says artistic director Rob Ruggiero, who is staging the play which centers on an encounter with King and the motel's mysterious maid. "This play is so grounded in this particular room and time. He even says in the play, 'So this motel room will be my tomb.'"

Adamson's aim for the set is "not to do a heightened

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Room

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reality version of it or to push a metaphor or concept. We really wanted the Katori's script to be the driving force behind the evening."

Hall's play premiered in London in 2009 and won the Olivier Award for best new play. A Broadway production opened in 2011 with Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett.

The designers of the Broadway production went to Memphis where the motel is now a national civil rights museum. King's room is preserved behind glass with Gallo and Adamson the only people to have entered it since 1991 — other than someone who occasionally dusts.

"It was an amazing research opportunity," says Adamson. "I was also overcome with emotions, too, to realize where I was, to put myself in his place and to know what happened just outside that door, knowing that door was the last thing he saw."

They took photos of the room, the tired motel paintings in the room, the Memphis telephone book, bed covers. They made swatches of the colors in the room. "At times it felt like a 'C.S.I.' episode."

But will the audience notice a tiny detail??

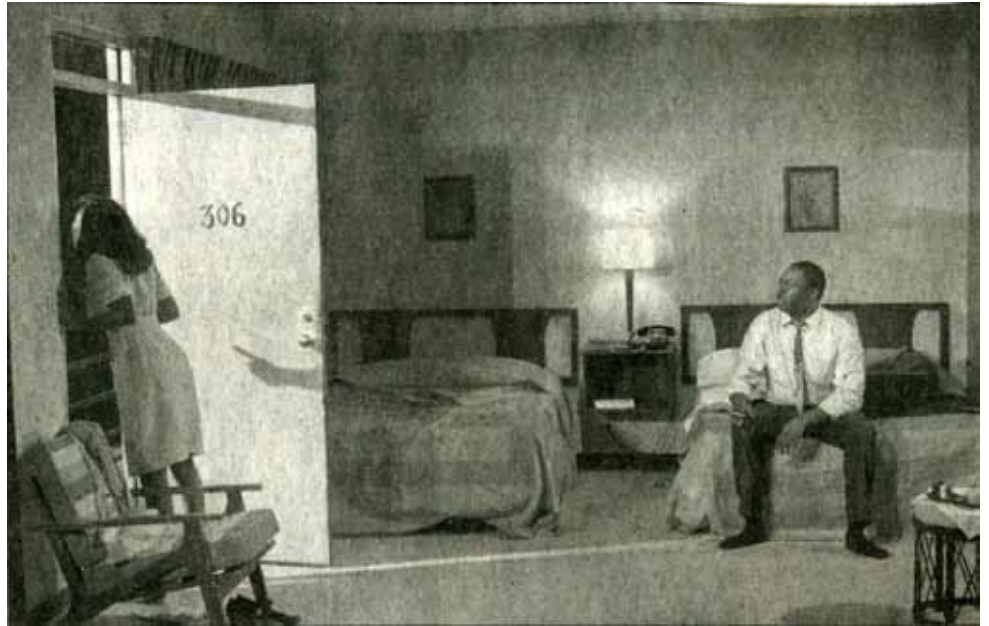
"I never ask that," says Adamson. "I always think everyone will notice."

TheaterWorks has a modified thrust stage, so the set is a more authentic recreation of the room than in the Broadway production, which has a wide proscenium. An exhibit called "Room 306" about the motel and the re-creation of the room through the design process is up at the Hartford theater's gallery.

The Right '0'

The TheaterWorks production team spent many days getting the details just right: how the drapes and bedspread don't exactly match, how the "0" in 306 is upside down, how weathered the door jam is, recreating exact placement of scuffs, even making sure light switches were just off-center by a small angle.

"Our whole production staff became so engaged," says Ruggiero. "It's exciting, moving and disturbing in all the right ways. There's a thrill factor to see how close can we get to make that chair look like the real chair. The thinking is maybe if we get all



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COURTNEY THOMASS and Jamil A.C. Mangan in a scene from "The Mountaintop" now in previews and opening Friday. Set designers wanted to get the details of Room 306 just right.

these details right some magic will happen. I just got goosebumps."

This is not a biographical play. "There's nothing like, 'I grew up, this happened...' It's this particular moment of time," Ruggiero says. "And Katori has written him as a man — not someone who is revered. He comes in, washes his face, uses the bathroom, takes off his shoes. We see a private moment behind this man."

"This is a fictitious account of him facing things about himself less than 24 hours before his death. It deals with the idea of someone who has an opportunity to understand the impact of his life just before it ends. That's what's so moving about the play."

Ruggiero says he hopes the details of the set register with the audience and the actors: Jamil A.C. Mangan who plays King, and Courtney Thomas who plays Camae.

"We have a duplicate of his briefcase, with an exact copy of what was in it," says Ruggiero. It includes that day's Memphis newspaper, a periodical called "Soul Force," and two of King's own books. It also has the monogram of MLK on it "that only Jamil will see but it will help him become the character. It all adds up."

"To me," says Ruggiero, "it's about truth. Maybe the audience doesn't know that a sign mistakenly says Lorraine "Hotel"

instead of "Motel," but if it has that kind of specificity throughout that the sum of the experience will feel like the truth so, in the end, you forget the room and just live with these characters."

THE MOUNTAINTOP is in previews and opens Friday, April 5, at TheaterWorks, 233 Pearl St. Hartford. The show runs through May 5. Tickets are \$50 to \$63; student rush is \$17; seniors at Saturday matinees, \$35. Pay what You Can on Wednesday, April 3. Performances are Tuesdays through Thursdays at 7:30 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; weekend matinees at 2:30 p.m.. Information: 860-527-7838 and www.theaterworkshartford.org.

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