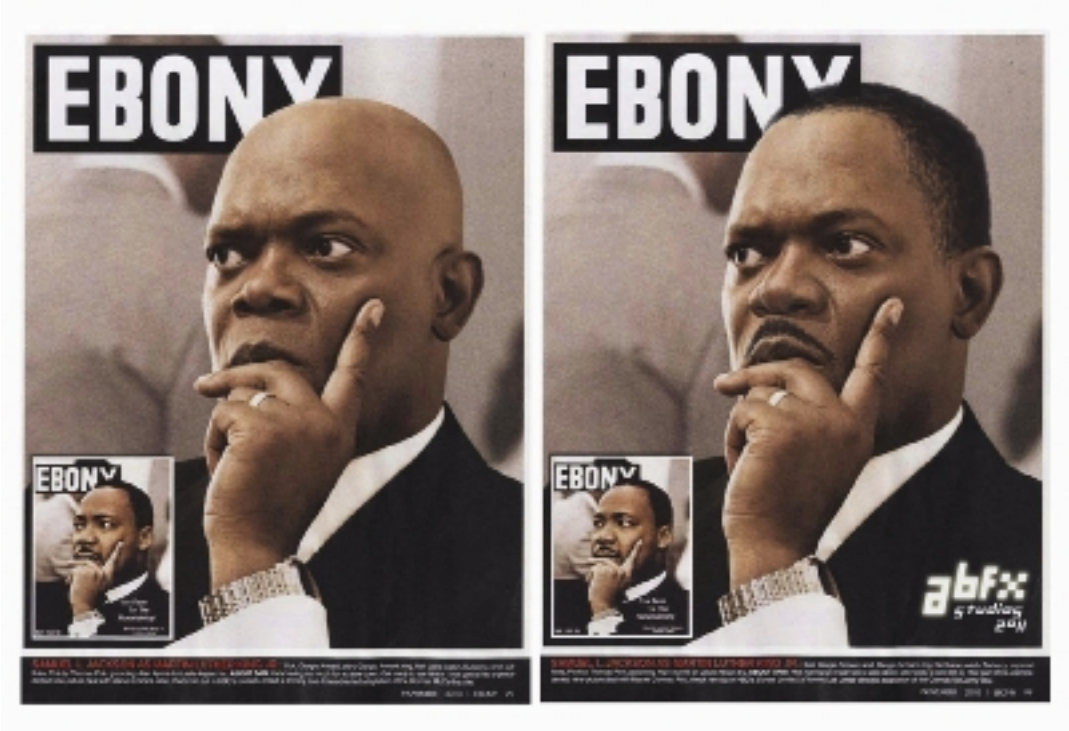

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By LINDA ARMSTRONG

Special to the NNPA from the New York Amsterdam News

"The Mountaintop" opened last week at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre on West 45th Street and held its opening night gala at Espace on
West 42nd Street
. It was so exciting being in this energized atmosphere where champagne was flowing, music was playing and a buzz charged the entire room.

That buzz went to new heights when the first of the play's two stars entered the room-Samuel L. Jackson, who plays Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He co-stars with Angela Bassett in this original play by Katori Hall, which is directed by Kenny Leon.

Jackson was glad to do a one-on-one interview with the Amsterdam News. We sat on a couch and he was incredibly friendly and charming. He shared his feelings about this play, which marks his Broadway debut:

Why did you decide to make your Broadway debut in this piece? How did you hear about the script?

Jackson: I didn't want to do a remake of any play I'd been in or seen. I wanted to do something that was fresh. I just happened to be in the car with Kenny when they called him about this play. I said, 'Oh, that's that play about Martin Luther King they were doing at the West End. I've never had a chance to see it, but let me read it when you get it.'

He emailed a copy to me and I read it. I said, 'So, are you going to do this play?' He said he hadn't made up his mind yet. I said, 'Well, you keep trying to get me to do a play-if you do this play, then I'll do it.' He said, 'For real?'

It was a fresh play. Even though it had won the Olivier Award in London, it hadn't been done in America
and I wanted to be part of the American debut and do something that was meaningful. I thought it was a pretty meaningful piece of work.

How does it feel to play Dr. King? You do it with such an obvious respect.

Jackson: I'm trying to present a man who's different from that icon we know-we don't know this guy. He's not making a speech and he's not leading a march. He's not doing any of that stuff. He's just come from making a great speech, he doesn't feel well, he closes the door, lets his shoulders down and lets all the air out and says, 'Here I am, I want a cigarette, I'm tired, I'm lonely, I'm a little scared.'

I just wanted to present him as a man and as those men who were my grandfather, my uncle, those men who taught me at Morehouse, those Southern preachers and those sedate-as only we know Morehouse negroes can be-but with a genuine heart.

What do you think of the timing of this play; do the generations here now need to see this side of this famous civil rights leader?

Jackson: It would be interesting if a lot of young people could see it and understand that kind of fame. That he wasn't just a speech, he was an ideal. He was an ideal that made people want to kill him-that made people love him. That was a price he paid that would be greater than any price they'll ever pay for being who they are. There's an ideal that allows them to be who they are today that wasn't always present.

What impression of Dr. King do you want to leave with the audience?

Jackson: He was a man who had a very clear understanding of his mortality. Even though he was standing up for us and fighting all the battles for us in a very real kind of way, it was never his intention to die fighting those battles.

You and Ms. Bassett maintain such a high energy on stage, how did you come to play off each other so well?

Jackson: We have a great level of comfort with each other and there's a great level of trust.

Cutline:

Samuel L. Jackson as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in "The Mountaintop"