

# Drama spotlights leader's message of peace and hope



## THE PLAYERS



CLAYBORNE CARSON — HIMSELF



OKIANER CHRISTIAN DARK — CORETTA SCOTT KING



MATT FITZGERALD — MALCOLM X



GOV. JOHN KITZHABER — JOHN F. KENNEDY



JOHNNY LAKE — DADDY KING



M. LEE PELTON — STOKELY CARMICHAEL



FRANK THOMPSON — MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

A docudrama performed at Willamette University brings to life Martin Luther King Jr. and other key players in the civil rights movement.

BY DAN HAYS  
For the Statesman Journal

Most celebrations of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. honor the spirit and the work of the murdered civil rights leader.

But Salem kept the faith Friday night by resurrecting the man himself. For a little over an hour, Dr. King and other historical figures walked the stage of a packed Smith Auditorium at Willamette University.

They were part of a staged reading of the docudrama "Passages of Martin Luther King," by Stanford University history professor Dr. Clayborne Carson.

Carson also is the director of the King Papers Project.

He was appointed to that responsibility by Coretta Scott King, widow of the slain preacher and social activist. He is charged with editing and publishing, in a projected 14 volumes, the speeches, sermons, letters and other papers of Dr. King.

In 1993, he wrote "Passages" when, he said, he realized that most people don't know very much about King.

Carson said the play is a "work in progress" in the sense that changes are made as he continues his research, and it changes nearly every time it is done.

It has been performed at Dartmouth University in New Hampshire, the University of Washington at Tacoma and at Stanford.

It was, in fact, the Dartmouth performance that brought the play to Salem.

Dr. M. Lee Pelton, President of Willamette, saw that production and invited Carson to bring the play to Salem as part of the University's tribute to King.

It was performed to a full house. They laughed and wept and applauded and, ultimately, rose to their feet as one in rapt approval.

Before the performance began, Dr. Carson said he was "honored that Willamette chose to do it. I'm very happy to be here."

Gov. John Kitzhaber, who read the words of John F. Kennedy in the production, had this to say about the experience: "Hearing the words of those great people took me back to my college days at Dartmouth, when the events in the play were really happening. I wish people were as socially connected and active today as we seemed to be back then."

Composed of words from speeches, letters and other papers, the play traces King's civil rights activism in the 1960s, including his conflicts and involvements with President Kennedy and black activists Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, the originator of the Black Power movement.

King was brought to vivid life by Frank Thompson, assistant director of the Institutions Division of the Oregon Department



PELTON



GERY LEWIN / Statesman Journal

**PERFORMERS:** "Passages of Martin Luther King," a docudrama written by Stanford history professor and King Papers Project director Clayborne Carson, is presented to a full house at Willamette University Friday night (above). Readers are (from left to right) Carson, Gov. John Kitzhaber, M. Lee Pelton, Matt Fitzgerald, Frank Thompson, Johnny Lake and Okianer Christian Dark. The audience at Smith Auditorium (top) reacts with laughter to the reading.



**SINGING HIS PRAISES:** The Gospel Music Workshop of America choir performs during the presentation.

of Corrections. Thompson's rich, sonorous voice was well balanced with those of Willamette student Johnny Lake as Daddy King and Okianer Christian Dark of the United States Attorney's Office as Mrs. King.

Willamette student Matt Fitzgerald presented Malcolm X as a dignified, richly complex man simultaneously certain of his convictions yet puzzled by what he saw

around him.

Pelton endowed Stokely Carmichael with fire, passion, and immense dignity.

Carson himself delivered the narration in the voice of a man who has lived much of this history and who understands what it meant to this country.

The words were enriched and counterpointed by the Gospel Music Workshop of America choir under the direction of Ter-



**DISCUSS:** Author Clayborne Carson (from left), Gov. John Kitzhaber and Willamette University President M. Lee Pelton meet before the performance.

ry Davis. Theirs was a performance endowed with the joy of life often echoed in the words of Dr. King.

When asked what has most surprised him as he studies the King papers, Carson said it was "the depth of his religious roots and the extent to which he saw himself as a religious leader rather than as a political leader."

That element also is well represented in the script, and was expressed most effectively through the music.

The performance was staged by Willamette director Chris Harris.

Audience member Rick Bingham of Salem spoke for most of the audience when he said it was "a terrific program, a wonderful piece of history with great gospel singing."

One cannot help but feel that Dr. King would have enjoyed himself.