

## Review

# To Kill a Mockingbird from Tennessee Repertory Theatre

By: Jeffrey Ellis, *Broadway World*

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Nashville theater audiences owe a huge debt of gratitude to Tennessee Repertory Theatre's creative team - led by producing artistic director Rene Dunshee Copeland, scenic and properties designer Gary Hoff, costume designer Trish Clark, lighting designer Phillip Franck and technical director Tyler Axt - for the exceptional production of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, now onstage at TPAC's Andrew Johnson Theatre, extended through October 30.

It is one of the finest acted Tennessee Rep productions in the company's storied 26-year history, and it shows that even the best-known and most beloved literary creations can be reimagined and mounted in a manner both unexpected and surprising. Copeland has made some very judicious cuts to playwright Christopher Sergel's script (which is serviceable in its own right, but somehow lacks the musicality of the original Harper Lee novel - despite the playwright's slavish devotion to the earlier work) which result in a production that is eloquently moving in tone and depiction, yet somehow completely contemporary and timely.

Copeland's deftly directs her cast through the plot, which is well known to virtually any American who can read, with inventiveness and attention to detail. Hoff's exquisitely designed and artfully realized set - the town of Maycomb, Alabama, circa 1935, is rendered in a sepia-toned backdrop that is both beautiful and utilitarian, showing us (through our own mind's eye) how the townspeople live and interact with one another behind the squeaky screendoors through which we gain entrance to their colorful lives - is yet another example of his extraordinary talents.

As is always expected from her, Clark's lovely period costumes are perfectly designed and aid the actors in becoming their characters, particularly for those actors who assay numerous roles. Franck's lighting design is both moody and ethereal, his use of shadows and light capturing the feeling of the time and helping direct eyes to the action unfolding onstage during Copeland's well-paced scene changes. And kudos to Paul Carrol Binkley for his evocative music that undscores the onstage action.

Copeland's stellar cast is led by Chip Arnold in the iconic role of Atticus Finch, the inspiring attorney who takes on a racially charged rape case in an effort to ensure that the accused is given a vigorous defense and a fair trial. Arnold portrays Atticus with a conviction and confidence that very nearly eclipses the film portrayal of Gregory Peck, imbuing his character with a low-key grace that is integrity personified. His courtroom scenes fairly crackle with intensity and dramatic import, but it is in his quieter moments (when Atticus interacts with his children Scout and Jem - here played unaffectedly with understated feeling by Margaux Granath and Christopher Dean) that Arnold's true talents emerge to great emotional effect.

Arnold is given ample support from the remainder of the superb cast throughout the play's two-plus hours of courtroom intrigue and smalltown drama. Bakari King delivers yet another winning performance, adding to his already bulging resume of triumphant stage roles; his portrayal of the accused Tom Robinson is stirringly felt.

As the grown up Jean Louise Finch, who helps to frame the play's action with her sensitive (and somehow non-intrusive) narration, Shelean Newman walks a fine line with a confident grace that helps illuminate the plot rather than distract from it. Denice Hicks, who quite simply becomes three of the neighborhood's most colorful characters - she is, in turn, Miss Maudie, Miss Stephanie and Mrs. Dubose - is convincing in each part, showing us the true depth of her tremendous talents.

Matthew Carlton is quietly effective as Judge Taylor (as well as in the less showy role of Mr. Radley), maintaining control of the courtroom and the audience with his performance. Marin Miller, as Mayella Ewell (the white trash woman who has accused Tom Robinson of rape), effectively underplays her courtroom testimony scene, thus making it all the more powerful. Bobby Wyckoff, as prosecutor Gilmer and as Boo Radley in the play's final scenes, proves once again why he is considered one of Nashville's finest and most versatile actors; his Boo Radley is a very picture of emotional restraint.

Jennifer Whitcomb-Oliva plays Calpurnia, the Finch family's housekeeper, with a generously commanding air, while young Isaiah Frank plays Dill (the visiting neighbor boy, based upon Harper Lee's childhood friend Truman Capote) with a fierce theatricality that captures the character's heart.

But there are two members of the cast whose performances are particularly impressive and electrifying. David Compton is a revelation as Bob Ewell, the mean-spirited and racist personification of evil; Compton tackles the role with relish, giving a reading of the role that is altogether terrifying and rivets your eyes to his every scene. And Mary McCallum, in the relatively small role of Tom's devoted wife Helen Robinson, displays her tremendous gift in the scene in which she discovers that Tom has died while trying to escape from the county penal farm. McCallum's understated histrionics are so movingly portrayed that you forget you're watching a play - you feel as if you have intruded upon a horrible, personal tragedy in the life of people you know and care about.

The collective performance of this acting ensemble is both emotionally draining and breathtakingly exhilarating. Copeland's heartfelt direction and smart casting choices are what transforms this often-produced script into something unexpected, theater that offers a new and unique view of Harper Lee's venerated work.