

Review

The Rep Opens New Season with a Classic.

By: Stephen Garrison, *Nashville Parent*

October 4, 2010

Even as the term racism continues to permeate present day political arguments, Tennessee Rep takes us to Maycomb, Alabama, 1935 — when racial discrimination was open and accepted — for a new production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Thanks to the classic story most adults know well, we are immediately bound to the widowed lawyer Atticus Finch, and his young, inquisitive children. Thoughtful and serious, warm and kind, Atticus tells his children about when he first owned a firearm. "I remember when my Daddy gave me that gun," he says. "He told me that I should never point it at anything in the house; and that he'd rather I shoot at tin cans in the backyard; but he said that sooner or later he supposed the temptation to go after birds would be too much, and that I could shoot all the blue jays I wanted if I could hit'em, but to remember: 'twas a sin to kill a mockingbird." "Why?" his son Jem begs, and Atticus replies, "Because mockingbirds don't do anything but make music for us to enjoy ... They don't do one thing but just sing their hearts out for us."

And there it is: The mockingbird becomes a perfect metaphor for the heart-wrenching story of the wrongfully accused black man, Tom Robinson, whose innocent life is cut short before Atticus can appeal his guilty verdict. All this during a brief summer when Jem and Scout are in the prime of their childhoods and often bound for mischief one way or another in a small-town world.

To Kill a Mockingbird is an auspicious opener for the Rep's 2010–11 season, thanks to the excellent casting of several notable Nashville actors and the stellar work of the overall ensemble as directed by Director René D. Copeland. As Atticus, Chip Arnold leads the cast with a finely nuanced and wise performance. In his hands the feel of the play is exactly right, and Arnold has a way of somehow bringing Americana to his role: he's the right balance of authoritative we want in our fathers, the understanding uncle we love and a lifelong friend all rolled into one. His children, Jem (Christopher Dean) and Scout (Margaux Granath) handle their roles very well, and little Isaiah Frank's portrayal of the precocious Dill is remarkably vivid. Local favorite Denise Hicks plays three characters in the play; Miss Maudie, Miss Stephanie and, as the elderly prudish Mrs. Dubose, she absolutely excels. One could go on and on about the wonderful acting: as Tom Robinson, Bakari King's emotional depth rings true. David Compton is downright scary as the alcoholic child-beating Bob Ewell — the audience laughs nervously when he takes his seat on the witness stand; and Marin Miller as Ewell's abused accusatory daughter Mayella casts a twitchy, emotionally wrecked portrayal.

There is another main character, though. One cannot criticize the beauty of Gary C. Hoff's vintage-invoking set, however, from time to time, it threatens to upstage the players. Consisting of panels spanning stage left to right, included are openings for upstairs windows, Jem's bedroom and a tree. In front of the panels, and separated as they span the stage, are several screen-door frames making for the Finch house, the Radley's, Miss Maudie's and more. At center, the set transforms when it's time to reveal the courtroom ... and all of it is quite functional, if not a bit noisy, but there is no depth for staging and the players seem somehow reined in.

But all is well at the Rep! Overall, this is a terrific first-rate presentation, and the kind of theater that can make an audience lick its chops for more. To be clear, *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the Rep is right on the brink of great.