

Review

Tennessee Rep's Mockingbird soars early then loses altitude

By: **Martin Brady**, *Nashville Scene*

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Let's start with the obvious: Any stage version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* will likely pale in comparison to the screen version, one of the greatest Hollywood films ever made. So be it.

Tennessee Repertory Theatre's new take on the classic, under the direction of René Copeland, has certainly surpassed Circle Players' mounting from earlier this year. That's a relief, and in many aspects Copeland's effort is notable and worthy, helped immeasurably by her artistic team. Designer Gary Hoff's hand-painted panoramic backdrop is wondrously charming and technically inventive. Magically rendered pictures of the town of Maycomb adorn the connecting panels that frame the entire playing area, and in places the backdrop opens up to give us glimpses into the homes. Paul Carrol Binkley's lovely original piano-and-guitar themes evoke the rural simplicity of a bygone Southern era.

Early on, when the story's hero Atticus Finch (Chip Arnold) sits with daughter Scout (Margaux Granath) on their wooden porch glider, it's easy to believe we're there in Depression-era Alabama, where a tale of bigotry, shame and narrow-mindedness is soon to unfold. Christopher Sergel's adaptation of Harper Lee's novel is sufficient in Act 1, which features effective performances by Denice Hicks (as three different town ladies) and narrator Shelean Newman (the grown-up Scout, reflecting on the past). The story's three children — including older brother Jem Finch (Christopher Dean) and summer visitor Dill Harris (Isaiah Frank) — are established strongly as well, and the infamous legend of Boo Radley (Bobby Wyckoff) is ably revisited.

Mockingbird's superficial warmth and familiar characters work well for a while in Sergel's treatment, and the story's darkest elements — including the way poverty diminishes us all — are effectively realized by Copeland's cast, comprising many familiar talented players, including Rep newcomers Jennifer Whitcomb-Oliva, Rodrikus Springfield and Mary McCallum.

But alas, Act 2 has problems. The trial scenes — some of the most dramatic in cinematic history — are leavened here by a certain amount of humor that is a tad offputting. (Imagine an audience laughing at the witness-box antics of Bob Ewell, one of the most despised characters in all of literature — played here by the otherwise well-cast David Compton.)

The plight of Tom Robinson, a black man accused of rape, is as gloomy and poignant as ever, and Bakari King is well-suited for the role. So too is Marin Miller as his accuser, the pathetic Mayella Ewell — though without the benefit of a close-up neither actor achieves an indelible characterization.

Leading man Arnold's courtroom summation seems weak here as well, though it might be rightfully assumed that the actor is seeking his own rhythms, understanding that copping licks from Gregory Peck is pointless. Still, his portrayal would benefit from more passion.

As we approach the final curtain, Sergel's script is running on fumes, with preachy dialogue and some structural awkwardness. Nevertheless, the last tableau — Atticus tending to a bedridden Jem — offers a moving stage picture and a warm conclusion to an evening that begins with a bang and ends with a qualified whimper.