

Review

'Mockingbird' is timeless story made modern

By: Evans Donnell, *The Tennessean*

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Tennessee Repertory Theatre's excellent revival of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' lovingly delivers a classic tale for contemporary audiences.

This beautiful production, grounded in a Christopher Sergel stage adaptation of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1960 novel, works from start to finish as theater for a 2010 audience. The direction, design and acting embrace Lee's narrative, but **Tennessee Rep's show reminds us live performance done properly makes a story new each time it's done.**

At its heart, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' is a story about humanity. While the Jim Crow era is past, we are still better for being reminded that mistreatment and disregard of others damages all of us. Director René D. Copeland and her colleagues understand this, and their presentation stays true to the humane decency of Lee's novel.

Copeland has cast well and encouraged the actors to explore the story and bring their modern insights to the stage. She's also encouraged the development of designs that support this fresh look at fictional Maycomb, Ala., in 1935.

Gary C. Hoff's set is anchored by a working backdrop that, combined with Phillip Franck's lighting, paints a sepia-hued picture of Maycomb. It's like looking at a faded old photograph that holds many rich memories. It's a working backdrop because various openings reveal such things as windows, a bedroom and a judge's bench. Hoff has designed many fine sets in his career; this is one of his best.

Trish Clark's costumes should be mentioned here, too. Yes, she gets the period details right, but more importantly the colors, cuts and shapes of her costumes give us more information about the characters we meet. We meet several characters in this show, and some actors play more than one part, so it's vital the costumes help the actors create, and the audience accept, the multi-faceted story.

And now we come to the actors. If the children playing Scout, Jem and Dill had been the kind of immature performers who self-consciously mug their way through roles, Copeland wouldn't have hired them, so it's not surprising she's picked three young actors who know how to give professional, believable performances.

It's nevertheless a revelation to watch them. Margaux Granath, Christopher Dean and Isaiah Frank give us fully-realized characterizations. I don't know if each wants to continue acting as they grow older, but I would certainly feel privileged to watch them if they did.

Chip Arnold is Atticus Finch. Arnold's portrayal allows Atticus' compassion to show, not just to the man he's defending (Tom Robinson, brought to heart-rending life by Bakari King), but to his children. His performance is fascinating and inspiring.

The support is just as stellar. Let's start with Marin Miller as alleged rape victim Mayella Ewell and David Compton as her abusive father Bob. Both are nasty but not one-dimensional; I admire not only their well-crafted performances but the fact they made me completely forget that I was actually watching two of the kindest people I've ever known. Yes, that's their job as actors, but it's not easy to pull off.

Veteran actors Matthew Carlton, Denice Hicks, Bobby Wyckoff and Samuel Whited shine in multiple roles with clear, clean transitions between parts. Fellow vet Shelean Newman plays narrator Jean Louise (the now-grown Scout) with a grace and ease that only comes when one thoroughly knows the story and how to convey it. Rodrikus Springfield as Reverend Sykes, Jennifer Whitcomb-Oliva as Calpurnia and Mary McCallum as Helen Robinson take characters that arguably weren't as fully realized on the page and make sure they're completely real on the stage.

Tennessee Repertory Theatre has often embraced [stories](#) set in the American South that speak to people no matter where they're from. Their current embrace of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' makes a 50-year-old story feel like a new creation.