

“All Rise!” for Harper Lee’s TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD...

By Freddy Cycholl

If you are looking for a show to make you laugh *and* cry, then TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD is the emotional roller coaster you’re looking for. The play tells such a brilliant story, and it is conveyed incredibly well by this cast. Plays sometimes make it difficult for an actor to truly capture an audience’s attention because there are no flashy dance numbers, crazy costumes, or elaborate dance, such as in musicals. Despite this, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD grabbed my attention and was an emotional experience and story that I will forever be grateful I got to have the pleasure of being an audience member.

Set during the Great Depression in the 1930s, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD is a play written by Aaron Sorkin based on the novel by Harper Lee. It follows the story of a lawyer, Atticus Finch, who chooses to defend a black man wrongly accused of rape in an extremely racist small town in Alabama. The story is told and commented on throughout by Atticus’s children and their friend: Scout Finch, Jem Finch, and Dill Harris. Will Atticus be successful in his endeavors to defend Tom Robinson, or will Tom be killed before they can even get through the trial?

Nobody gives better advice than Atticus Finch (Richard Thomas). Every time he stepped onstage, the theater was filled with his incredible stage presence. My favorite example of this was the incredible moment when he was first introduced onstage by his children, and the audience burst into applause. At this point, I grew more excited for the rest of the show, and I was eager to see what Atticus Finch would do next because of how his confidence seemed to spill over the stage. His conveying of this character filled me with happiness because of the relationships I could clearly see he made with other actors onstage. For instance, his relationship with Calpurnia (Jacqueline Williams) was illustrated perfectly with their seemingly dry humor and lines bouncing off one another so flowingly.

Mayella Ewell (Mariah Lee) always has her guard up and doesn’t give up that easily in her testimony against Tom Robinson, her opponent in the courtroom. I feel that she did a wonderful job in the dramatics of this role, and her physicality was beyond perfect, as she developed wonderful characterization as the show went on. She may have had little stage time, but she sure did put on an incredible performance in the time she had.

How could we forget young, lovable Dill Harris (Steven Lee Johnson), who was best friends with Scout and Jem Finch? The actor's comedic timing was amazing, and he always had the best moments to step in and lighten the mood.

Tom Robinson, played by Yaegel T. Welch, was a black man in a racist town so no wonder he is so insecure. This actor illustrated the perfect stutter and unsure physicality and posture in each scene, and his defensive movements against the other actors were the perfect touch to the tense scenes that occurred throughout the show.

Judge Taylor (Jeff Still) must be commended for his constant reactivity in the courtroom scenes. It is very difficult to be engaged when sitting down behind other actors onstage in multiple scenes in a row but Still did an incredible job, and he even lightened the mood often with well-done comedic timing.

Although the acting was wonderful, I noticed a few awkward blocking moments and scenes where some of the movement didn't appear intentional. For instance, in the opening scenes with Scout, Jem, and Dill, I felt they were moving a little too much, and the directors (Brian J L'ecuyer & Sari Ketter) could have placed them motionless to tell the story, rather than the distraction of movement. Despite this, there were many good moments too, like each of the courtroom scenes that seemed to place me watching a real-life trial.

One of my favorite things about this show is the set design, done by Miriam Buether, and the use of the rail system. The rails allowed a lot of the set to move quickly out of the way, like the pillars hanging instead of being on the floor, which would take longer for them to move. And to complement the transitions, the sound effects and music during the transitions faded in and out very well, so complements to the sound designer (Scott Lehrer). The music contributed to the ominous and tense mood of the show during transitions, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats. The detail and thought-out lighting design are also very important, especially when trying to emphasize a night scene versus day scene, or a dark room versus a lighter room with windows. The lighting designer (Jennifer Tipton) conveyed these aspects very well, and the transitions with lighting were seamless, the blackouts providing effective cover for the running crew to make the changes they needed. Overall, all the tech teams allowed the show to run as smoothly as possible and helped tell the story by inserting the audience directly into the director's vision for TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD.

I may be a biased musical lover most of the time, but I must admit that TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD at the Kravis Center was one of the most incredible plays I've ever witnessed. It's not exactly uplifting, but it tells an important story. The entire point of the production is to emphasize societal problems and educate the public on this time to ensure history does not repeat itself. Of course, this show also includes plenty of laughs to lighten the dark mood that the play maintains throughout. TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD is a phenomenal performance that I highly recommend seeing if you don't mind shedding a few tears!

At the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach, Florida: www.kravis.org

Running Time: 2hrs and 50 minutes, with a 15-minute intermission