

**Transcript: Connie Meng Review aired Friday May 2, 2003**

## **To Kill a Mockingbird**

**Vermont Stage, Burlington VT**

**Wednesday, April 30 through Sunday, May 18, 2003**

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD by Harper Lee has become an American classic, both the original novel and the film version. The story retains its power in the stage adaptation by Christopher Sergel. The character of Atticus Finch is a touchstone by which we can measure the strength of our beliefs and whether or not we have the courage to voice them in the face of opposition. Artistic Director Mark Nash has put together a smooth production that does justice to this powerful story.

Jenny Fulton's simple set along with John Paul Devlin's subtle lighting make the most of the small playing space. The physical production allows us to focus on the story and the characters. There's an intimacy in the FlynnSpace that draws the audience in and in a play of this nature makes one feel like a participant in the action.

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD has a large cast, all of whom do a fine job. Time constraints preclude my mentioning them all. However I have to say that John D. Alexander, who I have seen in other productions, is a truly wonderful character actor. His portrayal of Bob Ewell is right on target and never crosses the line into a redneck caricature. Emily Cervini does a nice job as his daughter Mayella.

Mary Wheeler as Miss Maudie has a tough row to hoe, constantly shifting from narration to participant in the action. She handles the challenge admirably and her final speech is particularly moving.

Tienn Wine is excellent as Calpurnia, housekeeper for the Finch family. She bears a strong resemblance to Lily in the PBS series I'LL FLY AWAY, and triggered my realization the powerful series was probably suggested by this same story. Sheriff Heck Tate is well played by Jim Reid, and his final scene is especially effective.

Now to the central characters. Esau Pritchett is almost painfully good as Tom Robinson, the black man who has the temerity to pity a white woman. Both his fear and his honesty are palpable.

As Scout, Atticus's ten-year-old daughter, Francesca Blanchard is remarkable. Her sensitivity as an actress belies her years. Having been admonished by her father to stand in other people's shoes before making a judgement, she says of Boo Radley, "I didn't need to stand in his shoes. Standing on his porch was enough." Speaking of Boo, Cy Moore is wonderful. It's hard to believe he also plays Mr. Gilmer, the prosecutor.

Finally, Christian Kauffman is a strong and gentle Atticus. His summation for the jury during the trial is very moving, but even more so is his portrayal of the grief of a good man unable to right a terrible wrong.

Director Mark Nash has assembled an excellent ensemble cast. He's managed to stage the sprawling narrative in a way that makes the changes of location and sub-text very clear. You could hear a pin drop during the trial scene. He's also come up with some clever touches, such as the appearances of the invalid Mrs. Dubose.

Atticus has a line after the trial that struck a chord with me, and unfortunately seems timeless. "They've done it before and they'll do it again, and when they do, it seems like only children weep."

The play is a strong finale for a strong season. On a scale of one to five, the Vermont Stage production of TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD gets four and two thirds ferry boats. For North Country Public Radio, I'm Connie Meng.