

# Vermont Stage's 'Mockingbird' proves powerful

By Jim Lowe

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BURLINGTON — "To Kill a Mockingbird" is one of the masterpieces of Americana, unflinchingly exposing what is American, bad and good. Vermont Stage Company, Burlington's professional theater, has created a production that tells this sad but beautiful tale of intolerance with power and pathos.

Harper Lee's novel of the same name tells the tale of a small southern town in the Depression that gets caught up in the power of hatred. Atticus Finch is a very reserved lawyer who has been assigned the

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defense of Tom Robinson, a young black man accused of raping a white girl. Atticus is also the single father of two children, Jem and Scout, and the tale is told through their eyes. The two are joined in their adventures by a boy called Dill, whose parents don't seem to have time for him.

Jem and Scout are at first angry with their father for taking on the unpopular cause; their friends and acquaintances are merciless in their taunts of "nigger-lover." Even the more understanding people, like Sheriff Heck Tate and Judge Taylor, see the trial largely as a formality. What goes on in this

Mark Nash, is a solid one that delivers all the power of this beautiful story. It is particularly well cast, though the acting is uneven, as in most Vermont large-cast productions. (Companies can only pay for a few professional actors.)

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Atticus Finch is played almost stoically in the beginning by Christian Kauffman, who gradually warms up to his children as he realizes their depth of their understanding. Kauffman looks and acts the part of a beleaguered middle-aged man, just trying to do his best.

The three children — Francesca Blanchard as Scout, Francois Bouchett as Jem, and Joey Behlendorf as Dill — all performed naturally and realistically at Thursday's performance. Blanchard's Scout is impish and exasperated, while Behlendorf's Dill is sympathetic as a lost kid who wants to belong. But it is Bouchett that most successfully captures the frustration and responsibility, often through wonderfully accurate facial expressions, of being the son of Atticus Finch.

Powerful performances were delivered by John Alexander as the accusing loser, Bob Ewell, and Emily Cervini as his desperately unhappy daughter Mayella — emotions virtually exploded around them. Mary Wheeler's Maudie is easy and natural as the storyteller, as was Jim Reid's sheriff.

town during one summer proves a riveting story, as the children learn the lesson of tolerance and, for that matter, love.

Northern Stage has chosen Christopher Sergel's adaptation, one of many. This version tells the story rather succinctly using the neighbor and friend Miss Maudie, as a narrator. (Others use the girl Scout as narrator.) This version's succinctness, however, retains most of the incredibly powerful scenes from the book.

Vermont Stage's production, directed by Artistic Director

The production's unevenness was most noticeable in several of the actors' posturing, particularly during the court scene, which at times contributed to a clumsiness of delivery. Still, the naturalness of the rest and the fast pace kept the action riveting.

The production's in-the-round staging proved largely successful as did Jenny Fulton's bare-bones set. Her costumes, though, were particularly outstanding in creating the atmosphere of the time's poverty and desperation.

Vermont Stage has created a production of one of the most

powerful American stories that is both potent and touching.