



[To Kill a Mockingbird](#) at [Royal Exchange](#)

Adapted by Christopher Sergel, Directed by Max Webster, Designed by James Cotterill

Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) February 2013

"It's a sin to kill a Mockingbird, they provide pleasure with their songs and never harm another living creature", symbolizing the moral of this tale, that it is wrong to kill the innocent and harmless.

Watching **To Kill A Mockingbird** at **The Royal Exchange Theatre** felt like the warm embrace of an old friend. Blissfully unaware of the passing of time and absorbed in every moment, I was sorry to say goodbye. As the book's

No. 1 fan

I had been nervous, which had eaten away at the joy of anticipation I felt as the evening approached. Having never spent time in the company of a

Christopher Sergel

adaptation before, I had first date nerves. But, we clicked, there was chemistry and yes, I'd love to do it again!

Set in the summer of 1935 during the Great Depression, inspired by true events and at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the fictional tired old town of Maycomb in racially segregated Alabama, USA, **To Kill a Mockingbird's** central and most passionate message of tolerance is just as relevant today.

The story is a classic tale of prejudice and a wronged victim, and revolves around the story of an African-American man **Tom Robinson** (*Okesie Morro*), accused of rape by The Ewell's, a 'poor white trash' family, and the man defending him, the upright and progressive lawyer, **Atticus Finch** (*Nigel Cooke*).

It is told as seen through the eyes of Atticus's young daughter **Scout** (*Shannon Tarbet*) who freed from the 'starved pink penitentiary' her Aunt would prefer to clothe her in, emulates the tomboyish and dungaree-wearing **Scout** of the book in every barefooted skip and twist of her hair - a young actress clearly made for this role. It is also the story of her passage through childhood and her developing maturity as she grapples with understanding the complexities, prejudices, inhumanity, and compassion of the adults in her world and the vitriol shown towards her father for defending a '**nigger**'. Thankfully, the script has not been doctored by over-zealous and politically correct proofreaders, because the '**N word**' is used in its proper context, providing authenticity and a flavour of time and place. It is also an account of the close, affectionate, and changing relationship *Scout* has with her brother **Jem** (*Rupert Simonian*).

) as he matures, and due to some impressive acting by **Simonian**, appears to age and grow into a young Mr. right before our very eyes.



This age-old tale of a wronged man in a racist society should be sombre given its main topic, but is awash with charm when told from the perspective of a lively, observant, inquisitive, and innocent child, trying to make sense of the seemingly intolerant behaviour of the adults in her small community. This is in no doubt due to the wonderful writing of **Harper Lee**, whose recollections are not only precise and detailed but affectionate, nostalgic, rich in detail and local colour and full of unforgettable characters we could do with more of today. Her only novel delivers evidence of a time and place now lost, of long slow summers punctuated by mundane events that are turned into humungous adventures when seen through the lens of childhood.

This adaptation is compelling. From the very first second, I was hooked. The play is bound to the book and helped along its long course by recurrent readings of the original text from various characters in impeccable southern dialect, at key points in the play. This drives the story forward and affords the audience the luxury of hearing the original delicious words from such a beautifully written novel. It also enables this adaption to cover much of the 300 pages and three

years included in the novel in just less than three hours.

The dustbowl setting of an Alabama backyard is created with a layer of sand and grit, which was spread all the way under the seats and almost out of the stage doors, slightly choking the audience after every bout of frenetic activity on stage. The subtle soundtrack was provided by a live three-piece ensemble and was evocative of a hot summer in the Deep South, with insects clicking, Blue Jays chirping and Mocking Birds singing. Throw in some Bluegrass, a few Cajun infused melodies and a bit of Gospel singing here and there, and you have the harmonious and evocative sound effects that conjure up the sounds of a depression-era Alabama town. Despite the very cold February weather outside, I almost mopped my brow, and looked for a piece of grass to chew on it was so convincing.

The powerful message of tolerance permeated the intimate setting of the **Royal Exchange Theatre**, and the audience were spellbound, as the lives of a widowed father and his young children are changed forever by an act of injustice.

The play has a large and talented ensemble cast of 23 who work together fastidiously between scene changes to re-jig the stage sets which are unusually minimal, but not missed, as the script and performances are enough to carry this particular story. Told in two halves, the first half explores the world of the Finch children and their new best friend **Dill (James McConville)** as they play, tease, fight and try to draw the local “bogeyman” Boo Radley across his front porch all the while trying to figure out the adult world. McConville is another convincing young actor from this impressive cast who gives an animated performance as the over-imaginative and over-dramatic Dill.

In the second half, set mainly in court, we have the theatricals of the legal process, in a classic courtroom drama, and some striking performances. The audience are addressed as jurors and the Finch children take up a seat in the rafters of the theatre to spectate, which serves as the **coloured quarters** of the courtroom. Scarlet Brookes on the stand, is gripping in her misery and bitterness as **Mayella Ewell**, the daughter of **Bob Ewell** (**Kieron Jecchinis**), the alleged rape victim of **Tom Robinson** (**Okesie Morro**), and has the language and mannerisms of a victim of poverty and ignorance. **Jecchinis** is also convincing as a spitting and vindictive bigot set on having **Robinson** convicted.



Okesie Morro as Tom Robinson brings poignancy to his desperate plight and displays a calm dignity that allows him to dominate the tense courtroom scenes and achieve credibility, drawing the audience into the racial conflict in an argument that is still heard today, and willing the jury to believe him, despite already knowing the inevitable outcome.

Cooke plays the large part of the heroic and progressive Atticus Finch very well, making him come across as rather dull and serious even though he has many libertarian qualities. Despite his small stature, - “he’s feeble, he’s nearly 50” says Scout - he has an immediate physical presence and personifies the Atticus depicted by Lee, showing patience, wisdom, compassion, intelligence, and courage as he attempts to impart his knowledge of truth and justice to his two precocious children, telling them not to judge anyone until they have walked in their skin.

You can feel the confusion and suffering of Jem and Scout from the taunts of their bigoted neighbours — capably portrayed by the young actors – who exhibit a comfort and maturity given the solemn material, and as they struggle with the seemingly timeless issues of racism and moral responsibility. Jem is perplexed at the verdict in the face of the evidence, and wants to do away with juries concluding, “I’ll never understand those folks as long as I live”. Atticus explains that “when it’s a white man’s word against a black man, then the white man always wins, which is just an ugly fact of life, despite the opinions of twelve reasonable men” representing the prejudices of the time and place rather than the unreliability of a jury.

Alongside the main story of the trial of a black man wrongly accused of rape, is the story of a reclusive and mysterious neighbour, known as **Boo Radley**, representing the fear of the unknown and played rather creepily in a brief appearance by

Jonathan Keeble

. Boo is rumoured to be a murderer who steals children, and the children fantasise about him, feeding each other’s imaginations despite warnings from their father to “leave him be” and advising them to try to see the world from his perspective. In a memorable set piece when the children venture out at night-time onto Boo’s front porch, the lined up cast members wave large branches around to create a shadowy effect of trees waving in the wind on a tree lined avenue, at the end of which the children are spooked by a giant shadowy figure behind a faded and moth-eaten net curtain. You can almost feel their fear as they run off as fast as they can into the darkness over picket fences and through the dusty backyards of their neighbourhood.

Throughout this performance, we are chaperoned around the tired old town of Maycomb, to meet the mainly elderly and always-opinionated residents who engage with the children in a way not seen often enough today, amiably cussing and cursing them, imparting knowledge, wisdom, advice (often unwanted, but usually taken) and cake. The oft-in-attendance **Miss Maudie** is played with the handbagged elegance and grace of a southern gentlewoman by **Nicola Sloane** as she steers the children gently through their childhood with a warm gloved hand. It reminded me just how much things have changed since the days when adults and children mixed freely through inter-generational everyday relations without the need for a CRB check and how both were richer for it.

Clearly, I love **To Kill A Mockingbird**, I love the book, and I enjoyed this adaptation immensely because it didn't stray too far from the book and included readings from its beautifully written pages. I don't mind being called a traditionalist as some things are just too good to mess with. This was the best bit of theatre I've seen in a while, well directed, performed, and set. The **Royal Exchange** clearly knows how to kick-start their Spring/Summer season. As Scout, would say, yessum, it was real good.

The fifteen strong cast includes **Scarlet Brookes** as Mayella Ewell; **Nigel Cooke** as Atticus Finch; **Ann Firbank** as Miss Stephanie and Mrs Dubose; **Nicholas Goode** as Musician; **Kieron Jecchinis** as Bob Ewell; **Jonathan Keeble** as Mr Gilmer and Boo Radley; **Kim Kitson** as Judge Taylor and Mr Cunningham; **Peter Landi**

as Reverend Sykes;

James McConville

as Dill;

Okesie Morro

as Tom Robinson;

Joy Richardson

as Calpurnia

; **Rupert Simonian**

as Jem Finch;

Nicola Sloane

as Maudie Atkinson;

Shannon Tarbet

as Scout Finch and

Simeon Truby

as Heck Tate. And the cast is supplemented by an eight-strong ensemble comprising students from local drama schools.