



[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 'starched 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.

