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'To Kill a Mockingbird' stuns us still

Published: November 16, 2011 4:43 PM
By STEVE PARKS steve.parks@newsday.com



Photo credit: Jerry Lamonica Photo/ | Starring in "To Kill a Mockingbird," from left, are Ken Forman, Lily Spellman, Hudson Galadri-Troy, Shonnese C.L. Coleman and Myles Stokowsky, at Bay Street Theatre, Sag Harbor through Nov. 26, 2011.

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It's a rare film that does justice to a great novel. But "To Kill a Mockingbird," directed by [Robert Mulligan](#) and starring [Gregory Peck](#), elevated [Harper Lee's](#) 1960 novel from literature to legend. No stage adaptation has approached that level of absolute, through-a-child's-eyes integrity. But Christopher Sergel's version, now playing at Bay Street Theatre, does no harm.

Director Murphy Davis and Ken Forman in the daunting role of Atticus Finch strive to present the hero as a man instead of a caricature of impossible rectitude. While I miss the narrative voice of Scout, Atticus' tomboy daughter, 12-year-old Lily Spellman endears herself to us with age-appropriate sass and spunk. (The limited expository narration is

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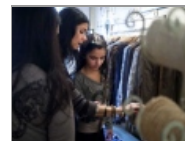
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There's nothing like a new year to get you revved up to learn a new skill or (finally) take up that hobby.

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borne here by Susan Galardi, who plays a neighbor.)

"To Kill a Mockingbird" takes its curious title from a lesson in the immorality of attacking creatures incapable of harm. In this case, it turns out to be pathologically shy neighbor Boo Radley (Keith Francis).

The true horror in this morality tale is racism -- rampant in small-town Alabama of 1935. A black man with no use of his left arm is accused of raping a white woman. His accuser had been beaten by a man (likely her drunken father) who punched her with his left fist.

As Mayella Ewell, Joanna Howard gives rousing testimony in support of her lie. The defendant, [Tom Robinson](#), is played with hapless resignation by McKinley Belcher III. He's defended by Atticus, the most upstanding man in town -- also the best shot. We glimpse his marksmanship when he shoots a rabid dog, impressing son Jem, wide-eyed in wonder as played by Myles Stowkowski.

Mayella's father, Bob, pulsing with rage as played by Joe Pallister, threatens Atticus' family with a spit in the face. It's a real moment. To the credit of director Davis -- this production is aimed at students 13 and older -- there's no stinting on language, either. It would be unthinkable to perform "Mockingbird" without the racial epithet we cannot repeat here. The power of hate needs to be palpable. Forman's Atticus, standing up to Pallister's Ewell, makes it so.

Hudson Galardi-Troy as Dill, Jem and Scout's playmate; Shonnese C.L. Coleman as housekeeper/surrogate mom Calpurnia, and Seth Hendricks as Sheriff Tate round out an able cast.

Gary Hygom's clapboard-street set takes us back to that time and place, allowing us to appreciate how far we've come.

WHAT "To Kill a Mockingbird"

WHEN | WHERE 7 p.m. Friday and Nov. 25, 2 and 7 p.m. Nov. 26 at Bay Street Theatre, Sag Harbor

INFO \$20, \$10 for students; baystreet.org, 631-725-9500

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