

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## To Kill a Mockingbird

Adapted from Harper Lee's novel by Christopher Sergel  
Leicester Haymarket  
(2004)

The problems which led to the Leicester Haymarket's going dark for more than a year have now been addressed and the theatre is thankfully back in business. This was in no small way thanks to the Arts Council which pumped in £1.3million to save the venue. The question that has to be asked now is: does Leicester really want a major theatre?

As part of the celebrations for Black History Month, the Haymarket is presenting *To Kill A Mockingbird* in rep with Athol Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys*.

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize, the 1962 film won three Oscars and this stage version is good enough to sit alongside them - it's simply stunning.

Having read the novel recently, I had my doubts that anyone could portray the innocence and playfulness of six-year-old Jean Louise Finch. But from the moment you see Veronica Leer clambering all over a swinging tyre in the back yard of her house, you're captivated. She's a tomboy, wide-eyed and gullible, wanting to grow up too quickly yet reluctant to face the grim realities of mid-1930s Alabama.

*To Kill A Mockingbird* is set in Maycomb, a small town where everyone knows one another's business. Racism threatens to unsettle the inhabitants at a time when the Ku Klux Klan is a significant force in politics.

A considerable amount of the book details the adventures of Jean Louise, her ten-year-old brother Jem and friend Dill as they try to discover some of the eccentricities of the Maycomb residents that children really shouldn't know about. Christopher Sergel's adaptation is much more direct than the novel: very early on we find out how nerves are being stretched because Jean Louise's father Atticus, a lawyer, is defending a black man accused of rape.

David Fleeshman gives a profound performance as Atticus, a doting yet corrective father and a respected professional. He quietly if somewhat grudgingly accepts that justice means different things for black and white people.

There are several excellent portrayals. Claude Close who plays sheriff Heck Tate is just like Boss Hogg from *The Dukes of Hazzard*, rotund, blustering about yet with a sense of decency which ensures that moral standards in the town are maintained.

Rob Dixon is arrogant and odious in mannerisms as well as words as Bob Ewell, father of the alleged rape victim; Aislinn Mangan excels as his daughter Mayella who has to do whatever she's told no matter what the truth may be; Craig Purnell is touching as Boo Radley; Helen Blatch is marvellous as the cantankerous busybody Mrs Dubose; and Seun Shote evokes sympathy as the defendant Tom Robinson.

Danny Nutt and Benjamin Davies are fine as Jem and Dill although you have to use a little imagination to accept them as schoolboys.

Director Paul Kerryson has come up with an atmospheric production which gives you a real feel of community life in a southern state. And there's growing tension in the courtroom scenes as the trial unfolds.

Kate Unwin's set deserves praise. There's a huge tree towards the back of the stage and fences in various stages of repair signifying whether a householder has the resources to take care of his or her property. The Finches' yard subtly becomes the courtroom with only a few props.

Occasionally some of the actors' voices are lost on the cavernous stage when they're facing away from the audience. But that hardly detracts from an extraordinary evening's entertainment.

The only pity was that there were several empty seats in the auditorium. It appears Leicester doesn't really appreciate what it's got on its doorstep. For quality, style and sheer enjoyment, this production of *To Kill A Mockingbird* takes some beating.

*"To Kill A Mockingbird" runs until Sunday, 14th November*

**Reviewer:** [Steve Orme](#)