

# British Theatre Guide

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

## To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee, adapted by Christopher Sergel  
The Lowry, Salford, and touring  
(2006)

Judging by the packed house - which included quite a few school parties - the choice of an adaptation of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prizewinning novel was certainly a good commercial decision for co-producers Birmingham Rep, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Touring Consortium and Watershed.

Michael Buffong directs a cast of nineteen actors in this tale set in the southern states of America during the depression era, when racial segregation was still very much alive. Atticus Finch is a lawyer with a strong sense of justice and morality who is defending a black man from a charge of attacking and raping a young woman, for which he and his children are insulted in the street and at school. Finch's daughter Scout and son Jem start to take an interest in their father's work for the first time, sneaking into the courthouse where the rest of the town awaits the verdict of the trial.

Like many literary adaptations, Christopher Sergel's script uses character narration, but rather than using Scout as Lee does in the novel, this job has been assigned to neighbour Maudie Atkinson (Helen Ryan). Bettrys Jones acts convincing as a young child (and not just because she is much shorter than those around her) whereas the boys Jem (Craig Vye) and Dill (Jean-Marc Perret) come across as young men dressed as children, although they play their parts quite well. Duncan Preston does a good job of playing Finch as a slightly dull, ordinary man - Gregory Peck was perhaps a little too conventionally heroic in the film. Ged McKenna is easy to despise as Bob Ewell (although perhaps a little heavy on the red face make-up), his daughter Mayella, the alleged victim, is played well by Sally Tatum, and there are other good performances from Vinta Morgan as defendant Tom Robinson, Joe Speare as Reverend Sykes, Andrea Harris as the Finch's maid Calpurnia and others.

Simon Higlett's set strikes a good first impression with its dusty atmosphere and planked buildings, lit by Johanna Town to feel like a hot summer in the deep south of America, but it does not always work practically. While the design gives the impression of a naturalistic collection of buildings, the direction tries to stretch the distances between them beyond naturalism, which means that sometimes the characters are walking in circles in the middle of the road to get between two doors that are almost next to one another. The transformation into the gaol house and then the courthouse works well.

Overall this isn't a bad night out at the theatre - it is generally quite enjoyable with a few very funny moments - but when I think of the huge impact that the novel had on me when I read it only a few years ago, this adaptation seems rather weak and forgettable in comparison. The production is lacking in pace at times, but it also seems rather too 'nice' and safe and at a comfortable distance. Whereas we feel the story in the novel through Scout's passion and outrage, her part is rather diminished in this script - especially in the courtroom scene where the children's lines seem rather like fillers shouted from somewhere in the distance on the balcony - which means that the audience is less emotionally involved.

It would be a shame if the school and college students in the audience had a lesser experience of one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century by firstly studying it in class - which kills the enjoyment of literature for a lot of people - and then by seeing a dramatisation that does not come close to reproducing the immense power of this hugely enjoyable novel.

*J D Atkinson [reviewed](#) this production at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and it was [reviewed](#) in 2007 by Steve Orme at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham*

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)