



## Kill shot

*Rep's Mockingbird hits dark target*

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*To Kill a Mockingbird* strikes a match to reason. It's a story that effectively shines a light on racism and, in doing so, turns it into an illogical absurdity.

Under current conditions of a post-civil rights era, we have—one would hope—a healthy head start for understanding the lessons of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After all, we just celebrated the election of our first black president, choosing him to help lead the nation out of a severe recession. It's a far cry from the play's Great Depression setting, where "negroes" chopped kindling for a paltry nickel.

But Harper Lee's story—adapted for the stage by Christopher Sergel—doesn't feel antiquated. *To Kill a Mockingbird* isn't just a reminder of the past, or an allegory to sit and suffer through—it's also an engaging storyline with fascinating characters. And the play's goose bump-inducing lines remind you just how ahead of her time Lee really was. That's especially true with lawyer Atticus Finch's closing courtroom statement, where we hear the resonance of America's origin in his statement, "Now, gentlemen, in this country, our courts are the great levelers. In our courts, all men are created equal."

The play opens in a Maycomb, Ala., neighborhood, the set design showing apartments bordered by a single large, rickety front porch. Despite dingy colors and evidence of rust and rot, the buildings tower elegantly with large window panels reflecting the glow of dreamy green lights, which appear to represent trees. The same windows later in the play glow purple to evoke an ominous dusk. Sometimes the windows reflect the characters talking on the front porch. Other times they capture kids' silhouettes running in the late evening like a strange old film. The effect of the lights and set is both abstract and realistic, making the work of set designer Bill Raoul and lighting designer Mark Dean as intriguing as the play itself.

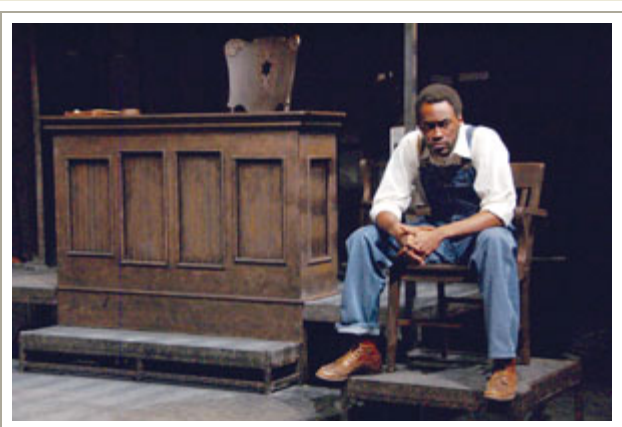


Photo by Ashley Sears

**Robert Karma Robinson stars in the Montana Rep's production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.**

The first half of *To Kill a Mockingbird* serves as a character study. Young Scout Finch (Marie Fahlgren) hears townsfolk grumble about her father Atticus, a lawyer who defends black men. The crotchety old lady next door, Mrs. DuBose (Lily Gladstone) spits out, “Your father’s no better than the niggers and trash he works for!” Gladstone serves up Mrs. DuBose with plenty of vinegar, and not overdone. Not only that, but she ages herself to ancient—in body language and cadence—so that you’d never guess she’s a young twenty-something.

Fahlgren, on the other hand, doesn’t always disappear into her character. She often seems like a caricature of a child—brimming with cutesiness and exaggerated gestures that worked well when she played Dainty June in *Gypsy*, but seem overblown here. It’s only when Fahlgren tones it down that she offers a solid gold picture of Scout. For instance, when all three of the kids—Jem, Scout and Dill—run screaming and laughing onto the porch after sneaking around a neighbor’s house, Scout’s caught chewing used gum in a moment of underplayed wiliness and smart comedic timing. It’s an example of how things work when the kids’ roles are played less like “*The Little Rascals*” and more like *Stand by Me*, where coming-of-age emerges from tomfoolery and painful loss of innocence.

Heather Schmidt plays Dill melodramatically, but with delightful precision. Just when you think she’s going overboard, she sidesteps, punctuating her performance of the young boy with a resigning grunt or an unidentifiable noise of exasperation. Even as the play’s comic relief she comes across with depth, like when she says, “I think I’ll be a clown when I get grown... There ain’t one thing in this world I can do about folks except laugh, so I’m going to join the circus and laugh my head off.”

Jennifer Fleming-Lovely, most of all, disappears completely into her portrayal of Jem, a practical, fierce boy. Her macho mannerisms and the way s/he shields Scout with brotherly gruffness all make Jem as believable as any neighborhood tough guy.

The second half of the play brings us to the courtroom, where Tom Robinson (a stunning Robert Karma Robinson) stands accused of raping a white girl, who is lying to cover up the fact that she came on to Tom, a black man. It’s here that the racial tension reaches its apex. Mikel MacDonald as Atticus comes across carefully measured and impressive as Tom’s lawyer. He pushes the dialog with sincerely biting anger and a heartrending plea for reason, like in the courtroom when he asks why “reasonable people go stark raving mad” in regard to race. Here, we see the heart of the matter. And the mood of the play—suggested by shadows and light and mirrored images—helps elevate Tom Robinson’s horrifying case as a reflection of a society we never want to face again.