

Pulitzer winning classic staged in Orange

Penny LeLeux, The Record Newspapers

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Saturday, Harper Lee's tale of southern life in the 1930s, racism and inequality in the law, came to life on stage at the Lutchter. It was a mesmerizing performance by the Montana Repertory Theater as they enacted Christopher Sergel's adaptation of "To Kill a Mockingbird."

The story centers on a young girl called Scout played by Marie Fahlgren, her brother Jem, played by Jennifer Fleming-Lovely and their single father, Atticus Finch, a lawyer. Played by Mikel MacDonald, Atticus comes to the defense of a young black man accused of raping a white woman.

Fahlgren plays a very energetic, vibrant and defiant young lady who is more of a boy than a girl. Curious about everything, Scout is relentless until she gets the answers she wants. Even Calpurnia, the black housekeeper, played by Lindsey McWhorter, has trouble keeping Scout under control.

The unruly kids are joined by an unlikely friend, Dill Harris, played by Heather Schmidt. The character of Dill is based on Lee's real life childhood friend, Truman Capote. Even though Schmidt said she didn't necessarily try to play it like Capote, the resemblance was there.

In the middle of the Depression, Atticus is usually paid for his services in vegetables and other items his clients could scrape up. It is a highly charged atmosphere, filled with a lynch mob and the trial of wrongly-accused Tom Robinson. There was a collective gasp from the audience when Atticus was spit upon. Quiet sobbing could be heard when Robinson's fate is revealed.

African-Americans were not called as such in the 30s, nor were they called black. In polite society they were referred to as Negroes, from the Spanish word for the color black, and commonly called what these days has come to be known as "the 'N' word." It was common language in the 30s and still used in the 60s, but rarely today.

That was the subject of the first question posed to the cast in a question and answer session after the performance.

"How hard was it to cast, to find people who didn't mind saying the 'N' word?" was asked by a young adult. I was unable to hear the first part of the answer because people were still filing out of the theater, but McWhorter said that her brother-in-law didn't like it. "It is uncomfortable, people are still dealing with it today. We have a responsibility to tell the story." She also said it bothers her out in society, but not in the play. Cast member Jim Sontag said there were "lots of extra rehearsals" so the cast could get comfortable with the language.

Another cast member said she thinks it depends on when you learned the story, as to the comfort level of the audience. It was also said that audiences in the south react differently than those in the north.

The cast admitted the production was very tiring and hard emotionally, but gratifying.

MacDonald was asked how it was taking on a role that has been played by Gregory Peck. "It was daunting, taking on a roll by Gregory. We're two different actors. I think he'd be happy with my performance."

Fleming-Lovely was asked why she decided to play a boy. She replied that she auditioned for Scout, but was cast as Jem. Her hair was quite long, she said, before she got the role, but is enjoying the short, boyish style hair.

The cast said the fourth character, the audience, in Orange, was great. The audience is what makes each performance different for them. It was a brilliant and enjoyable offering from Jim Clark and the Lutchter Theatre.