

The Spectrum

The Independent Student Newspaper
Of The University At Buffalo



The UB Center For the Arts swapped same-sex spit, danced alongside a transvestite named Angel and sang the sweetest harmonies AIDS has ever inspired, all in around 525,600 minutes. Oh, and that was just *RENT* in the Black Box Theater.

The act playing in the Mainstage Theater catered to a more cardigan-wearing crowd. Harper Lee's classic novel and go-to high school summer reading assignment, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, time warped the stage through the acting and staging of the thespians and stagehands of the always-engaging Montana Repertory Theater. Fifty years after the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel's publication, it's still as compelling as it was during the final years of Dr. King's life.

There's nothing like watching a child – or an actress brilliantly portraying one, who has casually used a derogatory term that set out to defame an entire race and now bears the scarlet letter “N” – learn that that human heart knows no color.

Interestingly enough, women portray all three lead adolescent roles from the novel in the play – which is intriguing, since Scout is the only girl. Marie Fahlgren is endearing as Scout Finch, owning her childishly optimistic and naïve role every step of the way in her rolled-up overalls. It's quite difficult to tell from afar that Fahlgren is actually a collegiate actress and not the spunky little Finch that plays on stage.

Jennifer Fleming-Lovely plays the brash, older brother Jem Finch almost to excess, complete with a well-mimicked boy voice and affinity for yelling out his consciousness. Unless you're armed with a playbill, you'll be assuring yourself that there's a bratty boy behind Jem's defiance.

Heather Schmidt stands out as the nasally, anywhere-but-home pseudo-brother Dill. Everything from her jerky, inquisitive strut across the stage to her adorable yet dorky voice inflection is not only spot-on, but also disarmingly hilarious.

Amidst the child fare, the story delves deeply into the race relations and prejudices found in the States, particularly the South, during the Great Depression. Under the watchful direction of Greg Johnson, the play paints a dusty southern picture of a community torn by rape allegations, accusations, and most importantly, injustice. Set around the trial of Tom Robinson and his alleged rape of Mayella Ewell, it's in the courtroom that Johnson's characters take heed.

Robert Karma Robinson does a fair job of bringing the lovable, luckless Robinson to life, but more impressive is the performance of his accuser – played by Aspen Marino – who masterfully portrays a torn, abused girl that sacrifices honesty for image. Watching Marino battle deceit, an ever-unfolding back story, and the fate of a man who did nothing but help her is riveting – especially since she manages to make a character impossible to not empathize with, even when she basically throws an innocent man to the gallows.

That leaves out one key component – father, lawyer, and all-around good guy, Atticus Finch. Offering up a slightly grayed take is Mikel MacDonald, a Repertory veteran and reliable lead. MacDonald's performance of the smooth-suited, pure-hearted Finch carries the play, much as the character does in the book, and is fused with genuine emotion. As he defends Tom Robinson's life in a hearing that's anything but warranted, his tears are real.

And as the verdict, and Robinson's eventual fate is unveiled, his pain isn't as much acted as it is felt.

Maybe the play left out a lot of Boo Bradley's character-building snippets from the novel. Maybe the ham-costumed Halloween knifing scene arrives abruptly and kicks showgoers in the chest. And maybe \$40 is a steep ticket price.

Regardless, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is one of the pre-eminent literary pieces of the last century and has a message that's as relevant today as it was when it written. The Montana Repertory Theater's take is not only well acted, it crosses gender roles and expectations and manages to make the Depression and its racial insensitivity as real as a dust storm in the desert.