

## 'The Scottsboro Boys' examines racial injustice

By MICHAEL KUCHWARA, AP Drama Critic

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Carol Rosegg / AP

In this theater publicity image released by Sam Rudy Media Relations, from left, Derrick Cobey, Julius Thomas III, Brandon Victor Dixon and Josh Breckenridge are shown in a scene from "The Scottsboro Boys," a musical featuring a score by John Kander and Fred Ebb, now playing at off-Broadway's Vineyard Theatre in New York.

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You could call "The Scottsboro Boys" a concept musical, much like such Kander and Ebb classics as "Cabaret," set in the tawdry world of a '30s Berlin nightclub, or "Chicago," whose musical numbers are performed in the style of 1920s vaudeville.

Here under the inspired direction and choreography of Susan Stroman, such minstrel conventions as the interlocutor (sort of a Dixie-tinged master of ceremonies) and two comic sidekicks called "endmen" are put to good use in conveying the story told by book writer David Thompson.

What makes "The Scottsboro Boys" so intriguing is the dichotomy between its supremely melodic score and the tragic if sometimes convoluted tale the musical is telling.

Kander and Ebb know how to make a song work in the theater — propelling the plot or revealing character — that immediately engages an audience.

Kander's melodies are effortless, pouring out in a variety of styles from cakewalk to folk ballad to comic ditty. Ebb died in 2004, but here his clear, precise and often quite funny lyrics have been finished by Kander, and the transitions are seamless.

Thompson's book meanders a bit as it delves into the men's various appeals to get out of jail and could use a little trimming to shorten its nearly two intermissionless hours.

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Let's get right to the point. "The Scottsboro Boys" is a staggeringly inventive piece of musical theater.

Its intentions are serious, its execution pretty much pitch perfect, and its entertainment value — featuring what is the final score by John Kander and Fred Ebb — of the highest order.

Yet the show, which opened Wednesday at off-Broadway's Vineyard Theatre, could not have found a more somber, real-life subject to musicalize: the story of nine young black men accused of raping two white women in Alabama in the early 1930s.

And their tale of justice repeatedly delayed and denied is

framed in the most provocative manner possible: It's told as a minstrel show, that 19th and early 20th century form of entertainment which often featured performers in blackface trading in the most blatant of stereotypes.

The show is scenically spare, but the lack of clutter gives Stroman more room to maneuver on the small Vineyard stage. A lineup of chairs — plus maybe a few tambourines — are all she needs to get “The Scottsboro Boys” to move.

And move, they do. This is a marvelous ensemble that manages to give everyone on stage a moment to shine. If there is one standout, it is the charismatic Brandon Victor Dixon, who portrays Haywood Patterson, the most outspoken member of the group. Dixon gives one of those breakthrough performances that should elevate him to the ranks of leading musical-theater actors.

Yet he is nicely complemented by the rest of the cast including veteran John Cullum as the interlocutor (the production’s only white actor) and the two lithe, limber “endmen,” Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo, portrayed by a devilish Colman Domingo and the equally naughty Forrest McClendon.

The company includes one woman (Sharon Washington), a mostly silent observer of the injustices that parade throughout the evening. Her presence is a bit of a mystery, but becomes more apparent the closer the musical gets to its final, stirring moments. It’s a fitting conclusion to an exhilarating evening of theater.

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On the Net:

[www.vineyardtheatre.org/](http://www.vineyardtheatre.org/)