

## 'Scottsboro' Turns Nightmare Into 'Chicago' Style Show: Review

Review by Jeremy Gerard

March 10 (Bloomberg) -- On the stage of New York's Vineyard Theatre, John Cullum swoons, lost in reverie. Behind the white actor, nine worn black men sing "Southern Days," a ghostly ode to Dixie as sweet-sounding as "My Old Kentucky Home."

But this is no Stephen Foster song. It's by the blithely acerbic "Chicago" and "Cabaret" team of composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb.

Their subject and the title of their valedictory musical (Ebb died in 2004) is the notorious case of the "Scottsboro Boys," nine young black men falsely charged in 1931 with raping two white women in Alabama.



"Don't you miss the sight of willows drippin'/ On a balmy Southern day?" begins the song, a woozy lullaby in four-part harmony. Cullum's thoughts of "honeysuckle days" are short-lived as the dreamy lyric turns to nightmare: "How the sights and sounds come back to me!/ Like my Daddy hangin' from a tree."

No one ever slid bitter words into honeyed melody better than Ebb did with Kander ("Tomorrow Belongs to Me," from "Cabaret," is a fine example).

Between 1931 and 1937, the men were tried, re-tried, and jailed under horrific conditions as the case became a cause celebre. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People deemed it too hot to handle, but the Communist Party jumped in, eventually providing a celebrated New York trial lawyer to handle their defense. (Charges eventually were dropped against the four youngest. The others moldered in prison for years.)

### Top Form

Director and choreographer Susan Stroman, who learned about staging a taste-challenged musical with "The Producers," is in top form here. "The Scottsboro Boys" is framed as a minstrel show, with Cullum playing the supercilious Interlocutor and a company of extraordinary dancer-singers telling the story, written by David Thompson.

With little more than ragged costumes, a handful of straight-back chairs and a few planks and curtains (the minimalist costumes and set are by Toni-Leslie James and Beowulf Boritt, respectively), Stroman fills the tiny Vineyard stage with razor-sharp vaudeville dancing and, with musical director David Loud, soaring music, some of Kander and Ebb's best.

Presented without intermission, "The Scottsboro Boys" flies by, before ending with an unnecessary coda that I hope will be fixed before the all but inevitable move to Broadway.

Through April 18 at 108 E. 15th St. Information: +1-212- 353-0303; <http://www.vineyardtheatre.org>.

Rating: \*\*\*\*

What the Stars Mean:

- \*\*\*\* Do Not Miss
- \*\*\* Excellent
- \*\* Good
- \* Poor

(No stars) Worthless

(Jeremy Gerard is an editor and critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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