



A *CurtainUp* Review

The Scottsboro Boys

By Elyse Sommer

*Maybe someday I'll get lucky
Someone's gona say 'All right son,
Take the train and go back home. . .*

— Refrain by Haywood Patterson, the most defiant and unluckiest of the Scottsboro Boys, from “Go Back Home.”



The Scottsboro Boys (Photo: Carol Rosegg)

John Kander and Fred Ebb more than deserve a place in the forefront of musical theater artists who turn stories that are more the stuff of serious dramas than shows with lively songs and and choreography. The corruption and violence rampant in Chicago during the 1920s inspired some of Ebb's most dazzlingly satiric lyrics and Kander's most razzle dazzle melodies. Their next serious yet seriously entertaining musical, *Cabaret*, revolved around another social evil, the German Nazi party's rise that led to World War II. Now, their last collaboration before Ebb's death, *The Scottsboro Boys*, completes what amounts to a stunning trilogy of musicalized fictional plays based on real events.

The shocking case of a group of African American teenagers who at the height of the Great Depression of the 1930s hopped a Memphis bound freight train hoping to find jobs. The were unlucky enough to be in the same train with two white women when it stopped in Scottsboro, Alabama, a place rife with virulent bigotry. The boys were unjustly accused of attacking two white women. Though their attempts to prove their innocence became a cause célèbre that helped to spearhead the civil rights movement and they escaped execution, their mistreatment and years of incarceration are more the stuff of an opera than a jazzy musical — unless, of course, that miscarriage of justice is being explored by that dynamic duo, Kander and Ebb.

The facts of the Scottsboro case — the repeated guilty verdicts in the face of evidence proving the innocence of these young men (one of whom is not yet fourteen) — are so shamefully bizarre that the only way to put it all into a musical format is to do something to match this outrageous miscarriage of justice. If Kander and Ebb's pathway into the story via a minstrel show strikes you as outrageous to the extreme, I suggest that you hurry up and get a ticket. Seeing will indeed have you believing in the brilliance and absolute rightness of the minstrel format. It works as the courtroom structure did for *Chicago* and the sleazy nightclub setting for *Cabaret*. David Thompson's book, Susan Stroman's zippy direction and choreography all serve to bring this tragic true story to vivid life. The talented cast's

propulsive singing and dancing electrifies the stage and does full justice to the ragout of jazz, ragtime and ballads as well as the choreography.

If some of the songs and even the staging evoke Chicago and Cabaret, it doesn't take anything away from this production's freshness. That occasional feeling of familiarity is not so much derivative as a link that emphasizes my point about The Scottsboro Boys being the concluding installment of a trilogy of musicals that cast a satirical eye on horrendous examples of injustice and corruption and yet manage to be dazzlingly entertaining. While there aren't any instant hummers like "All That Jazz," "Mr. Cellophane" or "Money," jazzy ensemble numbers like "Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey!" and the poignant "Go Back Home" beg for repeat hearings.

The Scottsboro Boys

L-R: Brandon Victor Dixon as Haywood Patterson & John Cullum as the Interlocutor

(Photo: Carol Rosegg)

The 13 performers, many of whom play multiple roles, deliver the goods as actors, singers and dancers. Naturally, it's a plus to have John Cullum, the only white cast member, as the interlocutor or MC of the Minstrel Show segments and also as Judge and Governor of Alabama. Cullum maybe eighty, but but his talent and charm are ageless.



L-R: Brandon Victor Dixon as Haywood Patterson & John Cullum as the Interlocutor
(Photo: Carol Rosegg)

The most minstrel-ly and reprehensible but riveting characters are played by the extraordinary Colman Domingo and Forrest McLendon, whose Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo have various permutations in the Scottsboro boys' arrest, imprisonment and constant mistreatment. McLendon is also terrific as the Yankee legal eagle, Samuel Leibowitz. This character, based on a real New York lawyer who, as a result of the public furor over the case was sent to Alabama to conduct a new trial, is the subject of a song called "Financial Advice" that makes it clear that Jews weren't any more popular than black people in this ugly environment. ("When your bills ain't paid/ And the goin's rough/And your bankbook says/You ain't got enough/ Let me tell you, sonny/ There's nothing like Jew money").

Typical of the minstrel genre, female roles (with the exception of Sharon Washington's mysteriously always present Lady) are played by men. Christian Dante White and Sean Brandford leave their Scottsboro Boy ensemble parts long enough to most effectively play this show's Roxie and Velma counterparts, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates. Their accusations made to circumvent their own troubles with the law eventually, but too late, weigh on Ruby's conscience as explained in "Never Too Late" ("Back then I was a homely phony/But now I change my testimony"). Haywood Patterson, the most tragic and fully fleshed out member of the Scottsboro ensemble, is a star-making role for Brandon Victor Dixon.

Susan Stroman does admirable double duty as director and choreographer. She has the dancers segueing effortlessly back and forth between the straight drama and song and dance segments. Whatever the mood or the action, her design team makes sure it all looks terrific — whether relying on a few tambourines and the artful arrangements of a baker's dozen of chairs or for a wonderful shadow play number, "Make Friends With the Truth." Toni-Leslie James's costumes add eye-popping color and flair. Kevin Adam's lighting is at its most astounding during the truly terrifying "Electric Chair" dream sequence. The excellent band, unobrusively tucked into the theater's side balcony, is never so loud that you can't hear the lyrics.

Like Chicago and even more, Cabaret, The Scottsboro Boys features some surprises which I'm honor bound not to spoil for you. Suffice it to say that the hour and forty minute nonstop production flies by as fast as those chairs on the Vineyard stage metamorphose from train to jail house, to courtroom, solitary confinement cell to bus.

Perhaps a comment by John Kander quoted in in a recent article about the somberness of today's musicals ("New Musicals Strike a Somber Note" by Felicia Lee, New York Times 3/02/10) best sums up why the marriage of this

sadly true story with razzmatazz singing and dancing is so felicitous: “Music does things sometimes that words cannot do, and musical theater can do things that strict drama cannot do, which gives it a real capacity to understand and portray human suffering.”

Amen!