

STAGE REVIEW

The Scottsboro Boys (2010)

Reviewed by Thom Geier | Mar 11, 2010

DETAILS

Opening Date: Mar 10, 2010; Lead Performances: Brandon Victor Dixon and John Cullum; Writers: Frank Ebb, John Kander; Director: Susan Stroman; Genre: Musical

The appearance of a new musical by John Kander and Frank Ebb, the famed composer/lyricist team behind such landmark works as *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, is a cause for rejoicing. (Especially since Ebb died in 2004.) True to form, the duo's final collaboration, **The Scottsboro Boys** (playing at Off Broadway's Vineyard Theatre), takes a real-life subject that does not seem an obvious candidate for musical adaptation: the plight of nine African American men who were arrested off a train in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931 and falsely accused of raping two white women.



Image credit: Carol Rosegg

To tell their story, Kander and Ebb (and book writer David Thompson) make a risky move that's bound to tweak the liberal guilt of many theater-goers. They set up the lone white actor in the production (John Cullum) as the emcee of a minstrel show, a master of ceremonies whose bitterly ironic opening number underscores the dark double meaning of that term: "Tonight's a night of merriment / Of laughter, songs and jokes / I'm host and interlocutor / The master of these folks!"

Yes, the show aims to deliver a history lesson about America's racist past by employing an array of theatrical tropes that are frankly racist themselves (shuffle-and-jive dance steps, Stepin Fetchit comedy routines, etc.). The mostly African American cast plays the Scottsboro defendants in a naturalistic way while employing more stylized, controversial minstrel performance methods to play the story's white characters: the slutty white women who cry rape, the racist sheriff who arrests and beats the prisoners, and the New York Jewish lawyer who swoops in to defend them in court. As intentionally broad as the performances often are, the actors are terrific.

Thankfully, the score is gorgeously and memorably melodic, the duo's best since 1993's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Kander writes in a variety of musical idioms, too, from the stirring men's chorus of the railroad song "Commencing in Chattanooga" to the comic testimonial "Alabama Ladies" to the wistful jailhouse ballad "Go Back Home." And director Susan Stroman stages the production in a strikingly simple fashion, deploying simple straight-back chairs to create multiple settings (a train, a jail, a courtroom, etc.).

But it's hard to escape the discomfiting fact that we have white creators appropriating racist dramatic forms on stage in 2010. The show is also unable to escape another dramatic cliché: the anonymous African American victim of institutional racism. Perhaps because there are nine defendants and so much story to tell, *The Scottsboro Boys* never manages to make its nominal heroes stand out as individuals.

There's the young one, the one with glasses, the hothead, the brothers. The closest we come to a protagonist is Haywood Patterson (a clear-voiced Brandon Victor Dixon), who learns to read and write while in jail, escapes at one point, and later writes a book about his experience. There's a lot that happens to Haywood, but even he emerges more as a symbol than a man of actual flesh and blood. That's a shortcoming in an otherwise solid show that aspires to not just inform its audience, but move it as well. **B**

(Tickets: vineyardtheatre.org or 212-353-0303)