

Legal History: the musical

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The story of the Scottsboro Boys, defendants in a 1931 Scottsboro, Alabama, rape case, is mind-bogglingly complex. The case, in which two white women unfairly accused nine black teenagers, would, before its legal conclusion in 1936, yield two momentous Supreme Court decisions.

How to shape a cohesive drama out of such material would tax Tolstoy, let alone the makers of this long-gestating musical: David Thompson wrote the book, and John Kander and Fred Ebb (Ebb died in 2004) did the music and lyrics.

The result, off-Broadway at the Vineyard, is a rousing, affecting show that showcases the inventiveness of director/choreographer Susan Stroman better than anything she's done since *Crazy for You* - and that includes *The Producers* .

The music effectively apes early 20th-century American song and dance styles: cakewalk, jazz, ragtime. And the book, except for an unnecessary device involving the mother of one of the boys, is efficient. Kander, Ebb and Thompson avoid the earnestness of other musicals about Southern racial violence (*Parade* , for example) in favour of an approach combining acidity with sweetness. The evening's framework - a reverse minstrel show, in which two jiving clowns (Colman Domingo, Forrest McClendon) and an Interlocutor (John Cullum) host the story - bolsters the comedy.

The Vineyard's small playing area requires that the choreography, from shuffle to strut to sashay, be economical, and that the set - resourcefully assembled banquet chairs - stay minimal. The almost-all-male cast personifies versatility.

Occasionally, the acting style is too broad, muting some of the impact. But then we hear a searing lament like "Nothin' ", in which the rebellious, guilt-ridden lead boy, Haywood (portrayed by the powerful Brandon Victor Dixon), slows down the narrative prayerfully. Harshly mistreated in jail, where much of the action takes place, these boys ache for justice.

In *Chicago* , Kander and Ebb also used a vaudeville-celebrity approach to a story about egregious interwar American injustice. And in *Cabaret* , the duo used showbiz routines to mock the horrors of a nation's persecution of social groups. The Scottsboro Boys may not be the equal of those two shows, but it has two or three numbers as dazzling as any in town. In fact, if there's anything around right now that's more startling than "Electric Chair", in which prisoners tap-dance the horrors of capital punishment, I don't know of it. ****

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