

## Ugly prejudice, dazzling drama

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If you see one show this season, make it “The Scottsboro Boys.” It’s as simple as that.

And what an unlikely triumph it is.

For starters, the plot is based on the true story of African-American men falsely accused of raping white women in 1931 Alabama. Although other tuners these days don’t shy away from the grim, this premise hardly screams “jazz hands!”



John Cullum (center) is both mediator and instigator in the brilliant “The Scottsboro Boys.”

And, yes, the score is by John Kander and the late Fred Ebb, who wrote classics such as “Cabaret” and “Chicago.” But their output hadn’t been so hot in the past 15 years; their latest Broadway effort, the old-school “Curtains” (completed after Ebb’s death in 2004, like the new piece), was warmhearted but musty.

Despite all this, “The Scottsboro Boys” is a masterwork, both daring and highly entertaining, and director/choreographer Susan Stroman (“The Producers”) has given it the best production possible at the intimate Vineyard Theatre. The book (by David Thompson), score and staging are so organically linked, you can’t imagine one without the others.

The stroke of genius -- and the word feels right here -- was to stage the piece like a traditional minstrel show with an all-black cast, save for John Cullum. He plays the Interlocutor, who serves as emcee and is one of the genre’s stock characters framing the events. The others are Mr. Bones (Colman Domingo) and Mr. Tambo (Forrest McClendon), who perform various supporting roles.

Using only some chairs to suggest a train, a jail and a courtroom, Stroman follows minstrel conventions to tell the story. Juxtaposing deep emotions and often exaggerated gestures, she creates a mood that feels straight out of Brecht and Weill.

Paradoxically, this makes the piece feel incredibly modern. It’s certainly more provocative than most self-consciously “edgy” rock musicals, as the creative team and its fearless, irreproachable ensemble constantly push the audience to the brink of discomfort -- while dishing out one catchy number after another.

There’s nothing Kander and Ebb won’t dare to do as they explore pet issues such as justice as spectacle and the corruption of the American dream. Here, they apply their signature musical style to some stupefying scenes in which razzle-dazzle rubs elbows with tragedy. An electric-chair dream sequence crackles with gallows humor; a New York lawyer’s arrival is heralded with a song about “Jew money.”

And that’s nothing compared to the final, jolting number. It’ll leave you shaking -- and exhilarated.

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