

The Scottsboro Boys

Reviewed By: [Andy Propst](#) · Mar 11, 2010 · New York

A tale of Southern bigotry and miscarried justice unfurls with swift and startling alacrity in the immensely satisfying *The Scottsboro Boys*, the new musical with music and lyrics by John Kander and Fred Ebb and a book by David Thompson, playing at the Vineyard Theatre.

Based on the true story of nine men falsely accused of raping two white women on a train traveling through Alabama in 1931, the inventive, consistently thought-provoking musical is performed as if it were a traveling minstrel show, presided over by the white Interlocutor (a winningly smarmy John Cullum), who has at his disposal an 11 member African-American ensemble. The company is led by Mr. Bones (Colman Domingo) and Mr. Tambo (Forrest McClendon), who play a variety of the Caucasian men who figure prominently in the Scottsboro case. The balance of the company members play the accused men as well as the ancillary characters during their ordeal.



Derrick Cobey, Julius Thomas III, Brandon Victor Dixon, and Josh Breckenridge in *The Scottsboro Boys*
(© Carol Rosegg)

The show-within-a-show conceit occasionally keeps theatergoers at a remove from the piece, but repeatedly audiences are sucked back into the men's harrowing tale that begins when a sheriff (one of Domingo's funniest turns) finds two white women who have also hidden on the train on which the men are riding. To save their skins, the women (played as cutting parodies of "po' white trash" by Christian Dante White and Sean Bradford) claim that they were violated by the men.

A swift trial -- in which the men represented by a drunken public defender and which brings to mind the trial in Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* -- results in a guilty verdict and death sentence. An appeal granted on the eve of the execution, however, gives the men a second chance. An attorney from New York, Samuel Leibowitz (played with impressive comic brashness by McClendon) represents them in this appeal, during which one of the women recants. Sadly, the men are still found guilty, and a string of appeals and barrage of legal maneuvering continues for another six years.

The production, guided with elegant simplicity by director-choreographer Susan Stroman, unfolds with rapid fluidity on a stage that scenic designer Beowulf Boritt outfits with a dozen chairs and a few boards, which are inventively rearranged to represent a variety of locations. And, as lit by designer Kevin Adams, the illusion of shifting from boxcar to jail cell to sun-filled courtroom is complete.

The score, which references cakewalks, New Orleans jazz, and gospel, may be one of the songwriting team's jauntiest and most instantly accessible. The lyrics, filled with cutting barbs about the legal system and the racism the men encounter, often surprise, particularly in their ability to reveal humor in even the saddest situations, such as in "Electric Chair," in which the

youngest of the accused (a remarkable Cody Ryan Wise) imagines his demise; this sequence is also a highpoint of Stroman's inventive choreographic work.

The ensemble performs tirelessly and passionately for over 90 uninterrupted minutes, and there are a host of notable turns, particularly Brandon Victor Dixon's ferocious portrayal of Haywood, a man who stalwartly refuses to be beaten by the system. Julius Thomas III is equally impressive as the sweet-natured Roy, who teaches Haywood to write, using an amusingly unconventional method, and Kendrick Jones consistently scores laughs as Willie, who is a particularly gifted pickpocket.

A lone woman (played with ethereal dignity by Sharon Washington) haunts the action. She's a spectral presence representing, among others, the men's girlfriends, wives, and mothers -- and her inclusion only underscores the injustices revealed in this daring show.