

VARIETY®

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Off Broadway

The Scottsboro Boys

(Vineyard Theater; 125 seats; \$70 top)

A Vineyard Theater presentation of a musical in one act with music and lyrics by John Kander and Fred Ebb, book by David Thompson. Directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman. Music direction and vocal arrangements, David Loud.

With:

Interlocutor - John Cullum

Haywood Patterson - Brandon Victor Dixon

Mr. Bones - Colman Domingo

Mr. Tambo - Forrest McClendon

Ozie Powell - Sean Bradford

Olen Montgomery - Josh Breckenridge

Willie Roberson - Kendrick Jones

Roy Wright - Julius Thomas III

Charles Weems - Christian Dante White

Clarence Norris - Rodney Hicks

Eugene Williams - Cody Ryan Wise

Andy Wright - Derrick Cobey

A Lady - Sharon Washington



'The Scottsboro Boys'

By **DAVID ROONEY**

A musical about racial injustice sardonically presented with all the crude stereotypes and vaudevillian humor of a minstrel show, “The Scottsboro Boys” dares you to be entertained -- and you will be -- while it makes you squirm. Of the handful of Kander & Ebb collaborations at various stages of completion when lyricist Fred Ebb died in 2004, this provocative piece appears the likeliest to earn a place among the veteran songwriting team’s signature shows, rippling as it does with musical, thematic and structural echoes of “Cabaret,” “Kiss of the Spider Woman” and, especially, “Chicago.”

In addition to riveting material and toe-tapping songs shot through with wry humor, the Vineyard Theater premiere also benefits from a tremendously talented cast of song-and-dance men, from music director David Loud’s luscious vocal arrangements, and from the muscular staging of directorchoreographer Susan Stroman, working at the top of her game.

While other Kander & Ebb shows began life in glitzy presentations before being later pared down to focus more mercilessly on their dark, shimmering hearts, it was a smart decision to start small here. Less yields more in a production that’s all about lean-and-mean economy in the storytelling, with each scene or musical vignette trimmed to its pithy, punchy essence. Every song has a purpose, and even in the most buoyant explosions of Stroman’s period-flavored choreography, dance is fully integrated into narrative in a show that packs dazzling physicality onto a small stage.

The sparseness is matched in the design choices. Beowulf Boritt’s set is simply a bunch of chairs and a couple of planks, endlessly regrouped into different shapes to represent everything from a boxcar to a prison cell to a courtroom with brisk efficiency. More elaborate description is left to Toni-Leslie James’ witty costumes and Kevin Adams’ dynamic lighting, drenching the stage in mocking cartoon colors or oppressive shadows.

Like the songs and staging, David Thompson's book is a model of purposefulness. It was a stroke of genius to have an all-black cast not only lampooning condescending views of African-Americans, but also hoary stereotypes of white folks, from a bigoted, bow-legged sheriff to good-ole-boy Southerners; from trashy Alabama tarts assuming the airs of fine ladies to an unctuous preacher or a shifty New York-Jewish lawyer. The limply honorable intentions of white liberals, in particular, receive a bracing bitchslap.

Like "Chicago," the travesty of American justice is the subject in this inventive retelling of the ordeal of nine young black males accused of raping two white women on a Memphis-bound freight train in 1931. The narrative chronicles their harrowing experience during six years of being bounced between jails and retrials after initially being sentenced to die in the electric chair. Mostly strangers at the time of their arrest, some of the boys are so young they've never had a girlfriend, while one 13-year-old (Cody Ryan Wise) doesn't even know what the word "rape" means.

The sole white member of the cast, John Cullum, plays a minstrel-show impresario; his ingratiating presentation of grotesque comic versions of chilling events recalls the emcee's function in "Cabaret." Stroman has the ensemble make a surprise entrance from behind the audience; their rowdiness both excites and unnerves, a contrast that sets the tone for the entire show. And from the first vocal number, the exuberant "Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey!," it's clear we're in the hands of superior musical-theater craftsmen.

Flanking Cullum's Interlocutor are Mr. Bones (Colman Domingo) and Mr. Tambo (Forrest McClendon), a pair of wise-ass showmen who slip with chameleonic prowess and leering complicity into the oily skins of a series of characters toying with the boys' fates.

With the notable exception of Haywood Patterson -- whose fierce pride and refusal to die for a lie provides an affecting center to the show in Brandon Victor Dixon's charismatic performance -- the Scottsboro boys also assume multiple roles. Among the most amusing are Christian Dante White and Sean Bradford as the floozies who cry rape to cover the fact they were turning tricks on the train. The one woman in the cast, Sharon Washington, figures effectively as a silent witness throughout, representing the boys' aggrieved mothers. Producers have requested that reviewers not reveal her role in the final scene that follows the knockout title number. But the opening image of her sitting balancing a cake box on her lap will telegraph her symbolic identity to anyone with at least a passing knowledge of the African-American civil rights movement.

The device works, even if the show doesn't really need this coda to seed feelings of anxiety and moral outrage in the pit of the audience's stomachs. One of its strengths is that it's not agitprop, but nor is it passive entertainment; the double-edge of its droll, old-time showbizzy treatment of a shocking true story gives the musical real teeth.

Styled in a brassy 1930s musical vernacular and played by a band of eight, the songs are the catchiest bunch to come along in a new tuner in years. "Commencing in Chattanooga" simulates the propulsive rhythm of train travel; "Southern Days" plasters a subversive smile over its paean to a lopsided world of white privilege and black subservience; "Electric Chair" combines tap and sizzle to macabre effect; "Shout!" is a sadly hollow celebration of freedom; and "Financial Advice" is a hilariously un-PC vamp about the convenience of "Jew money." The latter number is among the high points as performed by the marvelous Domingo.

More contemporary-sounding than its fellow numbers but easily the show's most beautiful song is "Go Back Home." Led with unembellished, plaintive honesty by Dixon and Wise, the yearning ballad reminds us of the deep human suffering at the root of this startling burlesque. Musical numbers: "Minstrel March," "Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey!" "Commencing in Chattanooga," "Alabama Ladies," "Nothin'," "Electric Chair," "Go Back Home," "Shout!" "Make Friends With the Truth," "That's Not the Way We Do Things," "Never Too Late," "Financial Advice," "Southern Days," "It's Gonna Take Time," "Zat So," "You Can't Do Me," "The Scottsboro Boys." Set, Beowulf Boritt; costumes, Toni-Leslie James; lighting, Kevin Adams; sound, Peter Hylenski; orchestrations, Larry Hochman; music arrangements, Glen Kelly; music coordinator, John Monaco; fight direction, Rick Sordelet; production stage manager, Megan Smith. Opened March 10, 2010. Reviewed March 5. Running time: 1 HOUR, 55 MIN.