

'To Tweak a Mockingbird': Aaron Sorkin's play with a twist

'You never really understand a person until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it', proclaims Atticus Finch in this West End production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Whilst his words echo exactly the original text, this production strays from its source material by questioning their substance: it asks its audience to consider whether the extension of empathy to all is selfish, or selfless, especially when it concerns a character as menacing as Bob Ewell.

This small divergence from the source material is an understated one: it serves - at once - to pay homage to the original text, whilst also staking claim to a new interpretation of Atticus. This *is* Atticus in all his righteous glory - but not quite as we know him. It's symptomatic of this production as a whole: a faithful tribute to Harper Lee, with a few modifications.

Adapted for the stage by Sorkin and directed by Bartlett Sher, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is so well-paced that it's almost easy to forget that this is an adaptation of a much longer novel. The climactic 'trial' scene is masterfully spread across the duration of the 2-hour production, interlaced with the various recollections of its young tritagonists - Scout, Jem and Dill - who gleefully partake in a shared narrative. Just when these moments of recollection threaten to spill over into dullness (and they never do), the play deftly transitions back to the courtroom, where the stakes are elevated, and the audience are reminded of *why* things happen as they do. The courtroom is physically and structurally the fulcrum of this play, and a beautifully slick and minimalistic set enables and empowers the various settings around it to rise and fall out of existence.

In fact, 'transition' could aptly describe the subtle success of this understated production - transition between sets (always seamless), transition between scenes (always fluid) and, importantly, transition between tones (from tragic to comic, often in the same moment). Lee's novel is renowned for its warmth and sincerity, despite the gravity of its subject matter, and I was genuinely relieved that this production upheld this duality: it would be easy to make *To Kill a Mockingbird* an entirely tragic adaptation, but to do so would forsake the soul of the original. This is a factor not only of the sensitive writing (successfully bringing the narrative from page to stage), but also because of the genuine affection and wisdom exuded by Atticus (Rafe Spall) and the three youngsters (played by Gwyneth Keyworth, Harry Redding and David Moorst).

But the standout actors were, undoubtedly, the two Ewells - Bob (Patrick O'Kane) and Mayella (Poppy Lee Friar), who bring a welcome depth to two complex characters. O'Kane's stage presence is unpredictable: to this prejudiced patriarch, he brings a smug stubbornness, and a terrifying sense of self-belief in his own lies. Testament to his delivery was the unsettling atmosphere he provoked: at times I genuinely believed he might cause further harm (outside of the courtroom), despite already knowing the outcome of the plot. Lee Friar, however, plays Mayella with a stubborn vulnerability: hers is a character who is unconvinced by her own story, yet will rigidly conform to the Ewell narrative throughout her uncomfortable interrogation. Mayella is a difficult character to play - she is at once oppressor and oppressed, vulnerable and obstinate, and Lee Friar successfully brings out all of these qualities in her courtroom delivery.

A final word on the differences which make this play stand out - the famous 'climb inside of his skin quote' - now synonymous with Atticus - is, in the novel, evidence of Atticus's unerring commitment to the ethics of empathy. But its meaning gains a whole new dimension when said by an actor, who himself must temporarily clothe himself in the 'skin' of another, and, in all but the most literal sense, 'walk' around it. It's an eerie interpretation of an iconic line, which gains a new resonance and prescience in a play which remains generally faithful to the source material, with the exception of

the way in which it handles the principles of its main character. This Atticus is slightly more flawed than in the novel: he breaks his pacifist principles, and has a more complex relationship with Calpurnia (his housekeeper), who in turn has more agency. In one particularly notable scene, she calls out Atticus for his latent biases and preconceptions.

Diehard fans will not appreciate the change – after all, Atticus has come to be something of a role model to all lawyers, for his willingness to stand alone against the conscience of the community (according to a monument to his name in Alabama). Others may appreciate the new and fresh interpretation of Atticus: in many ways, it humanises him, allowing him to claim accountability for his mistakes. Whatever your perspective, this production will give you a renewed appreciation for the original masterpiece, whilst adding a new layer to it by re-examining its characters. And, at the end of the day, you really can't ask for much more than that.