

“All Rise” – Not Your Grandparents’ “Mockingbird” A Play Review

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AARON SORKIN IS ONE OF AMERICA’S MOST HIGHLY REGARDED SCRIPTWRITERS. His works include the play (and subsequent film) “A Few Good Men,” the movies “The American President” and “The Social Network,” and TV shows “The West Wing,” and “The Newsroom.” Known for his snappy, dialogue-heavy scenes peppered with witty and cerebral exchanges, Sorkin has channeled his considerable talents toward slower-moving though no less intense material: Harper Lee’s classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

For the uninitiated, the centerpiece of Lee’s book, set in a small Alabama town in 1934, is a trial in which African American Tom Robinson is accused of raping Mayella Ewell. In reality, Mayella, a victim of crushing poverty and her father Bob’s physical and sexual abuse, turns to Tom for affection. When Bob discovers her embracing and kissing Tom, he beats his daughter and forces her to falsely accuse Tom.

There has been significant controversy surrounding this play. Sorkin was forced to reverse some of his changes by Harper Lee’s estate. Under threat of a lawsuit, producer Scott Rudin forced local, community, and student productions employing an adaptation that been around for decades, to shut down if they were in twenty-five miles of “a decent-sized town.” Sorkin retained use of the N-word, but not a revered scene in which the Reverend of the town’s African American church instructs Atticus’s daughter Scout to rise, along with all the black observers in the balcony, out of respect for her father and his quixotic efforts. (This version features neither the minister nor a balcony.)

While the narrative thread of Lee’s novel remains intact, Sorkin updates and enlivens several key characters, breaking the original story out of its rigid mid-20th Century racial milieu. Atticus is no longer a faultless paragon of virtue and his children, especially son Jem, no longer trusting and uncritical. As flawlessly depicted by actor Jeff Daniels, he is a victim of his obsessive courtesy, even to Maycomb’s most hateful and abusive citizens. He—and more so Tom—are undone by his naive faith in his white neighbors’ sense of fair play and blind justice. In fact, in this version, Atticus persuades Tom to renege on a plea deal sending him to prison for 18 years, since he is convinced Tom will be found innocent.

When Bob Ewell comes Atticus’ home to gloat after Tom’s sentencing and ultimately assaults him, Atticus’ long-intact equanimity finally fractures. Twisting Ewell’s arm behind his back, he essentially says, “Before I break your arm, you incestuous SOB, let me make it abundantly clear that I am your superior” (In some way this supplants the moment from the book/movie in which the children suddenly learn their father is the best rifleman the county. He may be placid, even meek, but deep down Atticus Finch is a badass.) Only Jem’s outcry as he emerges from the house breaks his father out of his spell, and Ewell is released, humbled but unharmed. Even then, Atticus tries to contextualize Ewell’s behavior for his son. To Ewell, the Civil War was yesterday; he still lives with the humiliation of that defeat. Jem has none of it. “If you had lived during that war,” he asks his father, “which side would you have fought on?” Atticus replies, “I would have hid under the bed.” After a long pause, he adds, “I’m just joking.” Jem replies, “Are you sure?” (In a later scene, Jem confides that if he could take back one moment of his life, it would be when he called his father a coward.)

Sorkin’s Calpurnia (Atticus’ longtime housekeeper) is far more frank and unflinching than Lee’s. When Atticus assures her that he can get Bob Ewell out of the courtroom before he cross-examines Mayella, she asks, “Are you sure?” She is less than impressed with his answer. When Atticus learns Tom was shot five times in the head and back while trying to climb the prison fence, she asks how a man with only one good arm could even think about trying to climb a fence—a reminder that African American distrust in law enforcement long predates the Fred Hampton shooting or “Black Lives Matter.” And she has no room for Atticus’ insistence that his neighbors, including the jury, are good people at heart. They entered the courtroom as monsters, she exclaims, and left as murderers. Atticus’ classic line that you can’t judge a man until you get inside his skin and crawl around in it is repeated throughout this production and met with an increasing level of derision. Some people—or at least their ideas, Sorkin suggests—simply aren’t worth our time.

The jury’s miscarriage of justice is abetted by Tom’s admission that he repeatedly helped Mayella with chores because “I felt sorry for her.” In the book/movie, this admission is catastrophic, given most white citizen’s reflexive embrace of white supremacy, but also accidental. In the play, Tom confesses this to Atticus during their first meeting. Atticus first replies yes, just be honest and say exactly that. A split second later: No. You can’t say that. Don’t ever say that. So Tom’s comment in court is not an honest miscalculation, but a result of merciless and unethical badgering from the prosecutor, an out-and-out racist stripped of all but the most superficial veneer of Southern gentility. As a result, Atticus’ final admonition to the jury is strikingly different from the book/play. “We practiced that question for six weeks,” he confesses. But is a jury, no matter how mired in the tropes of the Confederacy, really going to convict a man clearly incapable of committing the crime while the real culprit sits before them? Sadly, we all know the answer before Atticus does. But upon seeing his error, there is no room for an Oedipal catharsis. Atticus will stay in Maycomb, Alabama and will ultimately lose his place in the political life of the state, living with his guilt and perhaps, after all, actually becoming the man who disappointed millions in *Go Set a Watchman*. But this is not the trajectory suggested by Sorkin’s narrative. Rather, it is that even in the midst of defeat, Atticus and other white citizens in Maycomb like Judge Taylor, Sheriff Tate, the “town drunk,” and yes, Boo Radley, will continue to fight the good fight, to rise to the challenge that still lies before this country and every community in it.

The play begins with Scout asking her brother and their friend Dill how Bob Ewell could have fallen on his knife and died. (Sorry, you’ll have to watch the movie or read the book if you’re currently confused.) When she finally puts the pieces together at the end, she realizes what good people are sometimes forced to do when confronted with raw hatred, and what must be done to protect those caught in the crossfire. When Scout utters the last line of the play—“All Rise”—she is not returning us to the courtroom but instead calling all of us to summon our better angels and rise up to do the hard work of maintaining our all-too-fragile civil society.