

Large cast makes 'Mockingbird' work

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre launched its 90th season with dignity and compelling drama.

To Kill a Mockingbird, which opened last night in Cowan Hall, is the type of old-fashioned, large-cast play that only college theaters mount with any frequency in this budget-conscious era.

With 18 characters, plus 14 other townspeople, Christopher Sergel's stage adaptation of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1960 novel offers a nuanced portrait of an entire town: Maycomb, Ala., in 1935.

At the moral center of Maycomb is Atticus Finch, who stands up to his neighbors by defending an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman.

The play about the power of idealism retains its power at Otterbein. The drama may be old-fashioned, but *Mockingbird* is sobering and ultimately touching under Ed Vaughan's contemplative direction.

Scenic designer Rob Johnson's country houses and weathered porches seem like faded photographs under designer Dana White's dappled sunlight and shadows.

The sound design, by Randall Bosh and Dave Mead, wraps around Cowan Hall, implicating the audience as metaphorical townspeople.

Aside from a few lulls and pac-

THEATER REVIEW

To Kill a Mockingbird, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Christopher Sergel's stage adaptation of Harper Lee's novel. Directed by Ed Vaughan.

Atticus Finch.....Sam Jaeger
Scout Finch.....Molly Camp
Maudie Atkinson....Amy Ellenberger
Miss Stephanie....Marianne Timmons
Nathan Radley.....Josh Freshour

Bigotry and bravery

Being presented at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through Oct. 19 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$9.50 to \$15. Call 823-1109.

ing problems — exacerbated by Wednesday's restless but ultimately appreciative student-preview audience — Vaughan balances the large cast and large themes against the quiet moments of a small town whose placid surface hides deep tension.

Unfailingly courteous and courageous, wise but weary, Sam Jaeger makes Atticus Finch a true hero — and very human.

Much of the story's poignancy and innocence stems from the child's

point of view. Molly Camp is the adorably tomboyish Scout; Zach Reat, her older brother; and the refreshing and amusing Luke DeLeon, her playmate Dill. Finch's children see almost everything, but they need — and ultimately get — adult help to understand the complexities of a world where neighborly kindness and racial prejudice coexist in confusingly apparent harmony.

Becky Snow's vivid Mayella insists she's a victim of rape, but her awkward, shifting posture betrays her guilt.

Also very real: Amy Ellenberger's narrating neighbor, Maudie Atkinson; Aaron Ramey's vindictive Bob Ewell, a violent drunk; Adam Donmoyer's sympathetic Judge Taylor; Carmel Avegnon's chiding maid, Calpurnia; Marianne Timmons' bigoted neighbor Miss Stephanie; and Damon Decker's observant Heck Tate.

College plays can falter when student actors strain to play a different age, but the stolid Southern drawls and slow, arthritic gaits make the young believably old — especially in contrast to the three children.

Backed by a top-notch design team, Vaughan helps the talented student cast communicate the complex truth that it takes a good father and a village to raise a child — especially when the lessons learned are not the ones intended.

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A wing and a prayer

Otterbein puts 'Mockingbird' in flight

BY JAY WEITZ

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Playwright Christopher Sergel did novelist Harper Lee a disservice in adapting her classic 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the stage in 1970. Part of the story's considerable moral impact lies in the contrast of the innocent confidence of children in the ultimate goodness of people against the often cruel reality of the racist adult world of 1935 Maycomb, Alabama. Sergel, though, gave narrative duties to the kind and supportive neighbor Maudie Atkinson, who, in the manner of an adult, might tell us a bit more than we need to be told.

Otterbein College Theatre's current production of *Mockingbird*, under the meticulous direction of Ed Vaughan, faithfully and movingly makes the case for Sergel's work, but cannot finally overcome its built-in limitations.

By now, the story of the 1961 Pulitzer Prize-winner for fiction is familiar. The 1962 film with an Academy Award-winning screenplay by Horton

Foote helped make *Mockingbird* one of the most influential works of the post-World War II era.

Tom Robinson, played with sad and terrified dignity by Yosvany Reyes, is a black worker unjustly accused of raping white Mayella Ewell (Becky Snow, whose eloquent body language betrays her own complicity in the lie).

Atticus Finch is the upstanding and forward-looking lawyer who defends Robinson against the ingrained bigotry of the time and place. Sam Jaeger, who was so wonderfully animated as the male lead in last spring's world premiere of Carter W. Lewis's *Picasso Does My Maps*, is much more restrained here. That may be in the tradition of Gregory Peck's film portrayal (another Oscar winner), but on the stage, this saintly figure really needs to show more evidence of a humanizing passion underneath the unflappable exterior. Only through the eyes of children can an adult seem so one-dimensionally perfect. Because

Sergel has made another adult the narrator, Atticus Finch requires more texture than Jaeger has given him.

Molly Camp is endearingly natural as Finch's observant young daughter Scout. Zach Reat has just the right touch of maturity to do justice to her older brother Jem. Luke DeLeon is amusingly formal as their precocious friend Dill, supposedly based on Lee's own friend, Truman Capote.

Rob Johnson's scenic design, Dana White's effective lighting, and Katie Robbins's costumes combine to suggest the rural South of some 60 years ago without a lot of complicating detail. Allowing the set's worn house fronts to serve as the backdrop to the courtroom scenes was a good and simple visual metaphor for Atticus's declaration that he could not be one thing privately and another publicly.

That is among the enduring lessons of Harper Lee's morality tale, which can still break our hearts even in so awkward an adaptation. Blame playwright Sergel, not Otterbein's competent cast, for clipping this *Mockingbird's* wings. **CG**

Otterbein College Theatre's production of Christopher Sergel's To Kill a Mockingbird continues Oct. 18 and 19, at 8 p.m., in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Call 823-1109.