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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer and raconteur  
Posted: November 1, 2010 06:41 PM

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# Theater Review: "The Scottsboro Boys" Triumphs

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**THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS** \*\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
At the [Lyceum Theatre](#)

It's easy to call **the new musical *The Scottsboro Boys*** a fitting swan song for the legendary Broadway team of John Kander and the late Fred Ebb, who died in 2004. But "swan song" is too tepid for a show this vital and exciting. *The Scottsboro Boys* is quite simply a triumph. What's most exciting about this show is how it's pure Kander & Ebb. After decades in the theater, they've produced one more classic that easily ranks alongside their greatest works, *Chicago* and *Cabaret*. It's that good.

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The true story is as unlikely a choice for a Broadway show as you can imagine: nine young black men aged 13 to 19 were arrested on trumped up rape charges in 1931 Alabama and became a national cause celeb. Though sentenced to death at repeated trials (which were overturned again and again by Yankee courts), none of the nine were killed outright by the state. But they spent years, in some cases even decades in prison and suffered a remarkable disruption in their lives that was hardly offset by the fame their case engendered. And don't look for a happy ending: four of them worked in vaudeville to trade on their fame but their lives were broken and shattered all down the line.

So how did Kander & Ebb frame this tragic tale? As a minstrel show, of course. Led by a white master of ceremonies (the wonderful John Cullum), the nine young men sing and dance their story, with an assist from two stock vaudeville performers, Mr Bones (Colman Domingo) and Mr. Tambo (Forrest McClendon), who also play other roles like the jailers, the lawyers and the such with broad, winking style. The stage is set off by three giant, rusting steel frames that suggest the train the men were riding on and the tilted reality they must endure in Alabama. A dozen chairs are provided for the cast, which become supports for wooden planks they sit on to mimic the train ride and are later stacked up to serve as the jail cells they're stuck in for so many frustrating years.

This setting is boldly theatrical and plays to the strength of Kander & Ebb: their ability to offer up a rousing or touching number that can peer into the darkness at the heart of society. And what numbers: the opener "Minstrel March"/"Hey Hey Hey Hey" is pure razzle dazzle, with Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo even offering up flat, intentionally obvious jokes to punctuate the singing and dancing. The audience I saw it with was a little confused and overwhelmed at first. They knew how serious the subject was. Exactly how entertained were they supposed to be? Should they laugh? It's the same tension Kander & Ebb mined when revealing the rise of Nazi Germany or celebrating women who offed their men.

Swiftly and with precision, we get to know the men, ranging from two brothers to a little boy to the strong, unwilling to bend Haywood Patterson (a standout Joshua Henry). They're just riding the rails and searching for work during the heart of the Depression (the charming "Commencing in Chattanooga") when two white women threatened with imprisonment for also riding the rails accuse the nine men of raping them. (The women are played hilariously and to great effect by Christian Dante White and James T. Lane, who also portray two of the Scottsboro Boys.)

What follows is a tale of frustrated hopes and despair, all softened somewhat by the witnessing presence of The Lady (Sharon Washington), who we easily spot as Rosa Parks. (That's not just a theatrical device to link the Scottsboro Boys to later developments in the struggle for basic civil rights for blacks. Rallies were held all over the country to spotlight this injustice and at one rally sponsored by the NAACP in 1931, then Rosa McCauley met her future husband Raymond Parks.)

Of course, presenting it all as a minstrel show is a constant reminder of the racism that underlies everything that happens to the men involved. (And boy, since one of them is only 13 at the start and doesn't even know what rape is, making the claim even more absurd. Jeremy Gumbs handles the role with the same multi-talented aplomb as everyone else.)

John Cullum's presence as the Interlocutor helps tremendously as well. He's an avuncular, seemingly friendly presence, who calls them his boys and encourages them to wow the crowd with this or that shuffle. Cullum is engaging but also shows his age; he is 80 years old after all The show deftly lets him be at the heart of many musical numbers but never hides the fact of his relative frailty compared to the vibrant cast. This is a hopeful, positive note in a subtle way: Cullum's character is literally part of the distant past, out of step with the present and clearly a relic. (The actor of course, remains a vibrant talent we trust will be around for many years to come.)

It's one of the show's many brilliant sleights of hand how the performances of the Scottsboro boys range from the full-on enthusiasm of the first number (though we sense something is off-key) to more and more reluctant as the show goes on, climaxing with a blackface routine when they wipe off the makeup and resolutely refuse Cullum's entreaties to do the Cake Walk and smile the way people love to see 'em.

This tension is captured most perfectly when Cullum exhorts the boys to sing one of the oldies and they



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launch into the lovely, pitch-perfect "Southern Days," which sounds exactly like a bygone gem about darkies singing in the fields and the mythically idyllic world of the slave states. Kander & Ebb are so good here you actually feel the tug of nostalgia for a verse or two. But the nine men -- while singing beautifully -- don't seem very happy. Then Cullum says "Smile!" with such steel in his voice they immediately plaster on forced grins and you know everything you need to know about this paternalistic fool who thinks he does right by his boys and can't understand why things would change. Even he gets the message when the lyrics shade into menace and the song describes lynchings and other evils. It's just one of many highlights.

Others include the lovely yearning for family called "Go Back Home," the very funny "Alabama Ladies," "Electric Chair," "Nuthin," and pretty much every other number. Needless to say, the brilliant material raises everyone's game. Joshua Henry gives a magnetic star-making turn as the principled Patterson. But there isn't a weak actor in the show, from the empathetic reactions of Sharon Washington (in a tricky role where she might have easily looked awkward onstage with little to do but react) to the fluid stand-out dancing of Kendrick Jones.

All the technical elements from the set to the lighting to the costumes and sound are perfectly in sync. Writer-director Susan Stroman (*Crazy For You*, *The Producers*, *Contact*) has simply never done better work. The book by David Thompson (*Steel Pier*) is a career peak for him as well. And above all, it's Kander & Ebb, who after a remarkable career produce not one last gasp, not a gentle valentine (a la *Curtains*) but a corrosive classic that embodies everything that makes them great. I predict it closes in nine months and then we catch up with it 20 years later when *The Scottsboro Boys* turns into a big hit. Or you could just go see it now and count yourself lucky.

**What others are saying:**

**Charles Isherwood of The New York Times** said, "Mr. Kander and Mr. Ebb have written a zesty if not top-tier score, but the pleasures of a jaunty ragtime melody and a clever lyric are hard to savor when they are presented in such an unavoidably grim context. Like "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson," the intermissionless "Scottsboro Boys," which runs a bit under two hours, suffers from a problem of monotony, as the scabrous comic tone spreads like shellac across almost every sequence."

**Joe Dziemianowicz of the New York Daily News** said, "It's exciting to see "The Scottsboro Boys" on Broadway boasting so many things a musical should have. That includes good songs, a provocative story (not from a movie), a rousing staging and a hugely talented cast. But it also has a split personality. It wants to shock; it yearns to charm. They're not always compatible goals...isn't perfect, but it's worthwhile. It deserves credit for tackling a slice of history that needs to be known."

**Elizabeth Vincentelli of the New York Post** said, "John Kander and Fred Ebb have given American musical theater a pair of un-disputable, stone-cold classics, "Cabaret" and "Chicago." Now they've added a third one to the list: "The Scottsboro Boys," which opened last night on Broadway.... But you can't separate the songs from Stroman's staging, a model of visually striking economy. She needs only chairs, tambourines and a few other props to evoke a variety of locales and situations, including a chain gang and an electric-chair execution.... Yet this is also a thrillingly inventive and entertaining night at the theater."

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David Rooney of *The Hollywood Reporter* said, "In an age when institutional racism endures in more veiled forms, this bold musical keeps you tapping your feet while it socks you with an emotional punch to the gut. That's a tough combo for mainstream commercial acceptance, but it makes for arresting theater."

Jeremy Gerard of *Bloomberg News* said, "Unveiled last spring in a smashing production overseen by director-choreographer Susan Stroman, "The Scottsboro Boys," seemed an unlikely candidate for transfer to the commercial arena. Here it is anyway, subtly but smartly retooled, in the intimate Lyceum Theatre. It's still smashing, and it's still shocking.... The story is wrenching and the songs rank with Kander and Ebb's most gorgeous."

Andy Propst of *Theatermania* said, "And now more than ever -- thanks in part to some judicious tweaks from director-choreographer Susan Stroman and the replacement of three cast members -- The Scottsboro Boys grabs audiences as soon as the members of the ensemble burst down the aisles of the theater and never lets go. The audacious, troubling, and yet strangely entertaining work tells the true story of nine men falsely accused of raping two white women on a train traveling through Alabama in 1931 within the framework of a traveling minstrel show, led by the white Interlocutor (a winningly smarmy John Cullum)."

Elyssa Gardner of *USA Today* said, "In short, Scottsboro, which opened Sunday at the Lyceum Theatre, wears its social conscience and its political incorrectness on its sleeve. And while the result is thoughtful, vibrant entertainment, the earnestness and irreverence can seem self-conscious."

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

**NOTE:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to the show in previews with the understanding that he would be writing a review of the show.

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sumur 04:35 PM on 11/30/2010

5 Fans

*I saw the show in early November and was blown away! What an excellent show on so many levels ... great entertainment, great theatre, great art, great social commentary, great history lesson. Everyone should see it!*

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**noudidnt** 04:14 PM on 11/03/2010

185 Fans



*I like this review. I want to see this show.*

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**caesarf** 03:32 PM on 11/03/2010

38 Fans



*Saw it at the Vineyard before it moved to Broadway, and I too was floored by the production. Isherwood of the Times is wrong as usual.*

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**Rand** 11:22 AM on 11/03/2010

277 Fans



*The advertisements on radio make it sound like the "feel good" musical of the century*

*I looked at my wife after hearing the ad for the first time and asked "What's next? 'Auschwitz: The Screwball Comedy'?"*

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**Michael Giltz** 02:40 PM on 11/03/2010

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*I think Mel Brooks beat you to it. The Scottsboro Boys is a serious musical and -- like cabaret and chicago -- seriously entertaining. For me, any story told well is satisfying and even exhilarating, whatever the subject matter.*

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**Rand** 03:08 PM on 11/03/2010

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*I'm glad to hear it*

*As I wrote, the ad was a complete turn-off*

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**Minskyzelda** 01:26 PM on 11/02/2010

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*Excellent review. I feel the same way. It is right up there with the best of Kander and Ebb, the best social commentators the theater every had. Everyone should see this stirring, remarkable show.*

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**Michael Giltz** 02:39 PM on 11/02/2010

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*Thanks for commenting. I can't believe not every review was enthusiastic. My prediction that the show will be a bigger hit 10 or 20 years from now just might come true.*

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**langstonhughesfan** 11:50 AM on 11/02/2010  
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How I wish I were in NYC right now!!!! Sounds fabulous.

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**Michael Giltz** 02:39 PM on 11/02/2010  
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