



BRINGING MOCKINGBIRD TO LIFE

Metro Theater Company's production pulls no punches in reviving a civil-rights classic for young audiences **By Margaret Bauer**

When Metro Theater Company artistic director Carol North began preparing for *To Kill a Mockingbird* last year, she couldn't have imagined the performance's resonant synchronicity. Like the residents of the play's fictional Depression-era town of Maycomb, Ala., many families are now just scraping by—and though the nation has elected its first black president, membership in white supremacist groups is on the rise.

To a young-audiences-focused theater group like Metro, the circumstances present a uniquely teachable moment: a chance to illustrate how far we've come in certain respects, while reminding us of the vigilance such landmark moments in history demand.

To do so, Metro's holding nothing back in retelling Harper Lee's provocative childhood tale. North's eyes go wide at the barest suggestion that anything in the play, which explores racism and other seamy topics, might be toned down for younger audiences. Her tone becomes adamant. "No punches are pulled," she flatly states, relating a question

she fielded asking about the play's portrayal of "the rape scene"—a scene that only exists in character Mayella Ewell's false testimony.

"We've all seen films that have been adapted from a book, where it gets so sensationalized—and I'm sure that was their worst fear," says North. "What I could say is, the rape didn't happen, there is no rape scene, but it is the centerpiece of the trial, and the trial is the center of the play. Mayella is a victim of poverty, she's a victim of parental abuse—but I think the hardest thing for audiences is going to be the N-word."

Explains North, "Jabari Asim wrote a wonderful book called *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why*. He said the only time it is permissible is in art, in context, for a specific purpose. So I thought, 'OK, I think that's what this is.' To take the word out, I think, is to dilute the power of the piece. And if we're not willing to embrace the power of the piece, why do it?"

The critical task of educating audiences began last spring, when North sent a letter to parents of the young actors auditioning,

explaining the word's use in the play. Not a single actor backed out, and more than 40 auditioned—displaying such depth of talent that North double-cast the child roles of Scout, Jem and Dill. In addition, adults from Washington University's Lifelong Learning Institute will play townspeople in the climactic trial scene, giving the cast an age range of 60 years.

A series of citywide reading events sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts-sponsored Big Read program will accompany this month's performances—providing further opportunities for dialogue. "As families, you know, I think it's a judgment call: How trusting are we of young people to go into the biggest stories and know that one of the things that drama does is take us on an emotional journey, and we come out of it OK, even when it's a scary ride?" says North. "I absolutely trust that, and this is a piece I've longed to do for ages and ages."



STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK SCHNELLE; CAST PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF METRO THEATER COMPANY

Metro Theater Company's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is most appreciated by audiences ages 10 and older and runs January 9 to 18 at Washington University's Edison Theatre in Mallinckrodt Student Center, 6445 Forsyth. Tickets are \$16 for adults, \$12 for children and \$8 in blocks of 10 or more. For tickets, call 314-935-6543 or visit metrotix.com; for more information, visit metrotheatercompany.org or edison.wustl.edu.