

# TIMELY AND TIMELESS

Very Little Theatre tackles Harper Lee's classic *To Kill A Mockingbird*

For half a century, Harper Lee's novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* has held an immovable place on the American bookshelf by using humor and grace to tackle one of our nation's ugliest ongoing realities: racism.

The Very Little Theatre has mounted a winning production of this evergreen tale.

Christopher Sergel's adaptation takes us to the fictional world of Maycomb, Alabama, in 1935. Director Stanley Coleman ably gathers townsfolk to chatter over the latest gossip: Tom Robinson (Darius Bunce), an upstanding husband and father, has been jailed, accused of atrocities against the daughter of the biggest ne'er-do-well in town.

Witnessing the simmering tensions, young Scout Finch

(Noa Ablow-Measelle), her brother Jem (Cody Masterson) and friend Dill (Hazel Van Ummersen) have their languid, playful Saturday abruptly suspended.

Scout and Jem's father, Atticus, represents Tom, imbuing every word he speaks, every gesture, with a self-effacing heroism. Scott Frazier Maskiell brings a powerful, restrained energy to the character, an iconic role if there ever was one.

Larry K. Fried as Heck Tate is also a standout — beleaguered, but with a heart of oak. Donella-Elizabeth Alston, as the children's terrorizing-but-beloved care provider Calpurnia, offers a maternal glimmer in an otherwise emotionally ascetic landscape. Likewise, Hershell Norwood as the Reverend Sykes provides constant vigilance, shepherding children and onlookers through the painful trial in the second act.

And underscoring the adage that in theater "there are no small parts, only small actors," Bobbye Sorrels is simply perfect as the cantankerous Mrs. Dubose.

Narrating the production, Rebecca Chamberlain, as a grown-up Scout, floats in and around the action, gently explaining background and intention.

Dialect coach Tricia Rodley has a tall order: To our northern ears, a Southern accent might be a broad descriptor, and any pass at it would suffice. But spend just a bit of time in the South, and one notes that accents vary not only by state but also by county, even town. In this production, some characters attempt a Southern accent, some don't. It's understandable, but it may break the spell.

Sarah Etherton's set undergoes clever transformations, from quiet neighborhood to courtroom. Sound design by Stanley Coleman, Adrienne West and Molly Clevidence consistently transports. Lighting design by James Aday and Kari Welch evokes the mysteries of lightning bugs and humid days. (The only issue is when the narrator stands downstage right, she is consistently in the dark.) And hats off to the costume team, lead by Nancy Boyett and Paula Tendick, for outfitting the whole of Maycomb in period detail.

*To Kill A Mockingbird* plays through Jan. 30 at the Very Little Theatre. Tickets available at [thevlt.com](http://thevlt.com) or by calling the box office at 344-7751. — Rachael Carnes



SCOTT FRAZIER-MASKIELL (LEFT), HAZEL VAN UMMERSEN, DONELLA ELIZABETH ALSTON, CODY MASTERSON AND NOA ABLOW MEASELLE IN VLT'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

# SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

OCT keeps it fresh and challenging with *The Last Five Years*

A subtle aesthetic is starting to emerge at Oregon Contemporary Theatre, which for the past couple of seasons has mounted a series of tight, powerful works by playwrights (some with ties to Eugene or the Northwest in general) who tackle the prickly issues of what it means and how it feels to live in this world right now.

Call the aesthetic postmodern-domestic, or perhaps urban-erotic. Taking a cue from masters like Chekhov and Tennessee Williams, these plays burrow into our deepest intimacies, gathering their dramatic force not from grand gestures but, rather, from the crackling connections of close relationships fraught with love, loss, humor and anxiety.

OCT's latest production fits snugly into this contemporary aesthetic while also pushing the envelope in

thrilling ways. Jason Robert Brown's musical play, *The Last Five Years*, tells the sad-happy story of Cathy (Evyne Hollens) and Jamie (Ethan Crystal), who meet, fall in love, get married and then fall apart. But there's a twist, and the twist is everything.

The play, directed by OCT artistic director Craig Willis, is narrated inversely: Jamie, an aspiring novelist, starts his story at the beginning of the romance, and Cathy, an aspiring actress, begins the play at the end of the marriage. Despite sharing the stage, the characters only interact once, as they meet in the middle of their reversed timelines.

Hence, as Cathy and Jamie react to this and that moment, we are given a kind of counterpoint, an echo that moves back and forth across time. The thrill of one is chilled by the heartbreak of the other. The effect is bracing, as though fate is at once foretold and undone.

The musical pieces, written and composed by Brown and accompanied by a live chamber orchestra, are fantastic, by turns hilarious and haunting. The play is narrated almost entirely in song, even more so than in classic musicals, and both Hollens and Crystal carry the show — so much so that the reverse-chronological-singing about a busted relationship by two people who only meet once in real time comes across as not only coherent but perfectly natural.

OCT's *The Last Five Years* is an innovative piece of theater executed with confidence and grace. It funnels the propulsive drive and infectious rhythms of musical theater into the tighter spaces of romantic drama, and the tension gives off sparks.

*The Last Five Years* plays through Feb. 6 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$30, tickets at [octheatre.org](http://octheatre.org) or 465-1506. — Rick Levin



ETHAN CRYSTAL AND EVYNE HOLLENS IN OCT'S *THE LAST FIVE YEARS*