



COURTROOM DRAMA FALLS FLAT: The cast of 'A Time to Kill.' Photo: Carol Rosegg



Theater Review

***A Time to Kill* doesn't translate to the stage**

A TIME TO KILL

Based on a novel by John Grisham

Adapted by Rupert Holmes

Directed by Ethan McSweeney

John Golden Theatre

252 West 45th Street

(212-239-6200), www.ATimeToKillOnBroadway.com

By David NouNou

Courtroom dramas are nothing new; they have been around since biblical times. Consider the case of King Solomon and the two mothers, each claiming the child was hers. My generation was weaned on TV's "Perry Mason" and "The Defenders." Successful courtroom plays that were turned into movies include *Witness For The Prosecution*, *A Few Good Men*, *Twelve Angry Men* and *Inherit the Wind*. There were even successful novels that translated to movies: *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, *The Verdict*, *Philadelphia*, and even John Grisham's *A Time to Kill*. However, we presently have an oddity, a successful novel that was turned into a successful movie and now transformed into a play, and a fair question to ask is why?

For a courtroom play to work, it needs tension, twists and originality. Unfortunately for *A Time To Kill*, it bills itself as "Based on the Classic Best Seller by John Grisham." That's tantamount to giving the ending away; for most people have either read the novel or seen the movie. Had Mr. Grisham not been such a successful writer, the results may have proved differently. As it stands, the stage adaptation by Rupert Holmes just doesn't translate; it lacks the requisite tension, twists and originality. As he did in his musical *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the audience gets to participate (well, sort of). Having the audience be the jury seems more of a gimmick than being stylishly inventive.

Jack Brigance, one of Mr. Grisham's most popular heroes, a novice attorney, (Sebastian Arcelus) is defending Carl Lee Hailey (John Douglas Thompson), a black man who has murdered two "white trash" rednecks in the courtroom where they are being tried for the savage and brutal rape of Carl Lee's daughter. All the action takes place in a Mississippi courtroom. Did I mention that the jury consists of an all-white panel?

For every defending lawyer, there is a prosecuting district attorney, Rufus R. Buckley (Patrick Page). Also in this courtroom there is the obligatory gruff, no-nonsense judge, Omar Noose (Fred Dalton Thompson); and the curmudgeonly drunken, disbarred old lawyer, who is the mentor of the hero of this piece, Lucien Wilbanks (Tom Skerritt).

The reason why actual courtroom dramas fascinate the public today is that they have become tabloid media fodder. Whether it was O.J. Simpson or Casey Anthony, the crimes they were

being tried for were heinous indeed, but it was the lawyers that captivated our imaginations and how they went about manipulating a jury to get the verdicts they got. That's what was most intriguing about those cases. The same can't be said here. For all the characters in the play seem like they are stock characters doing a reading of a scripted play. There is no passion or conviction in the performances. All the crimes that are committed are either talked about or taking place off stage. Even the Ku Klux Klan is thrown in as an image on a screen (it is Mississippi in the 1980s, after all). Instead of being seized by shock and terror, we just sit through a narrative of being told what is happening.

In this case, it's not so much as missed opportunities as there were *no* opportunities; especially when the leading attorneys as written and played are not compelling enough to sustain our interest or dynamic enough to stir our imagination.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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