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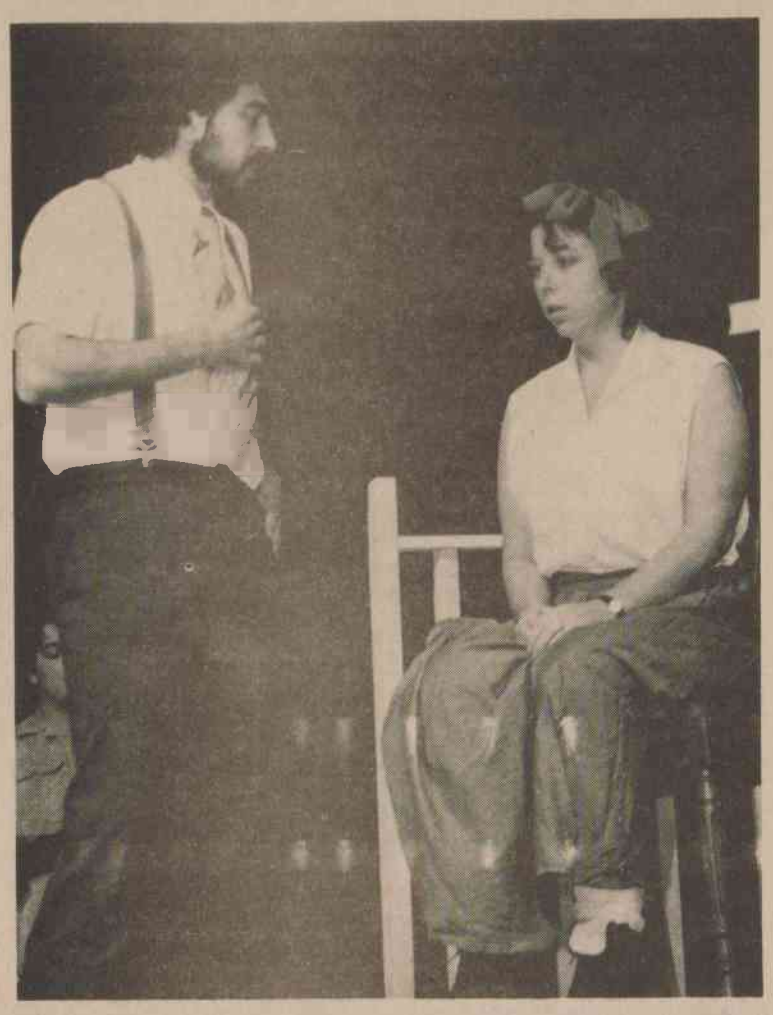

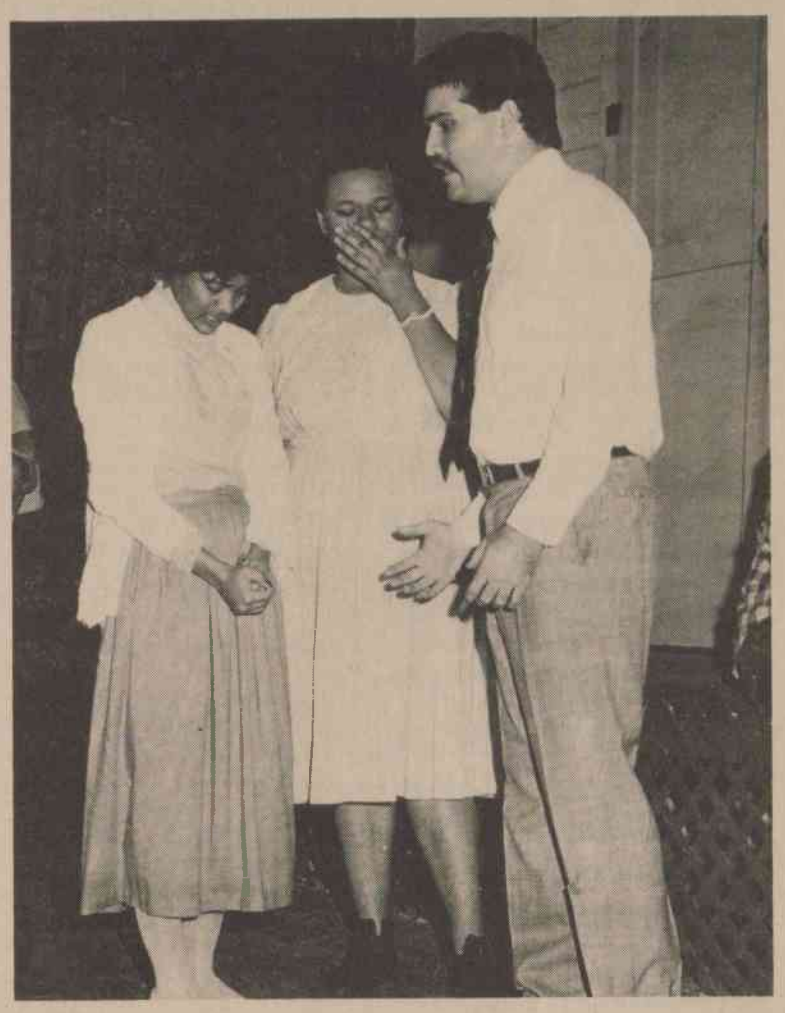

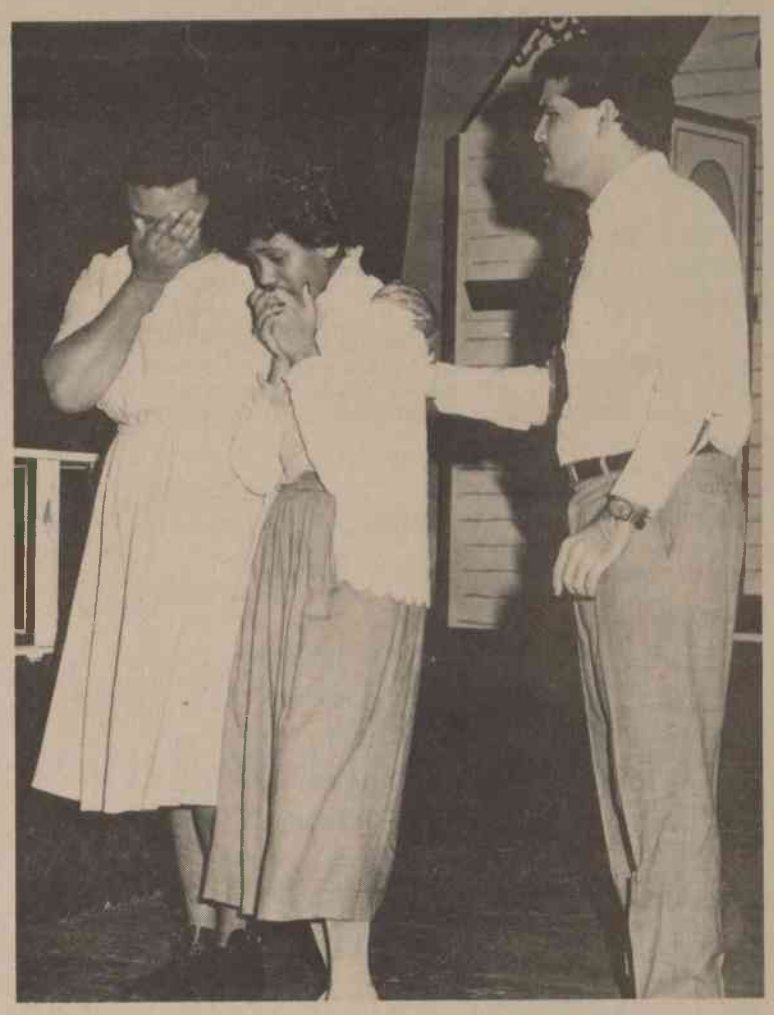

To Kill A Mockingbird

A Review by Ken Wolfskill

In 1960, Harper Lee, an Alabaman, was dealing with a dangerous, hot issue in **To Kill a Mockingbird**, the story of an established and respected white lawyer daring to defend a black man accused of raping a white woman. This was three years before these united States were torn apart by race riots, four years before Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In Alabama in 1960 (and still in 1963 when I started college there) the "coloreds" had their own water fountains, their own entrances at the movie houses, their own bathrooms at the service stations, but not as a mark of their privilege: these served as a constant reminder to blacks that their "place" was separate and apart. We were all white at my school and at the pancake house and at the Holiday Inn. They were starting sit-ins, not at Mama O'Grady's, but at Woolworth's lunch counter; they were refusing second-class treatment, not at the movies or on jets or at my school, but on buses. Blacks were demanding equal treatment while at least one white Christian I heard preaching to his congregation was saying "We'll **nevah** let a niggah into our church!" ("Nevah, Lowud, nevah!" a man echoed.) Times were tense between the races in those days.

In her story that suggests that blacks don't always receive justice because whites have some preconceived ideas about them, Miss Lee uses a setting of 1935, as though to say, "This was the way things used to be." She also portrays the oppressed black as a kindly, shy, and crippled young man who wouldn't nay, **couldn't** harm the loud vulgar white trash who are his accusers. At the center of the story is Atticus Finch, the wise lawyer, the reluctant hero, the unassuming and modest nice guy who finishes last, losing to obviously stupid and open bigotry. That he is a bird-loving father to a couple of innocent and growing kids who are awfully cute helps make his stand against stupid bigotry even more noble.

Thus, a quarter of a century ago, in tense times, whites were eased by a work of fiction into feeling that a Christian and democratic (though a bit condecending) view of blacks was not only acceptable and desirable, but noble and fine. In 1986, when racial tension is certainly less visible, we–blacks and whites– see still the humaneness and goodness of fair and just treatment: the innocent black youth shouldn't be jailed, much less killed. (It's okay, however, if the scuzzy, drunken red-neck who beats his daughter dies.)

Perhaps we see a little more easily now what Miss Lee was doing with "Boo" Radley, too: he's a little different from "us" perhaps, like gays and wops and Jew-boys and them furreners; but if you only get to know him, he might not seem so scary; he might even turn out to be good (though abnormal).

Mrs. Boyce's production of the play was successfully involving, getting the audience to ask, "Is the black man going to be acquitted? Is old man Ewell going to get away with his lies? Are the children going to be disturbed by the trial's outcome?" Part of her success was the staging, especially of the trial scenes. But in large part, she was successful because of her cast.

Kids don't generally make good kids on the amateur stage, but Hugh Davis, as the cast-off child made sensitive by his rejection, and Mickey Mulder, as the boy growing into knowledge of society's meanness, showed more naturalness and life than many of their elders in the cast. It's rather awkward to play a kid next to an actual kid, but Jennifer Mekovsky, as Scout, was uninhibitedly youthful and energetic. As Scout, grown up, Jeanie Adams was very smooth, very pleasant; she almost seemed to love the story, almost convinced that it meant something important to her.

Stupid rednecks are pretty easy to play, especially if you're allowed to spit on stage. But Hargus Taylor, as Bob Ewell, seemed genuinely ignorant and mean: he'd hurt you. And he wouldn't even think about it. Laura Ainslie, as the daughter, had one of the most interesting performances: she too seemed genuinely ignorant, but there was also a hint of conniving shrewdness in her; and she almost suggested the character's sensuality but gave up the coyness for the conniving.

As the innocent victim of racism, Patrick Rudolph effectively cowered and vinced and was pulled around. I felt he made the character almost too subliterate, muffling the pride and understanding in him.

Scott Cassell played Atticus, the exceptional, humane lawyer whose sense of justice transcends social custom and public will. Although Atticus seemed to find a temper and got tricky and cute at the trial, Cassell made him seem generally a large, solid presence of truth, sincerity, honesty, and goodness in a shaky time for his Southern town and his confused kids.

The production was smooth and provocative, calling less attention to itself, I think, than the very important issues Harper Lee gently raised.

Pre-Registration Forms are due

Friday, November 21!