THEATER

'Lynching' an affecting look at Frank case

By Dan Hulbert
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Once again, Theatre in the Square gets the local theater season off to an early, smokin' start and sets a high standard for others to follow. In "The Lynching of Leo Frank," the Marietta playhouse gets maximum mileage from a checkered script — powerful here, weak there, unpredictable there — by virtue of its terrific ensemble of actors.

By virtue, too, of the controversial subject matter. Robert Myers' fact-based drama explores the crime committed 85 years ago a mere mile from the square, where the perpetrators continued to stroll and go about their business for decades afterward, well-known but immune from justice.

Like "Parade," the 1998 Broadway musical drama by Alfred Uhry and Jason Robert Brown, "Lynching" believes that Leo Frank (Jim Roof), the Atlanta pencil factory foreman, was probably innocent of the 1913 murder of his employee Mary Phagan (Amber Brooke), convicted by wildly unlucky circumstances, including his own background as a Northern-bred Jew. The two works further deduce from the trial transcript and other evidence that Jim Conley (Rob Cleveland), the factory sweeper, probably did strangle the 13-year-old Marietta girl — or at least concocted a bizarre tale to frame Frank as a desperate lecher, knowing that as a black man he'd otherwise hang whether he were guilty or not.

REVIEW

"The Lynching of Leo Frank"

Through Sept. 24. 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 and 7 p.m. Sundays. $20-$26. Theatre in the Square, 11 Whitlock Ave., Marietta. 770-422-8369; www.theatreinthesquare.com

The verdict: *Bold and disturbing.*

After this, "Parade" and "Lynching" part ways. Uhry's musical book was the neater, more focused *story*, a clear tragedy with a clear Jewish martyr, despite its secondary sympathies for the poor whites who were whipped into an anti-Semitic mob by pamphleteer Tom Watson. Myers, too, has an agenda — to show how the bigotry of white Protestant Southerners pitted blacks and Jews against each other — but he gropes deeper than Uhry into the murky shadows of the case in search of a messier, though never complete, truth. (For the record, Myers is a white Protestant raised in Atlanta).

For instance, Myers shows Frank's camp as the first to openly play the race card, quoting Frank —"This was a Negro crime, anyone can see that" — and his lawyer, Luther Rosser (Charles Horton) — "Conley is a lying nigger" — from trial transcripts. Once the evil genie of race is out of the bottle, prosecutor Hugh Dorsey (Bart Hansard) is home free, slyly praising the "Jewish race" to the skies while reminding his Christian jury of their least favorite Jew, Judas Iscariot.

In Myers' intelligent, rigorously unsentimental approach, we never see these twists coming. He sees the world of 1913 as a kind of nightmarish Escher drawing, a closed system where bigotry seals off all exits.

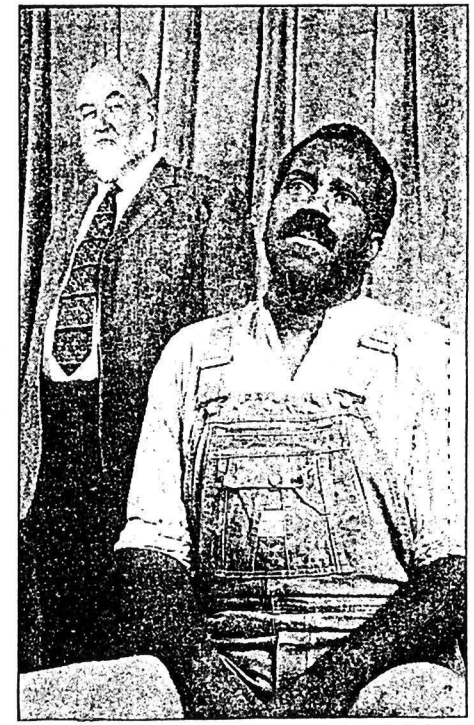
Then again, where there are no transcripts, Myers rather stiffly stage-manages events according to his own politically correct design. It couldn't be possible that a black man invented his own monstrous lie — *nooooooo*, we must see the venal white prosecutor coaching the scared Conley to save his skin.

And speaking of agitprop excess, could we have a national moratorium on "angry mobs" represented by three interchangeable white guys? A little recorded sound would be more credible. Likewise there would be more power in a quiet recitation of Watson's anti-Semitic rants, instead of showing him swigging whiskey and practically foaming at the mouth.

Some of this over-the-top quality may come from the direction of Anders Cato, but in the main he delivers a well-paced, compelling evening. Janet Harreld's costumes slip out of period (Frank's suit from circa 1940, neckties from three weeks ago), but Crawford Pratt's set is aptly stark, platforms with rope railings to suggest a gallows.

The aforementioned players are strong, with additonal standout performances from Shannon Malone (as Frank's wife, Lucille, enraged by the injustice while brooding with doubts) and Jim Peck as elderly Alonzo Mann, looking back from the 1980s on events he witnessed as Frank's 14-year-old office boy.

The play could even be titled, "The Tragedy of Alonzo Mann," so haunted is the man by what he knew but never said. While we see the aftershocks of the play's black-Jewish tensions even today (backstage at the Democratic convention, for a start), there is an even more universal message: Mere silence, itself, can be a crime.



Theatre in the Square

Alonzo Mann (Jim Peck, back) reflects on the events that swirled around Jim Conley (Rob Cleveland).