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American Theater Group Stages Stirring and Powerful "Till: A New Musical"

FEATURE STORY, THEATRE

It premiered in July 2019 at the New York Musical Festival, where The New York Times praised it as "by far the best of the festival's four shows," and Theater Mania called it "a beautiful tribute to Emmett and his mother, Mamie Till."

This Thursday, [American Theater Group](#) begins performances of *Till*, a new musical by Leo Schwartz and DC Cathro, which tells the story of 14-year-old Emmett Till, whose murder in Money, Mississippi in 1955 helped to ignite the civil rights movement.

The 2019 Production of “Till” at the New York Musical Festival. Credit: The New York Times

For its New Jersey premiere, *Till* will run at the historic St. Andrew’s Church in South Orange through March 8. Much of the show takes place in a church, thanks in part to Mamie’s historic decision to have a public, open-casket funeral in Chicago (which thousands of people attended).

On March 5, ATG will host a special post-show discussion with Emmett Till’s cousin, Reverend Wheeler Parker, who is the last living witness to the events that transpired that led to Till being kidnapped, tortured, and killed for allegedly flirting with a 21-year-old white woman.

We recently spoke with writer and composer Leo Schwartz and American Theater Group’s Producing Creative Director Jim Vagias about reimagining the story of Emmett Till more than five decades after his death.

Jersey Arts: Emmett Till was once again in the news recently because of the unending vandalism of his memorial, which is at the site of his murder. What do you think this vandalism means so many decades after the incident?

Leo Schwartz: Yes, it was a re-vandalization of that marker. But this time around, I think there is video of the incident. I can't fathom why somebody would specifically pick out this child's marker. Maybe it's because of what Emmett stands for in the civil rights movement. But it's confounding to me, to be honest with you.

JA: It’s really striking to me that, from the beginning, there has been a back and forth between people who want to cover up and forget the Till case, and people, like Till’s mother, who want to “let the people see,” as she said. As two people who are breathing new life into the Till story with this musical, why do you think there is so much push-back against telling and retelling the story of Emmett Till?

LS: I think it's because people are just uncomfortable with what it says about our society. Photos of Till’s mutilated body ran in the black press at the time. It didn't run in the white press. Most people didn’t see those images until a civil rights documentary aired on PBS decades later.

James Vagias: It's just such a difficult story. I mean, we had an incident yesterday – one of our designers just had to walk away. And I asked her if she was OK, and she said, "This is just really hard." Normal people just can’t grasp the level of cruelty that was inflicted on Emmett Till.

But what I do want to get across is that this musical is not two hours of painful, difficult theater-going. It is a wonderful production that is inspiring, hopeful, and positive. And it deals with a horrific incident in our past that fundamentally helped change the way society viewed the civil rights movement.

As Leo just said, the African-American community did see that photo at the time. And it did ignite the civil rights movement. And a lot of prominent African Americans remembered the moment they saw that photo and the impact it had on them. Rosa Parks said that when she was asked to move to the back of the bus, she just thought of Emmett Till and thought, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not moving."

Emmett and Mamie Till

LS: The thing that tipped the balance for me, in terms of deciding to tell this story, was understanding what Emmett's mother Mamie did. I thought, "That's the actual story here." The brutal killing of this child is not something we want to relive on stage on a nightly basis. We don't have that on the stage at all. What we have is Mamie's strength and love and –

JV: Courage. I mean, you didn't do that back in those days. You didn't say, "Enough. Stop. I'm going to make sure that what happened to my son is not in vain." And can you imagine the difficulty of a mother having to see what she had to see? But, because of her, things began to change.

JA: So, Jim, you're at the theatre right now working. Can you tell us what's happening today?

JV: Well, what's so exciting about doing *Till* here in South Orange is that the authors decided to begin and end the story in a church. So, we thought, "Well, why don't we use a church, an actual church venue, to tell the story?" So, as we're speaking now, literally, they are putting up a stage inside the sanctuary of St. Andrew's. Our lighting and set designer just walked in and said, "I'm going to try to do very, very little here, because the church's beauty is going to help us tell the story".

LS: I wasn't really sold on the idea at first, but I thought, "Well, let's see how it looks." And in the early parts of staging, I realized that this was a very powerful decision to make – to have everybody in the church observing this tale. And it takes on kind of a sacred status. It honors the story.

JA: This is a print piece, so we should talk about the music!

LS: It's got a lot of gospel, a lot of blues. It's kind of a jazz-based language. I use a lot of altered chords. But there are some show tune-quality songs in it. It covers a lot of ground. I think one of the best compliments I've gotten in this rehearsal process is the actors telling me, "I cannot get these tunes out of my head." For me, that's a huge compliment.

JV: Yeah, it's driving me crazy! I leave the rehearsal and I'm cursing Leo because these songs are always getting stuck in my head. The whole thing is just very, very, very catchy.

The cast of “Till” rehearsing at St. Andrew’s Church in South Orange: D’Nasya Jordan, Clyde Voce, Dwayne Clark, Marcus Beckett, Daisy Hobbs, and Vanessa A. Jones.

JA: On March 5, there will be a special post-show discussion with the last living witness to the events preceding Emmett Till’s death, Reverend Wheeler Parker Jr. Could you talk about that a little?

JV: Reverend Wheeler Parker is Emmett's cousin, and he was with Emmett both at the time of the incident in which Emmett went into the store and spoke to Caroline Bryant, the shop owner's wife, and later was in the house that Emmett was taken from. So, he's the last living witness to the events of this story, and he'll be there to talk to the audience about it. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I mean, to see a show about this seminal moment in American history, and then meet and hear from one of the witnesses to that event – the last living witness – and have him comment about what he saw, and give his take on it – not to be missed.

JA: What else should we know about Emmett Till?

LS: I just want people to know his story. Most of the people I talk to who are white don't know who Emmett Till is. I want people to leave the show and never think about race in the same way again. That's really what it comes down to for me.

JV: Ironically, when I first saw this piece, I had just read a book about Emmett Till a few months before. And one of the things I was affected by was how vibrant a kid he was. He was apparently a very gifted mimic and, like any 13 or 14 year old kid, he had a million things he wanted to do. He wanted to be a baseball player. He wanted to be a comedian. And the show starts with him mimicking one of the other characters in the show. And I just found that delightful – that this is a real, living, breathing kid who had these wonderful, quirky character traits. That was just so endearing to me. And that's the joy of meeting him. We'll never know what would have become of this wonderful, talented kid.