

Arts

N.J. STAGE

Musical 'Till' honors a family whose sacrifice fueled a movement

Natalie Pompilio For The Star-Ledger

In the 1955 photo that gave new life to the American civil rights movement, 14-year-old Emmett Till is lying in his casket, his face grossly swollen and bruised, teeth missing, one ear detached. He looks nothing like the round-faced boy who liked to dress up and had dreams of becoming a police officer.

No one can see the teenager who loved to make jokes, regularly attended church with his mother and who covered his stutter by doing impressions of his favorite comedic duo, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello.

Till's life and brutal murder — and his mother's love and brave decision to share her grief with the world — are at the center of "Till," a musical interpretation of the family's story, presented by the American Theater Group at South Orange's Church of St. Andrew & Holy Communion through March 8.

"We want to honor Emmett's memory and Mamie's love and the preciousness the black community feels for Emmett while also letting white audiences know that this still goes on," said composer Leo Schwartz, who co-wrote the show with DC Cathro. "This is not just for him, but for anyone like him cut down in hate, killed because of who they are. This is still happening. I want people to walk out of this show and never see the issue of color the same way again."

In the summer of 1955, Till traveled from his native Chicago to Money, Mississippi, to spend time with extended family. There a white woman working in a grocery store alleged the African American teenager had touched her, propositioned her and wolf-whistled after he left the store. The woman's husband and his half-brother then kidnapped Till from his uncle's home, beat him, shot him and tied a 75-pound fan around his neck with barbed wire before tossing him into the Tallahatchie River. His body was found there three days later.

Mississippi authorities wanted to bury Till immediately, but his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, insisted he be returned to Chicago. She then held an open casket funeral for her son, adamant that the world see the horrors inflicted upon him and witness her devastation. More than 50,000 people attended Till's funeral, and countless others saw images from it published in Jet magazine.

Later that year, two white men were arrested and tried for Till's murder. The all-white, all-male jury acquitted them after an hour of deliberations. The men later admitted the crime in a national magazine interview.

Till's impact on the civil rights movement is undeniable: Less than four months after his murder, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on an Alabama bus. Jesse Jackson said Parks told him she was going to give up her seat, but then she thought of Till and didn't.

On Aug. 28, 1963, exactly eight years after Till's murder, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. King had previously referenced Till, speaking about the racial injustice "in the crying voice of little Emmett C. Till screaming from the rushing waters in Mississippi."

Schwartz promised that the production is uplifting. "I don't want anyone to sit in the theater for 90 minutes and feel totally beat up without a sense of hope," he said.

The hope comes from those in the production who suffer the most: Till and his mother. After a preview for Texas teenagers, many in the audience told Cathro, "We knew the story, but now he's a real person."

"We want the audience to get to know Emmett and fall in love with him the way people did in real life," Cathro said. "He was one of those kids that would light up a room."

When James Vagias, American Theater Group's executive producer, saw the New York Music Festival was premiering a musical version of this tragic story, his first thought was, "I hope they get it right."

"They more than got it right," he said. "It really does reso-



Marcus Beckett and Daisy Hobbs perform in a scene from "Till." Lianne Schoenwiesner Spotlights Photography

nate in 2020 as it did in 1955."

To further that resonance, American Theater Group is also offering a post-show discussion March 5 featuring Till's cousin, Rev. Wheeler Parker Jr., the last living witness to the events of Aug. 28, 1955. It is also producing the show in an unusual venue: South Orange's Church of St. Andrew & Holy Communion, an Episcopal congregation founded in 1859. "Till" both starts and ends in church settings.

"It really is about faith, community and family, and that's what a church is," director Cezar Williams said. "When I heard it would be in a church, I joked that that would do 75% of our work for us. Then I saw this beautiful building and upped that to 90%."

Williams, who is African American and has two daughters, said he related to the challenges Mamie Till-Mobley faced trying to raise a child and keep him safe.

"I think in the timeless battle between love and fear, because that's what this really is, love ultimately wins," Williams said. "What happened to this child was wrong, but this mother, in the face of the unimaginable, chose to do something that would bring the country together."

Till

What: Presented by American Theater Group

Where: Church of St. Andrew & Holy Communion, 160 S. Orange Ave., South Orange

When: Through March 8

How much: \$42. Visit brownpapertickets.com