

# Black History Month: 'Till' sends a message



From left, Vanessa A. Jones as Alma Till, Dwayne Clark as Rev. Davis, Clyde Voce as usher, and Daisy Hobbs as Mamie Till. KATE ALBRIGHT/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

*Till*

*Book by Leo Schwartz and DC Cathro, music and lyrics by Leo Schwartz*

*American Theater Group*

*Feb. 27-March 8*

*St. Andrew's Church,*

*160 West South Orange Ave., South Orange*

[AmericanTheaterGroup.org](http://AmericanTheaterGroup.org)

*Special post-show discussion on Thursday, March 5, featuring Emmett Till's cousin, Rev. Wheler Parker, who is the last*

*living witness to the events depicted in the play.*

**By GWEN OREL**

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Emmet Till was murdered at age 14 in Mississippi. The young black boy, visiting from Chicago, was accused of offending a white woman in a grocery store. (Stories conflict about whether he whistled at the woman, harassed her, or bragged that he had a white girlfriend back home.)

The 1955 lynching had brought national attention to anti-black violence and segregation in the South. His mutilated body was shown in an open casket, which his mother Mamie Till insisted upon. Emmett Till became a Civil Rights icon.

“Till,” the musical, opens at American Theater Group in South Orange tonight, Feb. 27, and runs through March 8.

ATG, which was founded in 2012 by James Vagias, Montclairite and Broadway fight director Rick Sordelet, and Joe Mancuso focuses on new work.

“Till” will run in St. Andrew’s Church, on South Orange Avenue. The church, with its beams and Tiffany windows, provides an immersive experience for the show, which begins with a funeral, said Vagias, ATG’s artistic producing director.

Vagias saw the show at the now-defunct New York Musical Festival this past summer, and immediately contacted the writers. He knew immediately it was something to bring to ATG audiences, he said. And knowing the story starts and ends in a church, he knew “this would



CEZAR WILLIAMS

be a great way to immerse the audience in the show.”

Vagias also hired director Cezar Williams.

“It’s the first story about Emmett Till that I’ve heard of that deals mostly with his

community, his family and his faith,” Williams said. “So while we touch on the more tragic elements, we get a chance to really get to know these people beyond their historic significance.”

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Daisy Hobbs, one of the six-person company, agreed. Hobbs plays Mamie, Till’s mother. We first see her as she comes

slowly up the church aisle, then after ascending the stage, she leans over the (unseen) body of her son. It's a powerful image.

It's also an iconic image.

But Mamie, Hobbs said, did not set out to be a civil rights leader.

"She was just setting out to be the best mother she can be, and he was just a rambunctious, hyper, funny little boy. When you think of the story of Till, you see this picture of a disfigured 14-year-old boy in a casket with his face and body disfigured.

"We talk about what he wanted to be when he grew up. He always loved to make people laugh. You could see him being onstage someday. He was very funny, quick with his remarks."

Marcus Beckett, who plays the title role, said that he was familiar with Emmett Till's story.

"It's a story that, as black Americans, we grew up hearing as a cautionary tale of 'this is what can happen to black youth in America.' And I think we're still seeing that today. I knew the story in general, but there's a lot that I didn't know until really delving into this show and playing this role."

Actor Dwayne Clark, who plays multiple roles, said that a moment where they call up the names of black victims including recent victims is challenging.

"There's an emotional strain," Williams agreed.

It's a balance to keep the project enjoyable even with its heavy subject. The music helps: a blues song called "Money, Mississippi" is a cast favorite, funny with a good groove, he said.

"It's like a sales pitch from his great Uncle Mose about why

he should come down and see this place,” Beckett said.

## A WHITE GAZE

Leo Schwartz, the composer, lyricist and co-book writer of “Till,” was looking for a serious



LEO SCHWARTZ

subject when he began work on it about seven years ago.

It was around the time of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin, Schwartz said. “I spent an entire week ruminating on that.” Then Schwartz read a column by NYT writer Charles M. Blow, who said that “every black parent has to have ‘the talk’ with their children.”

And he found it shocking to learn that in many ways, there were two different Americas.

“So obviously, black people had been telling the story and had been trying to get the message out for years. And a lot of the white establishment in the white society has not listened.”

For Williams, the fact that the show was created by two white men was something he did consider.

“There is something called ‘the white gaze.’ For every project, you have to ask, ‘what is the purpose?’ And I remember one of the early conversations with Leo, I asked him what the purpose was.

“He said, ‘To save black lives.’ That was something I could sign on to.”

Schwartz said that with every reading and workshop production, the cast tells him when he gets something wrong about black culture – although of course there *is* no unified black culture.

Chicago, where Till lived, is very different from Money, Miss.

“There is always one moment in every rehearsal where I get educated by the cast,” Schwartz said. From the American Theater Group company, Schwartz learned that he could not put “a nice ribbon” on the ending, no matter how much he wanted to. In the NYMF production, the show got close to a COGIC (Church of God in Christ) Homegoing. That’s a funeral with an energy, a sense of celebration because the person is going home to God.

Music director Emily Cohn told him there would not be so much energy in a child’s service, because the child had not lived a full life.

“I hadn’t considered that,” Schwartz said. And then one night the cast told him they too found the ending confusing.

“And of the cast members felt this was not that experience, that though there were gains made, that there it’s still continuing on with, you know, blacks are still being pulled over or shot.”

So he had to find a balance between not wanting to have some uplift, with being truthful. Schwartz hopes people will leave the theater and never see race the same way again.

Williams agrees: "I think the current ending is a call to action."