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# To Kill a Mockingbird

*Broadway's Biggest Hit and its Vassar Ties*

BY NANCY NOVICK

What's it like to be in the hottest show on Broadway? Shona Tucker, Associate Professor and Chair of the Drama Department at Vassar, smiles as she describes being in Aaron Sorkin's adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as "exquisite." Tucker is part of the hit show's ensemble and is also the understudy for Calpurnia, the housekeeper and cook for the Finch family.

Professor Shona Tucker
Photo: Karl Rabe

But Tucker is not the sole member of the cast who is part of the Vassar community. Baize Buzan '10 is part of the ensemble and is the understudy in the roles of Scout Finch, Mayella Ewell, Miss Stephanie, and Dill's Mother. Buzan, who graduated with her degree in drama from Vassar, was once Tucker's student. LaTanya Richardson Jackson, who plays Calpurnia, is the mother of Zoe Jackson '04. (She's married to the actor Samuel L. Jackson.) And Liv Rooth, who plays Miss Stephanie and Dill's Mother and serves as an understudy for Mayella Ewell and Mrs. Henry Dubose, is married to Vassar alum David Wells '97, who is also an actor. In addition, Jason Blum '91, is one of the show's producers.

In addition to bringing Harper Lee's beloved novel to the stage in a production that is garnering wide acclaim, the team headed by producer Scott Rudin, and director Bart Sher, have set an exceptional tone for the cast, according to Tucker. Unlike the movie, in which Calpurnia provides firm guidance to Jem and Scout, but does not otherwise play a pivotal role, in this production, Tucker says, "Calpurnia is a fully-formed human being with fears and concerns. [She is]someone who gets angry."

Much has been written about Sorkin's script, which focuses primarily on the courtroom drama in which Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson, an African-American man falsely accused of rape by a white woman. Speaking on *60 Minutes* last November, Sorkin addressed the primary dilemma he faced: Atticus is a revered figure for millions of readers and viewers, but his belief that there is "goodness in everyone" has an uncomfortable resonance in the aftermath of the 2017 rally in Charlottesville and a worldwide increase in racist rhetoric and action. How can Atticus evolve beyond his long-held convictions? Sorkin's response was to have "almost every character" challenge Atticus' worldview, and Calpurnia is no exception.

In turn, "Atticus realizes there are things he did not conceive of, ways of looking at this situation that he did not get before, " Tucker says.

"It would have been easy to make this a nostalgia piece," she adds. Yet in Sorkin's hands, the story may never have been more relevant. "We're so in need of this story. Atticus is a liberal voice, but he's not just preaching to the choir or speaking to conservatives. He's speaking to everyone."

Although devotees of the novel and the film may have some initial resistance to anyone other than Gregory Peck in the role of Atticus, and to the casting of adult actors in the roles of the three children—Jem, Scout, and Dill—Tucker observes "It totally works with the story [the production team] is telling."

Tucker, who is on leave from Vassar through the end of the spring semester, and has acted in productions across the country and has had television and film roles, is making her Broadway debut in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She began teaching some years ago in order to spend more time with her son, who is now a teenager, and for many years would not consider roles that took her away from home overnight. Today, she values her work with students as well as the flexibility that permits her to continue acting. Although she has not yet been called on to play Calpurnia, Tucker says of her understudy role, "you have to be ready at every performance. It's your job." To stay sharp, she and the other actors who understudy the principal roles have at least one rehearsal a week.

When asked about the Vassar-Mockingbird connections, Tucker says. "It could just be happenstance. But it makes sense that these folks who celebrate the power of the individual to create—something that Vassar fosters and propagates—coalesce into this place."

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