

Last Rights

In Romulus Linney's new drama, a condemned man learns to be free

Is it cruel to teach a dying man to live? This and other excruciating life-and-death questions assault the reader of Ernest J. Gaines's eloquent novel *A Lesson Before Dying*, about a young black man condemned to death in a small Louisiana town. A National Book Critics Circle Award winner in 1993, the book tells a profound and harrowing story that seems a natural for stage and screen. Sure enough, HBO turned the book into a well-received 1999 movie, and in January the tale finally hit the boards when the Alabama Shakespeare Festival mounted Romulus Linney's powerful stage adaptation.

A Lesson Before Dying's first steps toward the footlights were taken shortly after its publication in 1992 when ASF board member Virginia Roddy read Gaines's novel and was hooked. Roddy pestered ASF artistic director Kent Thompson until he read, and fell for, the novel as well. Then, when television and movie deals-in-progress blocked the theatre from obtaining dramatic rights immediately, Roddy cornered Ernest Gaines at an honorary degree ceremony at Tulane University and talked him into smoothing the way.

Meanwhile, and completely separately, Gaines's old friend Romulus Linney was also coveting the material for the stage. In 1997, he finally called Thompson to volunteer as adapter, and the production was accepted into ASF's Southern Writers' Project, founded by Thompson in 1991 to be a forum for Southern writers and "a window for the rest of the nation to view Southern themes through drama." Just as work on *Lesson* was gearing up, Oprah Winfrey gave the show an indirect publicity boost when she selected the novel for her Book of the Month club.

A Lesson Before Dying, Linney has commented, is "the stuff the theatre cries out for... authentic, honest tragedy." The tragedy revolves around the death

row incarceration of Jefferson, a young man convicted of murder—probably unjustly—in a fictional Louisiana parish in 1948. As Jefferson waits to die in the electric chair, his grandmother broods over the defense attorney's casual comparison of the condemned man to an unthinking—and therefore guiltless—"hog."

Determined that her grandchild should die "like a man," the grandmother enlists the reluctant local schoolmaster, Grant Wiggins, to teach Jefferson dignity. Gaines's book and Linney's play describe in unflinching detail Grant's tortured efforts to fulfill this mission, which takes a huge emotional toll on him. "I don't know how a man should live," the teacher agonizes at one point. "How can I tell him how he should die?"

While spiritual crises rage through the parish, Jefferson's execution tests the local power structure, creating tensions between white prison managers and the black community, the older generation and the younger generation, religious and secular authority. It was this aspect of the work that the taut, vigorously acted ASF production, under Thompson's direction and with scenic design by Vicki Smith, captured particularly vividly.

By Celia Wren

Three key sections of the set—the raised stage depicting the prison day-room, a downstage area on the side representing a local café, and a desk downstage center standing in for Grant's dilapidated one-room schoolhouse—showcased three intriguingly different sets of power dynamics. In the brick-walled dayroom, cluttered with cardboard boxes,

(see above)

"I don't know how a man should live. How can I tell him how he should die?"



Authentic tragedy: Isiah Whitlock Jr., foreground, and Jamahl Marsh in Alabama Shakespeare Festival's *A Lesson Before Dying*.