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REVIEW

Power in 'Lesson' prevails

By Allan Swafford
Special to the Advertiser

In Romulus Linney's "A Lesson Before Dying," a young man - barely more than a child and certainly a child in understanding - is bestialized by the system which we ludicrously call Justice.

But with the help of his former teacher and the love of his godmother and minister, he rises to become a paradigm of what is best in humanity.

Based on Ernest Gaines' novel of the same name, "Lesson" dramatizes the last few weeks in the life of Jefferson, a youth wrongly convicted in 1948 by an all-white, Louisiana jury of murder. The trial breaks down his self-respect, and we watch the gradual re-establishment of this self-respect as a result of the efforts of Grant Wiggins, his fourth grade teacher.

In this confrontation between Grant and Jefferson, the prime mover is the boy's godmother, Emma Glenn, a powerful character. Both she and Vivian Baptiste, Grant's girlfriend, impel Grant to teach Jefferson to die with dignity. Toward the play's end Grant explains to Jefferson the nature of a hero and concludes, "We need you more than you need us." In learning this lesson and accepting his position as hero, Jefferson becomes a symbol for all people, removing race from the equation.

"Lesson" is easily the most powerful play to come from ASF's Southern Writers' Project which has certainly been no slacker in generating worthwhile drama. It is a palpable treasure for its audience. You will leave challenged on several fronts.

As staged, director Kent Thompson moves us subtly from a quiet but gripping start to a devastating climax. His superb cast simply enthral. Central to this spellbinding is Isiah Whitlock's creation of the complex, anguished and disillusioned Grant opposite Jamahl Marsh's carefully considered, disintegrating Jefferson. Barbara Meek's dynamic Emma, reminding one of another Gaines' character, Miss Jane Pittman, moves all before her.

Aaron Harpold, as the sympathetic deputy Paul, gives a beautifully modulated performance. Melissa Maxwell's Vivian is a warm, genuine creation as is Robert Colston's Reverend Ambrose. Stephen Bradbury's Sheriff Guidry is flawed but not monstrous, a human where usually we see only caricature.

Vicki Smith's period set - period except for some metal filing cabinets - pleases the eye and affords a fluid acting space. Alvin Perry's costumes conjure us back half a century.

"It came in under our income expectations, not much, but enough to give us pause about future musical revues," Malfeld said, adding that "in retrospect the goal the theater company had set was probably far too optimistic."

"For theaters the post holiday period is traditionally a slow one — both because people are usually involved in so many other activities and because they are trying to watch budgets."

While the ASF had hoped for more from "Forever Plaid," Malfeld said no one could have hoped for any more from "A Lesson Before Dying," the ASF's Southern Writers Project world premiere adapted from Ernest Gaines' powerful novel.

"A Lesson Before Dying" exceeded all our expectations both financially and artistically," Malfeld said. "Whenever you do a world premiere, which is to say a play that no one has ever seen before, and it has 'Dying' in the title, and it still does great business, you've got to be very, very happy."

The goal set for the play, which runs through Sunday, was \$122,000. With a week of receipts still to be added to the total, "Lesson Before Dying" has already done \$130,000 worth of business.

Malfeld cited excellent acting, a fine script and positive word of mouth as reasons for the play's success.

WANT TO GO?

- **What:** The Southern Writers' Project world premiere of "A Lesson Before Dying," by Romulus Linney, based on the novel by Ernest J. Gaines.
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. tonight, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 & 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 & 7:30 p.m. Sunday.
- **Where:** Alabama Shakespeare Festival, in the Blount Cultural Park off Woodmere Boulevard.
- **Admission:** \$20-\$30; discounts are available for students, senior citizens, military members.
- **Information:** 271-5353