

THEATER REVIEW

ASF Writers Project learning lesson well

By ALEC HARVEY
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The Alabama Shakespeare Festival has built a national reputation with its Southern Writers Project. Begun in 1991 by artistic director Kent Thompson, the project has brought to the stage works by Dennis Covington (*Lizard*), Randy Hall (*Grover*), Keith Glover (*Thunder Knocking at the Door*) and Horton Foote (*Vernon Early*), among others.

Now comes *A Lesson Before Dying*. Romulus Linney's earnest and affecting adaption of Ernest Gaines' Pulitzer Prize-winning book. It's a lovely and powerful show, made all the stronger by some wonderful performances.

Set in 1940s Louisiana, *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the story of Jefferson, a black man wrongly convicted of murder and set to be executed. During his trial, his own attorney called him a hog, and he believes it, so to help him die like a man, Jefferson's godmother sends in a teacher to help bolster his confidence.

That's the primary lesson that Gaines' title refers to, but Jefferson isn't the only character who has to learn something. And while Linney's play is no-doubt faithful to Gaines' original work, one has to assume that these lessons were a tad more subtle in the book than they are in the play.

Thankfully, preachy moments are few and far between in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

★★★★½

A LESSON BEFORE DYING

At The Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery through Feb. 20.

Call 1-800-841-4273 for information and reservations.

Some adult language

The cast is small, but potent, led by Isiah Whitlock Jr., as Grant Wiggins. The teacher's part is the most fleshed-out in the play, and Whitlock makes the most of it. Jamahl Marsh does a fine job with the difficult part of Jefferson.

Barbara Meek infuses Emma Glenn, Jefferson's godmother, with a sense of strength and dignity that's reminiscent of Gaines' most well-known character, Miss Jane Pittman. Melissa Maxwell is fine as Vivian Baptiste, Grant's girlfriend, but one hopes her character, a diversion on stage, had more to do in the novel.

Thompson has directed with a sure hand, aided greatly by Vicki Smith's well designed set on ASF's smaller Octagon stage!

A Lesson Before Dying is a perfect fit for ASF's Southern Writers Project. There's surely a lesson learned there — quality ingredients make for a fine end product.