

Whistling Dixie

Will Alabama Shakespeare Festival hit a home run with *Fair and Tender Ladies*?

Old ghosts die a slow death in Montgomery, Alabama. Though progress has undeniably swept through this cozy deep-South capital city, it's still an open question whether it can ever shed its widely held reputation as a wellspring of less-than-friendly social policies. If Kent Thompson, artistic director of the Montgomery-based Alabama Shakespeare Festival and founder of its eight-year-old Southern Writers Project, has his way, the answer to that ongoing question will be a heartfelt yes.

Thompson's pet initiative, the play-developing arm of the festival, has generated eight plays and 20 staged readings of works designed to challenge everyone's preconceptions—Southerners and non-Southerners alike—of what the South was, is, and is rapidly becoming. On a per-season average, two of the festival's ten offerings are born of the project—productions that are a far cry from *Troilus and Cressida* and *Richard III*, the festival's 1998–99 Shakespearean selections. A quick survey of project creations—from Keith Glover's enormously successful and much-produced “bluesical” *Thunder Knocking on the Door* to *Lizard*, an adaptation of Alabama writer Dennis Covington's peculiar youth novel about a physically deformed adolescent who runs off with a theatre troupe—proves there's far more to Alabama's history than fried chicken and racism.

“I think the South has a stronger oral tradition than other parts of the country,” explains Thompson, a dapper, soft-spoken man in his mid-forties who claims an impressive list of directing credits at the festival and beyond. “But it seemed we weren't doing anything with it. With the Southern Writers Project I want to try to change that. I want to feed back to the canon of the American theatre by telling stories of who we are as Southerners. Sure, there's something deeply paradoxical about the South—we're such a combination of contradictions. But we are also a window for America to see itself.”

By James Oseland

I have come to Montgomery this balmy November Friday to take in the project's latest contribution, an adapta-

tion of Lee Smith's 1988 novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*, a warm-hued tale that *Newsweek* praised for its “mixture of lyricism and sexual boldness.”

In a pre-show interview Smith revealed that her intentions for the book, which tells the story of an independent-minded Appalachian woman, were curiously parallel to the missions of the Southern Writers Project: “I wanted to write about lan-

guage and its acquisition,” said the North Carolina-based author, who originally hails from Grundy, a minuscule town in western Virginia's Appalachian region—soon due to be submerged under hundreds of feet of water by a state dam project. “I wanted to preserve the language of my childhood,” she noted with a touch of urgency.

Eric Schmiedl's music-infused adaptation of the book, with music and lyrics by Tommy Goldsmith, Tom House and Karren Pell, is an unqualified success. Centered on a dirt-poor woman, Ivy Rowe (played by the buoyant, energetic Greta Lambert, an associate artist at the festival), it's a two-and-a-half-hour trip through the grit, grunge and ulti-

mate redemption of her strenuous seven-decade back-roads life. As Rowe reveals her fierce, well-secreted snarls through a series of bristling and eloquent spoken letters, she becomes a metaphor for our collective journey as Americans—under-

appreciated but relentlessly striving to improve through self-transformation. With its intimate cast (the excellent Debra Funkhouser and Kim Ders cover the remainder of the roles in an effective narrative-shorthand conceit) and its Hill-



A metaphor for our collective journey: Greta Lambert in *Fair and Tender Ladies* at Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

billy Greek chorus of three onstage musicians (Teresa Williams, Samuel D. Cohen and Woody Jenkins) underscoring the drama, Smith's book is rendered as a folksy fantasia, in which a character's death or the first snow of the season segues into a delicious bluegrass jam. The result is so pure and sincere it makes your teeth ache—the stickiest peach cobbler has nothing on this play.

The project's next offering promises to be a harsher pill to swallow: *Lurleen*, a stage biography of the wife of Alabama governor George Wallace, who filled his gubernatorial seat when state law prevented him from seeking a third-in-a-row term, has been developed by Atlanta-based playwright Barbara Lebow (*A Shayna Maidel*) for a March mounting. The play's prickly narrative—Lurleen Wallace was viewed by many as an embarrassing stand-in for her unelectable-but-tenacious husband—is not the sort of history that's easily rehashed around these parts. But history with the sting of truth is just the sort of refreshment that Thompson and his Southern Writers Project cohorts are looking to serve up. **AT**

“The South is a window for America to see itself.”