

# 'Fair and Tender Ladies' a must-see for fans of country music

## Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

The Liberal Arts Symposium at Huntingdon College presented a one-man show, "Galileo," last week, for one night only, in a striking example of pedagogical theater. The not-for-profit Parnassus Productions brought the classical actor Roy Henderson, who trained in London and is a former member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, in the role of the Renaissance mathematician and astronomer.

When I asked the play's author, Rusty Bynum from Huntsville how this play differed from the famous one of the same title by Bertold Brecht, she said that the Brecht was not historically accurate, as if that were the only criteria for dramatic presentation. By this standard, Shakespeare fails.

The show, then turned out to be a kind of dramatized lecture. It is testimony to Mr. Henderson's skill that we were clearly presented with facts, dates, persons, which balanced Galileo's personal and public lives. As props, the actor used an oversized chess board, a lute and a sextant, which Galileo invented.

I hope theater students were also in the audience, for Mr. Henderson, who belongs to Actor's Equity, had a whole repertory of stagey poses and gestures — that used to be a part of an actor's training. To be sure he rightly punctuated his lines with gesture that stopped just short of the punch line, instead of after it, as an amateur would do.

I must confess I was more taken with this actor from the old tradition than I was with the machinations within Galileo's family and with the

church. The evening went on too long, mostly because of interludes of recorded lute music, with the actor striving for tragic, heroic status for Galileo at the end, which became hard to swallow. Give us theater, not pedagogy!

Country music is said to be the most popular kind of music in America, so the show that opened last week at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, "Fair and Tender Ladies" should be a big hit. The director is Susan Willis, the English professor who also coaxed the show through the development process of the Southern Writers' Project. The dramatization is based on Lee Smith's exhaustive

novel of the same name in which a Tennessee mountain woman tells her whole life in a series of letters.

How you like the show, which I saw at the final preview, will depend on your toleration for mountain speech, mountain music, and what is virtually an all-woman play (One of two men in the onstage band is also an actor, Samuel D. Cohen, and he occasionally plays a bit part). Much of the time it's laughing, crying, hugging — "We girls are all in it together" — for this is a matriarchy, with the men of the family either dead or shiftless.

Thanks to the tyranny of the dialect coach, all accents are interchangeable with even the redoubtable Greta Lambert, the heroine, with flat vocals and a nasal, hillbilly twang. Few of

these actors speak this way naturally, and even an exaggerated Southern belle's accent is not the way most Southern women speak.

The music, which has been specially written and recorded (a CD is available), is pure Nashville sound, with acoustic guitar and dulcimer. Although the show is billed as a play with music, it approaches the revue format with expanded continuity, except we don't applaud each number. Ms. Lambert sings well and the lead singer for the band, Teresa Williams (along with one of the band members) was heard in "Always ... Patsy Cline" this summer.

Despite Dr. Willis' enthusiastic director's notes, I couldn't help thinking that it took all these sophisticated people (wonderful Kim Dors and

Debra Funkhouser are also in the cast) to create a show that is essentially low brow. Perhaps that's what sells tickets, but I'm still idealistic enough to ask for classical theater, which was the charter from the beginning.

*The reviewer teaches at Alabama State University.*

# 'Tender Ladies' excellence defies praise

Mix: Southern charm, writing and bluegrass music make this play enjoyable

By Allan Swafford  
Special to the Advertiser

With a play so richly magical as "Fair and Tender Ladies," pointing to specific excellences becomes a daunting labor and — quite possibly — a waste of time.

That Lee Smith's novel has been brilliantly and faithfully adapted to the stage is the first such excellence. That Susan Willis'

## REVIEW

direction is adroit and sensitive is another. What more immediately strikes the audience is the scintillant force of the acting and the immense charm of the music.

And this catalog merely suggests the wonders of this latest and best yet offering of the Southern Writers' Project at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Set in the first three-quarters of this century, "Fair and Tender Ladies" details the life of Ivy Rowe, a mountain woman of heroic dimension living in a time of change.

The songs and the dialog — the language as musical as the accompanying music — reveal a woman who seems to spring from the very earth she treads, as much a part of the landscape as the trees and crags.

To speak of the uniqueness of the play, "Fair and Tender Ladies" is not a musical in any sense that we usually accept the word. Essentially bluegrass but in various forms of folk music, the songs do not decorate. They are intrinsic, integral and fulfill a number of functions such as narrative, characterization and commentary. Unswervingly appropriate, they could not be extracted to appear on the Top 10 charts nor conversely could the play be comprehended without them.

In sum, they are a vital, organic function of the play's unique form. And while they are not intended to decorate, they are *in context* engagingly decorative.

Smith's novel has a wealth of characters who are reduced to a handful in Eric Schmiedl's perceptive, ingenious script. The central role, Ivy Rowe, becomes a tour de force in the hands of the captivating, protean Greta Lambert who portrays the character from child-

hood to advanced age, from Innocence to (at least, sexual) sophistication.

The secondary characters are assumed by two dynamic actresses, Debra Funkhouser and Kim Ders. Permanently on stage, the three musicians — Teresa Williams, Samuel Cohen and Woody Jenkins — effectively undertake a variety of ephemeral roles.

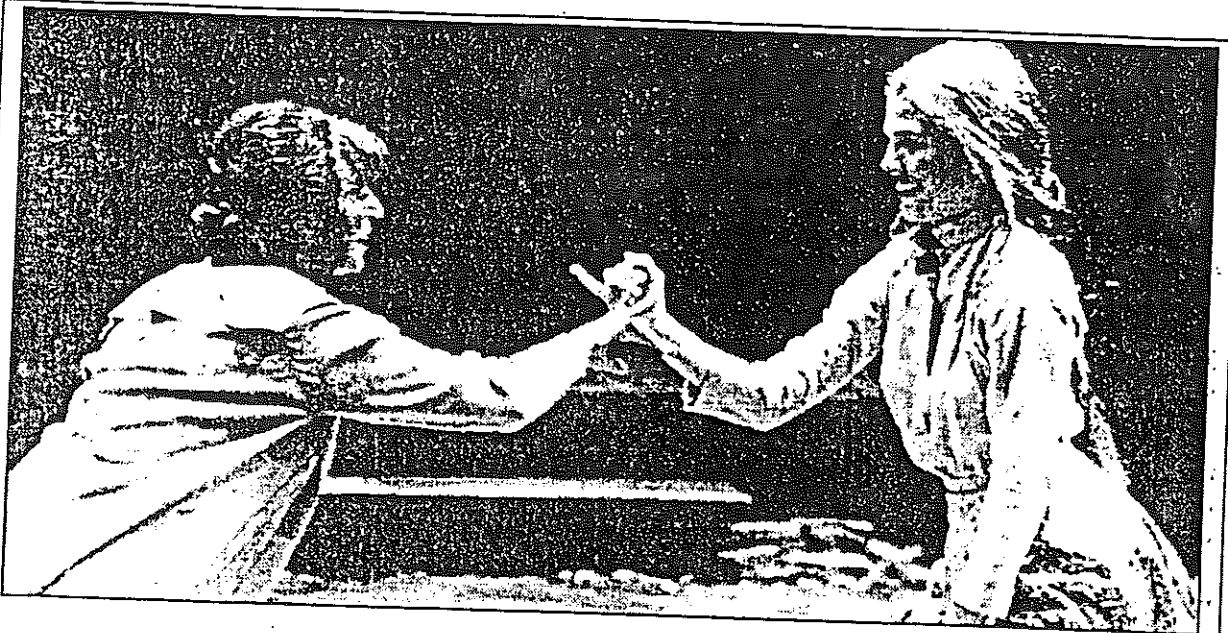
Funkhouser and Ders are notably versatile in creating their several individual characters but each leaves us with at least one — Funkhouser her brain-damaged Silvaney and Ders her warm, dominating Geneva — that burns in memory.

Susan Willis' spare, telling direction unveils the subtle beauties of Schmiedl's adaptation. Exploring and exploiting Smith's device of a lifelong series of letters, Schmiedl and Willis capture and convey the emotional impact of the novelist's original.

Schmiedl and the three composer/lyricists — Tommy Goldsmith, Tom House and Karren Pell — have here evolved a form that shares the integrity of great opera, which has insisted on the integration of word and music, of drama and song.

Contributing visually to the production's success is Michael Smith's metaphoric set design. The repetitive motive of circles — in the full moon and the acting space — becomes the symbol of the full circle of Ivy's life we watch on stage. His use of such materials as rusted, corrugated tin and rough, unpainted siding immediately evokes *place*, the elemental essence of Ivy's personality.

Allan Swafford has reviewed theater in Montgomery for 15 years



CONTRIBUTED

Debra Funkhouser and Greta Lambert portray Sylvanie and Ivey Rowe in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's production of 'Fair and Tender Ladies.' The play runs through Dec. 23.

## ASF performs musical folk tale

BY LORI MOORE  
Staff Writer

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival is presenting "Fair and Tender Ladies," a musical folk tale about lovin', losin' and livin' in the Appalachian mountains.

Free-spirited Ivey (Greta Lambert) has sipped from the cup of love and loss. But in the foothills of Appalachia, it tastes a lot like moonshine.

The play follows the life of Ivey Rowe from 1912 to the 1970s. As Ivey comes to the end of her life, she relives her experiences through letters to both the dead and living.

Ivey makes a childhood pact with her institutionalized sister, Sylvanie (Debra Funkhouser), to live freely. In her letters to Sylvanie, she writes of her dream to be a writer.

Her dreams are cut short when she chooses a quick tryst with a soldier rather than an education in Boston.

The resulting scandal drives her to her sister Beulah's (Kim

Ders) home in a modern mining town.

As a "rurnt" woman, Ivey has no restraints flirting with the town's men. But after a disaster at the mine, she realizes her good pal Oakley (Samuel D. Cohen) is the man to marry.

The couple returns to Sugar Fork, Va., Ivey's birthplace, and her free spirit is buried under the weight of five kids and the Great Depression.

When temptation gives way to an affair with the "honey-bee" man, Ivey's marriage actually strengthens.

Ivey looks back on her loves and losses with the steel-rimmed wisdom of age.

Though her dreams changed with reality, she raised five successful children, lived on her own terms and had few regrets.

Like her strong-willed grandmother, whom she quotes liberally, she sacrificed much and gained more.

The musical successfully used only six actors for nearly two dozen parts and voices. Music and Ivey's narration painted her

memories on stage.

Lambert often acts to no one at all as the chorus (Cohen, Woody Jenkins, Teresa Williams) supplies the voices of the characters.

Author Lee Smith tells her story of life's beauty with crass simplicity. The characters demonstrate an endearing lack of couth in their life views.

The acting remained solid, though sometimes too exaggerated for ASF's small Octagon stage. The simple wooden set perfectly created Ivey's rustic world.

The music flowed well through most of the play, though it fell short at the pivotal mine disaster. The steel guitar created a simple bluegrass feel.

The fine and tender ladies of this story had backbones of steel. Ivey was one of a long line of survivors.

Like many of the women in her world, Ivey lived with dignity and died with beauty.

"Fine and Tender Ladies," part of ASF's Southern Writer's project, runs through Dec. 23.

Dec. 3, 1998  
Auburn Plainsman

## THEATRE

# APPALACHIAN TALES

*Fair and Tender Ladies* graces the stage at ASF.

ROGER CASEY

In the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's latest production, playwright Eric Schmiedl and musicians and lyricists Tommy Goldsmith, Tom House, and Karren Pell have faithfully adapted Lee Smith's celebrated novel, *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Through two generations of letters written to family and friends, the play conveys the touching life story of Appalachian matron Ivy Rowe.

Smith has stated that *Fair and Tender Ladies* is an attempt "to memorialize the lives of older, uneducated women in Appalachia who possess great grace and dignity." Thanks to the outstanding direction of Susan Willis, Smith's aim has been achieved, clearly and cleverly. The play moves audiences both to tears and laughter because, while we all may know stories about the extraordinary spirit of ordinary lives, seldom do we see such lives played out on stage so realistically and honestly.

In her role as Ivy Rowe, ASF veteran Greta Lambert subtly ages 70 years over the course of the show. Never leaving the stage, Lambert maintains a driving energy level from the play's onset to final curtain, pausing only to take sips of water from an onstage pail and dipper. Lambert opens the play as the elderly Ivy, dragging a cedar chest filled with letters onto the porch of her lifelong cabin, suggesting an unpacking of the numerous stories stored away throughout her often tragic life. Lambert then flashes back to Ivy's childhood to play out the scenes depicted in these letters. The audience never once doubts her honest portrayal of a 10-year-old laughingly making snow angels with her retarded sister, a teenager experiencing first love ("a hand of fire has clutched me in the stomach"), an exhausted mother of five, or a middle-aged

woman rekindled through an affair. We laugh when she comments on her popularity with boys following the birth of her illegitimate daughter: "When you're burnt, it frees you up!" And when Ivy sings, "I been caught up in a darkness," she conveys a spirit extinguished despite the recent electrification of her Virginia holler.

The hollers of Appalachia must resound with the untold stories of such women, their lives legacies of endurance. To outline Ivy's life sounds almost cliché: her family poor, her coal-miner father succumbing to black lung, her sister retarded, her daughter born out of wedlock, her dreams thwarted, her affair with a beekeeper ended. Beekeeper? Just when the story seems to fall into the trope of the poor-Appalachian-woman-victim-movie-of-the-week, we're rescued by an authentic breaking out of the mold. Smith turns us away from the long-suffering stand-by-your-man stereotype and instead presents an original narrative of the disempowered making powerful choices.

Just as Ivy's unique life defies categorization, so does this production. It's hard to call it a drama, because music forms such an integral part of its two-and-one-half-hour length. It's difficult to call it a musical because the songs naturally arise from Ivy's storytelling and only on faint occasions border on the nature of numbers in the musical genre. Indeed, like Ivy's life, which seemingly emerges organically from the land surrounding her home of Sugar Fork, the musical compositions are both earthy and integrated. Credit Goldsmith, House, and Pell (also the adaptors of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*) for creating lyrics and melodies that carry and complement Smith's story rather

than overpower it in cleverness or showiness. Maybe one should call the piece "melody-drama," the songs and script merely different ways to signify harmonically one woman's resilient spirit.

Acting in musical and prosaic harmony with Lambert, Debra Funkhouser and Kim Ders portray a procession of women who touch Ivy's life. Funkhouser's depiction of Ivy's mentally disturbed sister Silvaney, the recipient of most of Ivy's letters even though she cannot read, is especially poignant. Silvaney, an appropriately named sprite of the woods, resembles an Appalachian Ophelia; she, too, is crazed by the death of a beloved man. Ders shines particularly as Geneva, a stocky boarding-house matron who declares in her old age, "I used to be a scandal. Now I'm an institution."

Three musician/actors accompany the cast and remain onstage for the entire performance: Teresa Williams, Samuel D. Cohen, and Woody Jenkins. Under the musical direction of Thom Jenkins, the trio creates memorable Appalachian melodies with expert performances on guitar, banjo, mandolin, dulcimer, and autoharp. They also double as a range of characters from townspeople to Ivy's crying babies. With inflections resembling another coal-miner's daughter, Loretta Lynn, Williams's haunting voice beautifully captures the warbling tones of Appalachian folk tunes. Williams also puts in an amusing performance as Granny, the storytelling, pipe-smoking "Doctor."

Also integral is Michael Smith's set, bathed in earthtones to emphasize the importance of the land in these people's lives. The centerpiece, a wooden porch, is as prominent on the set as the porch is in the storytelling traditions of the South. As a

backdrop, whitewashed fences cut with curves suggest the ever-present Appalachian mountains in the distance, especially when silhouetted by Terry Cermak's rich but simple lighting scheme.

While I believe *Fair and Tender Ladies* superior to any premiere I have seen under the auspices of ASF's Southern Writer's Project, like many new works, it could benefit from the hand of a deft pruner. Though I sat fully engaged through Act 1, I felt that a number of moments in Act 2 could be condensed or cut. Simply put, there are too many songs. We too often see Lambert pantomiming an emotional response on the porch while the background musicians present the narrative through a five-minute song. Of course, the danger facing any play that tells the entire story of one person's life is putting too much in or leaving too much out, and this production errs slightly on the former side. Cutting 20 minutes would lead to a tighter, even more compelling script. And while I never found the play falling into bathos, maybe excising at least one death from the plot would steer it even clearer of the melodramatic.

Shortcomings aside, the ASF's production of *Fair and Tender Ladies* gives us both an emotionally moving character to care about and a piece of theatre worthy enough to give resonance to the language of the disappearing culture of the Appalachian woman. Smith should be pleased with Ivy Rowe's dramatic transformation. **A**

*Fair and Tender Ladies* runs at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery through December 23. For specific dates, show times, and tickets, call the box office at 1-800-841-1273.

# BACKSTAGE

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The Performing Arts Weekly

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## Atlanta

Enthroned in a 250-acre park, Montgomery's Alabama Shakespeare Festival, two hours from Atlanta, luxuriates in a \$21.5 million performing arts center, cour-



Greta Lambert in "Fair and Tender Ladies," Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

tesy of former Postmaster General Wynton M. Blount and his wife. Not lackadaisical in its luxury, the festival is initiating the world premiere of Eric Schmeidl's *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Nov. 13-Dec. 23), adapted from Lee Smith's 1988 novel and set to music by Nashville's Tommy Goldsmith, Tom House, and Karren Pell.

A stock tale of an Appalachian woman's vitality through wall-to-wall calamities, *Ladies* is redeemed by heroine Ivy Rowe, who enralls as she is made flesh-and-blood by charismatic actress Greta Lambert. While Lambert conveys sweetly aching humanity, balladeer Teresa Williams

*Continued on page 32*

## REGIONAL Roundup

### Atlanta

*Continued from page 28*

throbs country soul into the show. The production is fluidly staged by director Susan Willis, with chairs and tables becoming tractors, and quilts becoming maternity beds. While *Ladies'* misfortunes are familiar, they are well executed.

Back in Atlanta, the best offerings are non-holiday fare. Actors' Express has extended Mary Rodgers' lightweight *Once Upon a Mattress* into Dec. 19, after opening Sept. 26. Packed with director Chris Coleman's explosive energy, *Mattress* showcases natural comedienne Jill Hames, who comfortably belts her ballads and vamps Prince Dauntless (a winning Geoff Schmidt). Arch jester Robert Egizio doubles as the production's smooth choreographer, making Three Stooges hay with Jeff McKerley and Theo Harness as they quail before the dragon lady queen, Josie Burgin Lawson.

Meanwhile, Horizon Theatre's *The Art of Dining* (Oct. 30-Jan. 3) is a comedy with some substance. Director Carolyn Cook exposes the inner lives of Tina Howe's obsessed gourmands—the most hysterical being a famished spinster, enacted by Lisa Adler.

Over-broad, at the expense of its message, the Alliance Theatre Company's *A Christmas Carol* (Dec. 2-26) trolls for audience-pandering laughs. Directed by Kenny Leon, it scores only in Dwight Andrews' musical direction, headlined by gospel diva Bernardine Mitchell. More fresh is the holiday perennial *The 1940's Radio Hour* (Nov 24-Jan. 3), at Marietta's Theatre in the Square, wherein Jason Byce's hot-and-cold direction is pumped up by bombshell Katie Kneeland, juvenile Scott Butler, and velvet crooner Mike Masters.

DAVE HAYWARD

## Organ recital by local musician showers audience with festive musical numbers

### Theater Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

Jim Sadie, who works in the family grocery and deli on Coliseum Blvd., gave an organ recital, for the second year in a row, at St. Andrew's, the pretty old church in Cottage Hills. The congregation has recently restored the fine, small pipe organ that dates from

1909. The same night as the recital, Cottage Hills was lighted with luminaria, and many houses had open house, like the architectural firm Acanthus (Randy Seay).

It's been 40 years or more since the Organ Historical Society was founded, and the whole idea is to identify old pipe organs, of which there are a great number all over the country. Next comes refurbishment, which is sometimes as simple as changing the wind pres-

sure. And then the OHS sponsors recitals on the old organs. We haven't got the OHS here in Montgomery, but our local chapter of the American Guild of Organists (lawyer Ray Johnson is the long-time promoter) gave active support to the project.

It's a courageous act for an organist without a graduate degree (Bach didn't have one either) to present a recital, but Mr. Sadie, a Huntingdon graduate, who studied

with Harold Rollig, has a firm grasp of his instrument and plays fluently. It's obvious that he loves to play, half the battle, and he can hardly start to play a tune than he falls into some variation of it.

After a trio of French "noels," short, bell-like pieces, and two Christmas songs sung by soprano Stacy Linn, Mr. Sadie played his own arrangement of Christmas tunes. There's a medieval tradition of including secular carols along with the sacred, so even "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" worked well with traditional organ playing. His final improvisation on "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" ended with "We Wish You A Merry Christmas", and its catchy repeated motif was ideally suited for variation. Such a Christmasy evening!

Let's hope Mr. Sadie commits himself to further organ study, for he and this recital clearly fulfill a community need. Contributions to help with the upkeep of the St. Andrew's organ are always welcome (contact Father Kissell).

It's sometimes good to take a second look at plays at Alabama Shakespeare Festival towards the end of the run. Most shows are "frozen" after the opening, so theoretically there should be no difference. But inevitably, actors settle into their roles, stage business becomes smoother, and different audiences see the show differently. The other night, for instance, many members of the permanent company turned out in the Octagon, when the other show was dark.

"Fair and Tender Ladies" which closes before Christmas, a dramatization of Sue Smith's novel about a mountain woman, appeals perhaps more to women than to men. My initial reaction was lukewarm, because I have trouble with both

country speech and music. Seeing it again, the show seemed much more than a play with music, but almost a country musical. The band, on stage throughout, often participates in the action, playing multiple roles, and the music occasionally carries the plot forward. The young lead singer's voice, approved Country style, was still jarring to this ear accustomed to usual musical standards. Obviously, though, the audience loved her, the music (a CD is available), and the show.

My other reservation concerns the character played by Greta Lambert. As usual Ms. Lambert is the consummate professional, carrying her role of the mountain woman by the sheer force of her charm and acting technique. She is on stage virtually non-stop, but we do not tire of her "infinite variety." We admire her; ergo, we admire the woman she portrays.

But should we? If I have the plot right, here is a woman who rejects an opportunity for education when it's offered to her when she's a girl. She apparently bears children out of wedlock and has a protracted relationship with a man not her usual partner. She engages in a compulsive dialogue with a retarded sister long after the sister is dead.

Yet the play seems to condone the character, because hers are merely survival skills for a free spirit. For me, there's just not enough that's substantive in the role (in the original book) to justify Ms. Lambert's virtuoso performance. Perhaps the play would be judged by the lesser standards of the musical.

The reviewer teaches at Alabama State University.

# ASF sezonas pradėtas pasauline premjera

## “Fair and Tender Ladies” spektaklio įspūdžiai

Alabamos Šekspyro festivalis (ASF), Montgomery, AL, 1998 metų spalio 14 dieną pradėjo naują sezoną, kuris tęsis iki 1999 metų rugsėjo 19 dienos. Sezono pradžia buvo du veikalai. Abu pastatymus stebėjo trys Sunny Hills lietuviai. Čia rašantis su keturiom tautietėm ASF aplankėme 1998 m. gruodžio 23-čią. Octagon'o teatre išgyvenome popietinį spektaklį nuostabios dramos, kuri tą patį vakarą buvo išimta iš repertuaro.

Matytoji drama pavadinta “Fair and Tender Ladies”. (Lietuviškai pervadinčiau į “Malonios ir jautrios moteriškės”, nes anglosaksiškas abstraktas “Jady” gan tolimas lietuviškai “poniai”, juoba kad dramoje vaizduojamos moteriškės toli gražu į ponių titulą nepretenduoja.) Veikalo siužetui panaudotas to paties vardo romanas, sukurtas plačiai žinomos rašytojos ir literatūros profesorės Lee Smith. Veikalą scenai perkūrė Eric Schmiel. Spektaklio gausioms dainoms gaidas ir žodžius sukūrė Tommy Goldsmith, Tom House ir Karren Pell. Spektaklio režisierė – Susan Willis. Veikėjai: Greta Lambert, Debra Funkhouser, Kim Ders, Teresa Williams, Samuel D. Cohen ir Woody Jenkins. Trys paskutiniai ir vaidino, ir atlikinėjo muzikinius dalykus.

Veiksmo vieta – Virginijos valstijos vakarinė dalis; laikas: 1912-1970 metai.

Išskyrus pagrindinę aktorę Greta Lambert, kuri atlieka Ivy Rowe rolę, visos ir visi kiti turi po kelis vaidmenis, užkulisy ir net scenoje-arenoje, skubiai persirenginėdami. O ir Greta Lambert, beveik šešių dešimtmečių eigoje, iš paauglės mergytės transformuojasi į energingą, žvalią jauną panelę, į nėsčią jauną merginą, į viduramžę dominuojančią moterį, į gyvenimą baigiančią senutę. Ši nuostabi universali aktorė visa tai atlieka taip, kad nėra į ją netikinčio žiūrovo. Šiame pastatyme savo gerbėjams ji dar padarė ir didelę staigmeną – dainavo! Ne kartą, o per visą trijų valandų spektaklį – net keliolika dainų, tai solo, tik trijų instrumentų kapelai pritarant, tai su vienu ar trim kitais balsais kartu. Girdėjome jos stiprų, ryškų, bet maloniai skambantį altą. Kai po spektak-

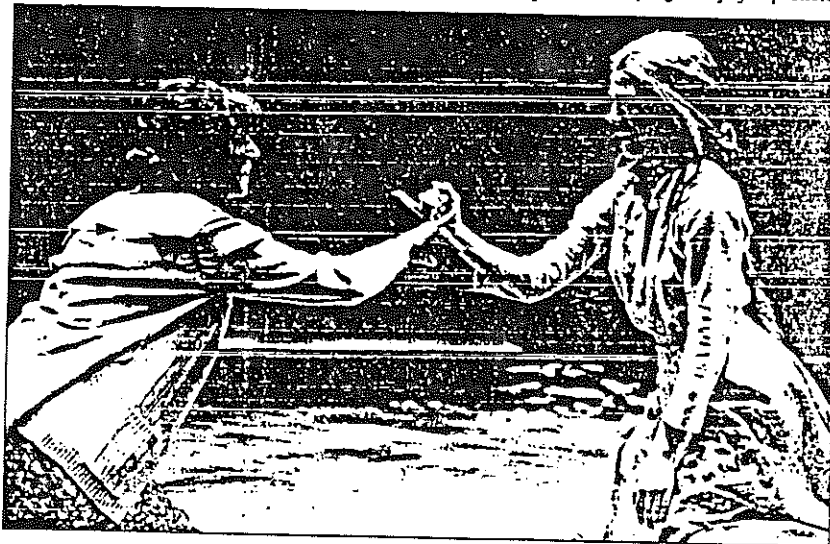
lio ji susitiks su publika, patvirtins, jog tikrai šiame pastatyme buvo jos balsinis debiutas, jog pradžioje net stigė drąsos, bet vėliau apsipratusi ir solistės vaidmenį pamėgusi.

Nesileisiu ryškinti įvairių mizanscenų, Gretos Lambert ir kitų aktorių vaidybos detalių, nes, kartą pamatęs, nenoriu kažkokį žinovą vaidinti. Paryškinsiu tik

juokėsi, juokėsi, juokėsi... Žiūrovas pamiršo, kad žalia veja tai grubios arenos grindys, kad ne saulės, o elektros lempų šviesa, pagaliau kad abi aktorės gal beveik trigubo amžiaus negu vaizduoja. Tas mergaitiškas džiaugsmas buvo toks tikras, kad naktį greitkeliu riedėdami kelis sykius tą sceną minėjome. Skaitytojus su abiem veikėjom

dintą. Manau, kad šis veikalas pasieks ne vieną didmiesčių sceną.

Jau turiu šiek tiek informacijos apie ASF 1998-99 metų sezoną, bet dar ne viską. Gero teatro gerbėjus, kuriems Alabamos pietų miestas Montgomery lengvai pasiekiamas, siūlau ASF, vieną iš šešių brandžiausių JAV šekspyrių festivalių, turėti savo atostogų planuose. Beje, prasidėjusio sezono programoje jau paskelbti



Kadras iš “Fair and Tender Ladies”: kairėje Greta Lambert – Ivy Rowe, dešinėje Debra Funkhouser – Silvaney vaidmenyje  
ASF/Scarbook nuotr.

vieną kelių minučių detalę. Į įsivaizduotą pievą atbėgo dvi paauglės: Ivy (Greta Lambert) ir Silvaney, jos jaunesnė sesutė, protinė atsilikėlė (Debra Funkhouser). Pirmoji gal 14-metė, antroji jaunesnė. Čia jos šoko ratelius, krykštavo, kryžium gulę į pievą stebėjo debesėlius, vėl susitvėrę rankomis šoko. Ir

supažindinti pridėtu šios scenos nuotrauka.

Romaną “Fair and Tender Ladies” Lee Smith parašė 1988 metais. Ir štai po dešimtmečio ASF jį adaptavo scenai ir parodė žiūrovui, išpuoštą liaudies bei kitokiomis dainomis, gabios režisierės scenon išneštą, gerų aktorių stebinančiai gerai suvai-

statysimi šie trys Šekspyro veikalai: “As You Like It” (repertuare kovo 9 – liepos 25); “Richard III” (kovo 30 – liepos 24) ir “Troilus and Cressida” (gegužės 25 – liepos 24). Norintieji daugiau informacijų žodžiais, ar gauti informacinę brošiūrą, gali skambinti tel. (800) 841-4ASF.

# 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.”

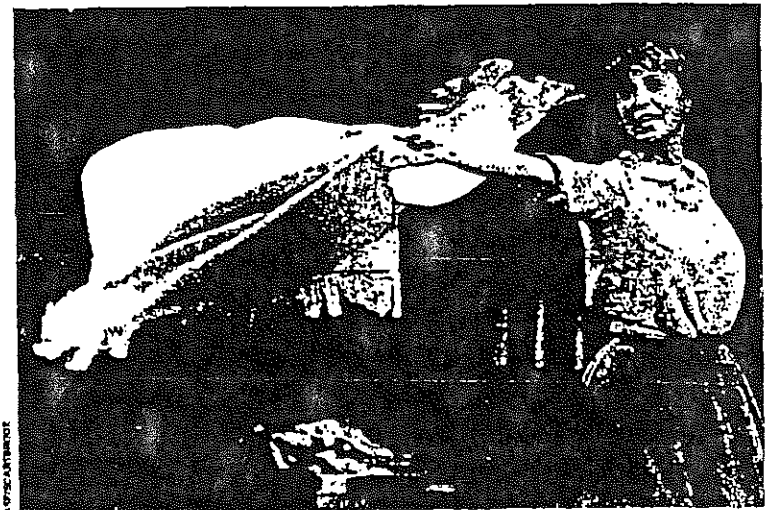
“The South is a window for America to see itself.”

By James Oseland

I have come to Montgomery this balmy November Friday to take in the project's latest contribution, an adaptation 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 language 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 ultimate redemption of her strenuous seven-decade back-roads life. As Rowe reveals her fierce, well-secreted smarts 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**