

Preview

'The Legend Of Jim Cullen,' a preview



A young girl (Emma Tolley) offers the only gesture of true compassion to Jim Cullen before his lynching, a drink of water as he awaits execution in the General Store in Mapleton. (Eleanor Cade Busby photo)

By Eleanor Cade Busby

In 1873, a group of masked and hooded men took Jim Cullen into the woods of Aroostook County and lynched him. This is the only known lynching in New England.

Heartwood Regional Theater, under the direction of Griff Braley, will open an original musical based on the story, now in its second revision, on Friday at the Parker Poe Theater in Newcastle. "The Legend of Jim Cullen" may not seem the stuff of musicals, but neither did a murderous barber from Fleet Street.

In a preview on Saturday afternoon, "The Legend of Jim Cullen" took flight on the notes of a new musical score by local composer Aaron Robinson. This may be Robinson's best score to date. The songs feature crisp harmonies performed by a noteworthy ensemble. The music is somber and haunting, at times inspirational and down-home lively.

When the men are raising a post-and-beam barn on the stage, the music, movement, and set come together with a performance worthy of a much larger venue. It would be hard to find a chorus of men as strong and in tune with one another short of New York.

Juxtaposed with choral numbers are sassy Rosellah's "Full Circle" and the haunting melody that accompanies Black Bird's "Lamentation." The balance and variety of song complements the dialogue.

The other striking image is that of Cullen on the tree. The lynching is done in such a way that no rope touches the man. The people who perpetrate this crime are hooded and dark. Each one has a rope. They simultaneously snap these, allowing each one to wonder if he was the one who hung Jim Cullen.

The story opens with a carnival barker/narrator at a microphone. It was not very clear that these were actors telling the story until the end when the microphone reappeared.

It's not light fare by any means, though Braley manages some humorous moments, sprinkled with a poignant edge.

Cullen, a New Brunswick immigrant, had a history of petty theft before the crime that led to his irreversible downfall.

He was only 27 years old at the time of the lynching and had fathered a young son, who was deaf, with the woman who eventually betrayed him.

The story takes a turn from one of petty theft, jealousy, and poverty to cold-blooded murder after Cullen leaves Mapleton. He stole a pair of boots from the General Store. The local sheriff and a deputy, who happened to be involved with Cullen's woman, caught up with Cullen.

The sheriff struck a deal with

Cullen that he would go back to New Brunswick the next morning, and never return. An ice storm stranded the men overnight in a shack together. Offered not only his freedom but the boots he stole, Cullen still killed the sheriff and his deputy in their sleep.

The first act of "The Legend of Jim Cullen" moves quickly, each scene leading the audience toward the tragic conclusion. The narrator's second act opener refers to myth and legends like Agamemnon and Macbeth. This instructive segment slows the build to the climactic moments. Act Two, rather than hurtling on to its grisly conclusion, moves gradually toward the end.

Costumes by Sue Ghoreyeb are spot on for the time period, and the exquisite Blackbird is a stunner. The set by the talented Trish Munson includes projections of water, fire, and much more to perfectly complement the piece.

"We wanted the focus on the actors and telling the story," said Munson, "this is much different

from last year's version of the set."

An 11-piece orchestra led by Sean Fleming supports the cast and chorus of 19 as they deliver this compelling drama with 30 musical numbers.

Many noteworthy performances in a strong ensemble make singling out actors for comment difficult.

The two youngest cast members have less to say than others, but make a lasting impression. Emma Tolley, as a village girl, is a delight in a sea of darkness. Human kindness and youthful energy accompany her, especially in the small scene toward the end when she shows Cullen a simple kindness.

Andrew Lyndaker as Elden, Cullen's deaf son, gives a bravura performance, and charms the watcher in the process. He makes this neglected, often abused child very charming.

Stephen Shore as Jim Cullen may not be as physically huge as Cullen was purported to be, but he makes the man real. Shore evokes a kind of sympathy for Cullen, who was a violent criminal. That skill, to make an audience feel pity without a word, but with a glance or a shrug of the shoulder speaks of real talent.

The cast is uniformly excellent, with strong characters, performances, and singing. It includes Grace Blewer (Blackbird), Shelley Crawford (Rosellah), Isaac Haas (Bateman), Caleb Lacey (Swanbeck), Deirdre Manning (Mrs. Dudley), Morgan Morse (Hayden), Logan Schultz (Hubbard), Stephen Shore (Jim Cullen), Ari Veach (Fillmore), Andrew Lyndaker (Eldon), Gabe Ferreo (Minot Bird), Allison EddyBlouin (Ellen Sawyer), Rowan Carroll-Christopher (Chorus), Virgil Bozeman (Sawyer), Kyle Aarons (Dudley/M/Cullen), David Meyers (Hughes), Emma Tolley (Evelyn), Nancy Durgin (Chorus), and Bella Rocha (Chorus).

Performances run in the air-conditioned Parker B. Poe Theater at Lincoln Academy in Newcastle, on July 24, 25, 26, and 31 and Aug. 1 and 2 at 7:30 p.m. There is one matinee performance on Sunday, July 27 at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$22 for adults and \$8 for students. Reservations are strongly recommended at boxoffice@heartwoodtheater.org or 563-1373.

For more details, cast information, videos, and photos, visit <http://www.heartwoodtheater.org>.

For those looking for something visually stunning, musically perfect, and thought provoking, plan on "The Legend of Jim Cullen" at the Poe this weekend and next.



The Blackbird (Grace Blewer) draws Jim Cullen (Stephen Shore) to the axe he will ultimately use to slay the sheriff and his deputy in "The Legend of Jim Cullen." (Eleanor Cade Busby photo)