

Grambling Stages Bold Play About Emmett Till

Contributed by Shakari Briggs -- Black College Wire
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"The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till"

Capping off Black History Month, Grambling State University's Department of Theatre Arts presented the play, "The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till," written by Mamie Till Mobley and David Bar III.

The story of Emmett Till is one that still pierces hearts and minds to this day. Fourteen-year old Emmett Till was murdered in Money, Miss., in the 1950s, during a time when the face of racism reared its ugly head and encapsulated the minds of Whites everywhere, especially in the South.

He was murdered for reportedly "whistling" at a white woman, which was taboo for a Black man. Till was found in the Tallahatchie River weighed down with a cotton gin fan and a face so disfigured that if it hadn't been for his father's ring, he would have been unidentifiable.

"The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till" chronicled the life and untimely death of Emmett Till, a catalyst for civil rights. It also captured the struggles his mother and family endured in order to get justice for his wrongful death and the future of blacks.

Setting the tone for the night were the soulful sounds of Sam Cooke's "Change is Gone Come" that reverberated through the Floyd L. Sandle Theatre while a captivating lyrical dance was performed by Princeton McCurtain.

The play opened up with a proclamation that the characters (Till, his family and community members) "would never turn back until they reached equality," something that resonated in the hearts of students, family, faculty and friends in attendance.

Each character brought to life the individual stories that haunted them from the disturbing death of their son, grandson, nephew and friend, Emmett Till.

Dr. King Godwin, Theatre Arts department head, and the cast carefully crafted a perfect depiction of Money, Miss. to the point that it took us back in time.

Viewers said that they felt as if they had been transported to a period of unjust biases and cruel prejudices.

Mamie Till Beasley was played by Ashley Boston. Justin Madden played Roy Bryant and John Whitten. Madden's portrayal of White racists was notable. He balanced two characters with ease.

His tone and resignation made everything he said and did believable even down to the accent. It was so surreal. Madden took what others would find complicated and made it his very own.

The actors were phenomenal in channeling the roles in which they were cast.

The monologues performed by Beasley highlighted the unwavering love a mother has for her child and despite her pain, her passion for the cause surpassed any doubts in our minds that she meant every word she spoke.

The most pivotal scenes in the play were the death of Emmett and the intermission in which a viewing of his body occurred. The theatre department had a wax imitation of his face, which gave the patrons a up-close and personal view of how "the face seen around the world" looked.

"It is truly a shame that hatred and the heinous death of a child manifested change," Madden said.

Closing out the play, the cast reiterated that until they had reached equality that "no, they would never turn back" showing the strong determination of the women and men even in times of tragedy.

If you were not able to attend "The State of Mississippi and the Face of Emmett Till," you really missed out on a special treat. Deeply moved and sympathetic to the struggles overcome by the residents of Mississippi is what I walked away with when I left the play that night. Never have I ever been so compelled to fight for the plight of African- Americans everywhere and after seeing the play something in my soul cried out for the mistreated and misunderstood people of my race.

Walking away from this play you not only left with a better understanding of the trials and tribulations African- Americans encountered but a greater appreciation that had it not been for people such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr.,

Medgar Evers and the young Emmett Till, we would be still be fighting for the same rights they fought for years ago.

Shakari Briggs writes for The Gramblinite, the Grambling State University student newspaper, which originally published this article.

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