

artsfirst night

Theatre To Kill a Mockingbird Theatre Royal, York

★★★★☆

Spinning ever more gold from a story so immaculate and well-known is an enigmatic challenge. Both Harper Lee's book and Alan J. Pakula's film are masterclasses of their genre, conjuring a slow-cook portrait of dust-blown Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s, where racism is buried as deep as the tree outside the house of the strange local recluse Boo Radley.

Legend has it that when Lee visited the film-set she was soon gone, declaring: "It's a work of art, I can tell. It'll be fine without me." It is unlikely she would feel the same way about the first act of this rendering brought to the stage by the director Damian Cruden.

Although fastened to essential scene-setting, the rhythm is fractured and often ponderous. Duncan Preston as the iconic lawyer Atticus Finch is over taciturn and perhaps, at 64, a little old; in the book Finch is said to be "nearly 50". His children, Scout (played by Grace Rowe) and Jem (Matthew



Duncan Preston holds court as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Pattimore) are far too apple pie and the use of video projections thickens the broth unnecessarily. Across a very long hour, the audience is stirred only when Atticus fires a very loud gunshot at a distempered dog that has wandered near by. Ears are still ringing, in Leeds.

Yet as much as the first act drags, the second is every bit worthy of the celebrated theatrical decree — "spellbinding". Cruden strips down the production to a courtroom drama, elegantly designed by Liam Doona and lit by Richard G. Jones. Thereafter, the

players and the narrative summon a wonderful tension and pulse.

Cornelius Macarthy as Tom Robinson, the black cotton picker framed for rape, is flawless. Clare Corbett as the alleged victim Mayella Ewell and her father, Bob Ewell, played by Mark White, are fine studies in twitchy low-life. In fact, their portrayal is so compelling that it almost feels possible to smell the sweat and muck and alcohol about their bodies as Finch meticulously unpicks their fabricated testimonies.

The book is currently a set text for GCSE exams in English literature. While many of the teenagers present at the Theatre Royal giggled in the wrong places and fidgeted during the first half, there was rapt silence after the interval — lost, hopefully, to a powerful story very well told.

Mark Hodkinson

York box office: 01904 623568, to Feb 26, then touring. Details: www.touringconsortium.com