

March 9, 2010

The Ballad of Emmett Till: Till We Meet Again

By Ed Rampell



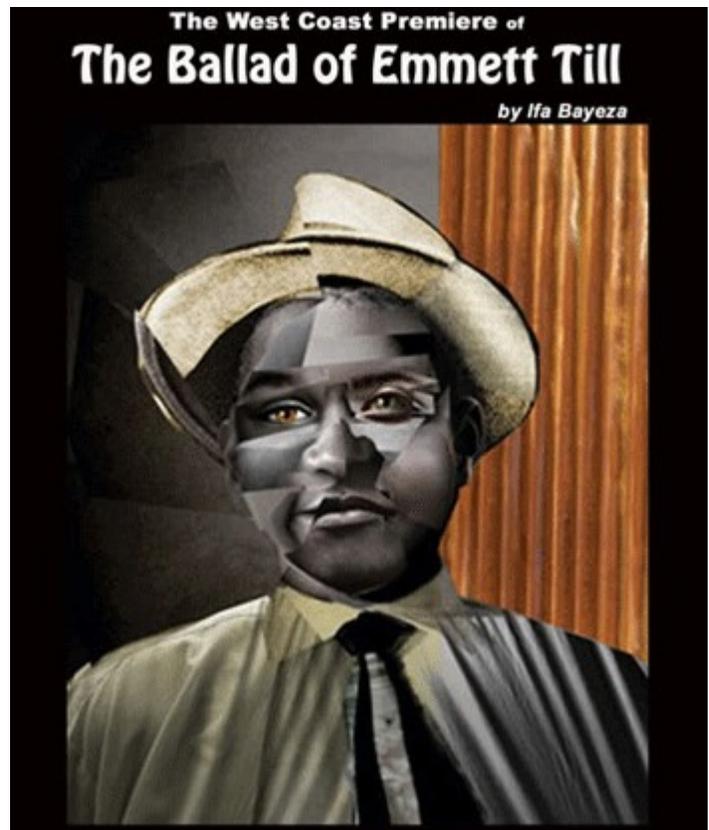
What do we know and remember about Emmett Till? Mainly that this 14 year-old was brutally lynched down South in 1955 for purportedly whistling at a white woman, and that at his Chicago funeral his mother insisted on leaving her son's casket open. The mutilated, partially decomposed corpse was viewed in person by up to 50,000 mourners and by many more in photos published in *Jet*, helping to inspire the then-nascent Civil Rights movement.

I believe that, for some reason, playwright Ifa Bayeza's version of events at the award winning Fountain Theatre omits mentioning the magazine's publication of these bone-jarring images. Be that as it may, there's more to the Windy City teenager than the above facts, and Bayeza strives to resurrect

him in *The Ballad of Emmett Till*. Bayeza tells Till's backstory as it was (or as the dramatist imagined it), and a picture emerges of a fatherless lad who struggled with and overcame polio and stuttering. The production tries to be from Till's point of view, but it is probably Emmett's POV channeled through the play writer's perspective.

Surprisingly, for such a tragic tale, *Ballad* is full of good-natured humor, as we follow the fast talking, loquacious, fun-loving, joking Till from his Chicago girl-chasing escapades to the city slicker's attempts to farm and fish with his Mississippi kinfolk. Had white supremacists not kidnapped and viciously murdered Till one night in August, 1955 for his alleged infraction of Jim Crow "etiquette," you probably would not be reading this now, and it's unlikely that Bayeza would have written a play about him. What did life hold in store for Till? He may have, like most people, faded into history's obscurity, or, perhaps, he could have gone on to do especially noteworthy things. His life squelched and stolen at such a tender age, of course, we'll never know.

This play could have easily been presented in a straightforward realist manner, but Bayeza's script, and Shirley Jo Finney's direction, have wrought a highly stylized production. (In that "the show must go on" tradition, Finney stepped in after the murder of *Ballad*'s original director, Fountain Theatre stalwart Ben Bradley.) Overall this creative rendering and storytelling technique works and serves the drama well. But certain elements lost me, such as the stick dance choreographed by Ameenah Kaplan, performed towards the beginning of the 90-minute one act play. While it's ably presented, what's the point? Foreshadowing of looming violence to come? Perhaps this baffled me because I have previously seen numerous indigenous stick dances performed by Micronesians and Filipinos, and I was confused by the cultural context.



Another thing that puzzled me is set designer Scott Siedman's use of baggage on the small, mostly bare stage of the 78-seat playhouse. Why? Emphasizing that Till traveled all the way from Chicago to Mississippi to visit and stay with his relatives there? That life is a journey? Or that Till and/or his saga carry heavy baggage? Your guess is as good as mine. On the other hand, David B. Marling's sound design organically underscored and enhanced the drama, as did Kathi O'Donohue's lighting, especially during a torture sequence that rendered it palpable, but endurable to sit through.

The *Ballad of Emmett Till* has only five actors, who seamlessly move from role to role as effortlessly as shape shifters, playing multiple characters. The ensemble acting is deftly directed by Finney. With his bravura performance Lorenz Arnell has an effervescent presence in the title role, bringing someone mostly known for his death vividly back to life. Arnell makes the ghost of Emmett flesh and blood, transforming an icon into someone all too human.

As the steely-willed Mamie, who brought her son's corpse up from the Delta to Chicago for all the world to see, Karen Malina White is stellar and protean in her multi-role incarnations. As is Adenele Ojo, who displays a comic flair as one of Till's hayseed Southern cousins or romantic interests, as well as a tragic touch playing Emmett's older relatives.

The South Carolina-born Bernard Addison captures what W.E.B. DuBois called "the soul of Black folks," crystallizing onstage the sheer terror of the pre-Civil Rights generation of Blacks subjected to night riders and lynchings in the Old South. When the rednecks come to his spread to apprehend his nephew in the dead of the night, Addison's character, Uncle Moses, is rather memorably dumbstruck. It is the quintessence of the powerless, terror stricken and paralyzed by persecution.



There is a venerable tradition in theatre (and movies) of the "All Black" production, and they are to the stage (and screen) what historically Black colleges are to education. Sometimes, these are shows conceived of as being for an "All Negro" cast (although not necessarily conceived of by Black playwrights per se). Other times, they are a re-conceptualization of a show with characters and a milieu that are not necessarily Black, but presented with a cast entirely composed of actors of African ancestry (although I have yet to see the "All Negro" version of *Fiddler on the Roof*).

The *Ballad of Emmett Till* seems to fall into this "All Black" genre. But I think the story would have been far better served if the actress whom Till supposedly wolf whistled at was Caucasian, and especially if the actors who kidnap and torture Till were white. Somehow, by using thespians who are Black as whites (and not performing in "whiteface"), *Ballad* ratchets down the racial tension, when crackling racial tension is precisely what needs to be raised a few notches and what the drama requires. Who knows what the thinking was in these casting decisions (other than, perhaps, the economic expediency of a small cast in a 78-seater).

After a brief delay due to Bradley's death (which was, like Till's, untimely) the Fountain Theatre presented the West Coast premiere of *The Ballad of Emmett Till* in February during Black History Month; however, the Thursday night performance I went to was sold out, and as of press time it has already been extended twice, through April. But in a country still troubled by racism, where hate crimes are on the rise — from nooses and KKK hoods at the University of California San Diego to death threats against the first African American president — any month is appropriate for this engaging interpretation of the life and death of Emmett Till, the martyr who launched the Civil Rights movement. Three months after Till's murder, Rosa Parks stood up by sitting down in a segregated Southern bus.

Till death do us part.

The Ballad of Emmett Till is being performed through April 25 at the Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles, on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 p.m.; Sundays at 2:00 p.m. For more info: 323,663.1525 or www.FountainTheatre.com.