

# Anne and Emmett

## Review

November 5, 2011

By Debbie Jackson

The world premiere of *Anne & Emmett* has a remarkable lightness about it, which is striking considering the horrendous material covered and the brutality inflicted on two young innocents.

The facts are there, nothing's been sugar-coated or glossed over. Both Anne Frank and Emmett Till share their stories and Anne's father and Emmett's mother precede them, sharing grief so real you can feel it in the air. Still, the premise that writer Janet Langhart Cohen has developed sets the disturbing issues in a context of wonder, adolescent sharing, and even hope. So, yes, the final effects are uplifting instead of the downtrodden dirge that could have been.

Anne and Emmett meet mysteriously in a large barn-like setting, with a hazy fog wafting through the slats from the other side, totally unaware why their paths have crossed. Anne thinks it's got something to do with the power of imagining and memory, and as they talk, both discover similarities in how they were treated and mistreated, and the cultural conditions at their respective times.

In some of the most poignant passages, the characters come across as typical young teenagers, reflecting on their lives, opening up and sharing details about the treacherous events that they experienced most of us can hardly fathom.

But it's the telling of their stories that fuels the insights about why they've been thrust together. The play gets across the power of remembering the painful past as a way to honor those who have passed on and paved the way. Emmett gets a chance to "see" how his death galvanized the progression of the Civil Rights movement, and how his tragedy played a pivotal role in sparking the righteous indignation of Rosa Parks and that young preacher from Atlanta. Anne's clear handwritings are projected



Graphic for Anne and Emmett

on the back wall and her sweet temperament comes through in her observations about life, her struggle to help her younger sister survive, and her unbearable loss at the hands of the Nazi occupation.

Still through it all, she appreciates the beauty of life as a beacon of hope, and entreats Emmett to work through his fearful, wary approach to his memories as well.

The strength of these two fine actors, Andrea Green and Charlie Hudson III, guided by Talvin Wilks' clear-sighted direction, brings this part of the script to life. As Emmett, Hudson has the realistic bearing of a young hot-shot northern adolescent with just enough swagger in his step to get into trouble, while Green relays the unrelenting strength of a young Anne Frank who refused to succumb to the hatred that slaughtered millions. Their evolving role in learning about each other's histories, caring, sharing and eventually trusting each other is the highlight of the production. Still scarred by the realization that he was tortured and mutilated after a white woman pointed him out to a posse of vigilantes, Till understandably recoils every time Frank approaches too near. To watch them finally reach a point where they can walk hand in hand to "look beyond the darkness," is true epiphany.

As a work in progress, the script will invariably undergo some tweaking to help maintain its powerful emotional thrust throughout. For example, the ending film footage depicting the tragedy of the 2009 shooting at the Holocaust Museum on the night of the play's first reading is a powerful reminder that bigotry still kills to this day and reinforces the purpose of the piece to engage activism, but it distracts from the theatrical journey and contributed to a jerky, somewhat anticlimactic finale.

These patches can easily be smoothed out as the piece gets on its feet and flies because the full production is so strong, including the performances of Roger Grunwald and Kelly Taffe in the ensemble. The set and lighting design by Maruti Evans contributes to the overall effects with a huge hinged door center stage that opens and closes allowing characters to enter and exit into the light.

Heart breaking as the premise might be, the mystical meeting of two young souls in a realm of memory, ends in hope, not only to remember and never forget the suffering of those who changed the course of history, but in bearing witness, become sojourners of that truth ourselves.

*Anne & Emmett* runs thru Nov 6, 2011 at the Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H St NE, Washington, DC. All performances are sold out.

### **Anne & Emmett**

Written by Janet Langhart Cohen. Directed by Talvin Wilks. Produced by William S. Cohen. Presented by Atlas Performing Arts Center

Highly Recommended

Running time: 90 minutes; with no intermission