

THEATER

Director sees relevance in 'Mockingbird'

By Robert Hurwitt
CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

Forgive Michael Butler if he sounds a little tired of directing just now. He may be excited about his current staging of "To Kill a Mockingbird," but sometimes he'd rather be acting. Or playing music.

Besides, he has an entire theater company to run. At 57, Butler is nearing the end of his fifth season as artistic director of Walnut Creek's Center Repertory Company. During that time, he's accelerated the longtime community theater's transformation — begun by his predecessor Lee Sankowich, who was also artistic director of Marin Theatre Company — to higher artistic levels.

Butler has brought in more professional actors, directors and designers. He's also increased the number of shows each season to eight, in the Leshner Center's three theaters, by adding two more adventurous, Off Center shows to an eclectic mix of popular and edgy musicals and safely established and riskier new dramas. "Mockingbird," Christopher Sergel's popular dramatization of Harper Lee's novel, is the third show he's staged this season, without a chance to act.

Butler's been doing both for a long time, sometimes designing sets or writing music as well (he's a published songwriter and a rock, blues and country guitarist). Before Center Rep, he was a frequent actor and director at San Jose Rep, where he met his wife, then-artistic director Timothy Near. He's performed on Broadway and at numerous regional companies, and directed everywhere from Marin Theatre and Aurora to Cleveland Playhouse, Seattle Rep

To Kill a Mockingbird: Wed.-Sun. through April 30. Center Repertory Company, Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. \$36-\$42. (925) 943-7469. www.centerrep.org.

and Shakespeare Santa Cruz.

Q: You have an eight-show season now?

A: In all three theaters — because of Off Center. It was six. When I first started I think it was five. That includes our "Christmas Carol," which is now in its 14th season. That's the one show we do in the Hoffman, the 800-seat theater, which is the largest.

Q: You usually direct how many?

A: This year I did three, which I will never do again. Famous last words — but it's too much, kind of back to back — "Dracula," "Boeing Boeing" and now "Mockingbird." Besides, I like to keep my hand in acting, at least once every other year.



Ann Luke

Michael Butler, artistic director of the Center Repertory Company, is directing "To Kill a Mockingbird."

Because it's fun. A lot of my career has been as an actor and I don't want to let that go just because I have an administrative job. I think the audiences like seeing that too.

There was one period where I was directing a lot and didn't act for like four years and then climbed back into a play. It was "Art" with Peter Van Norden and David Pichette, two guys who were like total Jedis. The first two weeks of rehearsal I was like a runner who was winded early in the race.

"Don't wait! I'll catch up. Don't worry." My chops just weren't

there. I got them back, but I don't want to go through that experience of being rusty again. It gets harder and harder to un-rust.

Q: "Mockingbird" is being done a lot lately.

A: Isn't that interesting? TheatreWorks, Ashland — you could make a case that wrestling with the history of race in this country is still a very big issue. I kind of laughed at one event we did where someone started with, "Well, now that we're in a post-racial society ..." Oh, really? Are you sure? I don't know if having an Afri-

can American president has heightened the interest, but anything that makes us look at that issue is a very good thing.

And you know "To Kill a Mockingbird" was published in 1960, won the Pulitzer in '61 and was made into a movie in '62, all right at the edge of the hottest part of the civil rights movement. And it's still cited as the most influential book after the Bible, worldwide. So it's very useful as a story for white people to deal with whatever degree of racism or prejudice we carry. It makes it possible for us to look at that because it's this little girl and we're seeing it through the eyes of innocence and great caring and respect for the people in the story.

Q: Is there anything unusual in the approach you're taking?

A: I think there is. The script pretty much cries out for a kind of realistic production. At least I think that's what most people have done. There's a strong urge to put the neighborhood onstage, to have all those little houses and porches, all that loving naive realism that I can't stand. I really didn't want to do that. I wanted to somehow capture the feeling of what it's like to enter the world of a novel where, yes, things are described but that's planting seeds in the reader's imagination, where it all really grows and is visualized. I thought it needed a simpler platform. In some ways I'm treating it more the way people traditionally do "Our Town."

It's a beautiful set (by Melpomene Katakalos), a kind of raked platform of old barn siding that we found that curves up into like a wave. And very little on it. But of course I've got Dan Hiatt playing Atticus Finch, so who needs scenery? You know, I hadn't thought about it that way until just now. But it's true.

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