

JUSTICE JOINED: ACTING ATTICUS, LIVING THE LAW A Lawyer/Actor's Adventures Playing Atticus Finch on the 50th Anniversary of *To Kill A Mockingbird*

BY WILSON A. SCHOOLEY

You, if you are like most people born in this country (or even in others) in the last 50 years, have your own special relationship with *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

The resonance this story has for so many people is remarkable. It is one of those uncommon creations that reaches right into our beating hearolitics, or education. It makes each of us feel something so personal, so intimate, and at the same time profoundly universal.



Wilson A. Schooley in To Kill A Mockingbird

This is one of the many truths I learned playing Atticus Finch in a 50th Anniversary production of the play this year. It seemed almost everyone who heard I was cast as Atticus told me: “*To Kill A Mockingbird* is my favorite book (or film) of all time!”

Why? What is it about this story? I think *To Kill A Mockingbird* drills directly, lovingly, deeply into the loveliest moments of our childhoods, and at the same time sings to the soul of our best selves. Even if we had hard-knock boyhoods or girlhoods, there were still some of those breathtaking, honeyed moments when we felt wonder, and love, and discovery, and the magic camaraderie of children. *Mockingbird* remembers those moments for us, and brings them right back to the surface—makes them alive again, right now. Almost as poignantly, it makes us feel, very viscerally, the primal heartbreak of blind injustice and the heartbreaking honor of people who fight against insurmountable odds to make it right.

Acting Atticus, I traveled an aerial arc from my childhood to my children's and back to my parents. As a father, I felt an unabated arterial flow from Atticus to Scout and

Jem to my own mighty love for my children. It touched me right where they have. It whispers in my ear the truth I know: life's greatest gift to me is my children, and my greatest gift to them is a pure childhood—open and free enough so they can live in that magical world of imagination and wonder, yet protected and directed enough to prepare them to be responsible, honorable, loving adults. Exactly what Atticus tried to do. Nearly every line of the play rings with the beauty of his effort, and so brings water to my eyes. I love Atticus' line in the book when, challenged by his brother about how he lets strong-willed Scout be herself, he says “she minds me as well as she can. Doesn't come up to scratch half the time, but she tries.” His brother responds “That's not the answer.” Atticus answers: “No, the answer is she knows I know she tries. That's what makes the difference.” As a son, the play has also been a path to re-awaken, cherish, and mourn my own childhood—the singular world in which I lived with my parents; a world no one else knew and now, with their death, no one but me retains in memory. Full of crystal clear moments and small treasures, like those in the jumbled box of marbles and memories in the exquisite opening credits of the *Mockingbird* film, it has a deep and abiding power.

For me as a lawyer, this story sings the song of my heart's greatest public passion: equal justice, civil and human rights, and the cause of the disadvantaged and discriminated against. Apart from children, nothing moves me more. As Jem and Scout's childhood was in many ways defined by the Tom Robinson case, mine was indelibly marked by Martin King, Malcolm X, the Freedom Rides and Civil Rights Movement. The compelling power, passion, and righteousness—the moral imperative—of that struggle fueled my journey to law school, into the legal profession, and finally to the work I've been doing for the last 12 years representing the indigent accused on appeal.

As an actor, this production re-energized me. Due to recent traumas and demands, I had not done a play in almost 4 years. I felt rusty, and both eager and leery about acting again. Atticus changed me as an actor. Because of the nature of this mighty story, and how much it speaks to me personally, emotionally, I both connected with the character instantly and deeply *and* felt a moral and emotional obligation to pour myself into bringing him to life on stage. That connection and commitment combined with very special, visceral performances from other actors in the ensemble put me in touch with chords of an actor's “voice” I had never before fully understood. It empowered me because of that experience itself—of finding my way deep into the heart of Atticus and finding *real* connections between him and other actors living on that stage with me—and because of the resulting response from audiences. I've been well-reviewed and awarded as an actor before. But I've never received anything like the reaction I got to Atticus. People approached afterward trembling and in tears, and told me I moved them, shook them, touched their hearts deeply. The compliments give me confidence I've not felt before as an actor—a faith that I can bring emotional resonance to performing I did not know it was in me to do; a conviction I can really

act, not just perform—inhabit a character in a way that reaches audiences on a deep emotional level. I attribute much of that to Harper Lee’s pen rather than my performance, but it is nonetheless a powerful discovery that has both changed my perception of myself as an actor and will change performances to come if I can hold onto what I learned.

The through-line pulled taught from all of these lessons of *Mockingbird* is a theme of Atticus’ character: throughout the story he is, over and over, talked about as a man who is “the same in town as he is at home.” There, surely, is a code for each of us to adopt: to be the same person—just, fair, honorable, honest, and true—to everyone in every aspect of our lives. Justice joined. For Atticus, these are not just words, they are the blood in his veins. For me, the most profound praise I received during the production was in a note from an actress in the play who wrote: “Throughout this production, you have been Atticus both on stage and off.”



Wilson A. Schooley in *To Kill A Mockingbird*

So much learned and so much gained, just personally, from those pen strokes on a page 50 years ago. How much greater is Harper and *Mockingbird*’s gift to us all, as people and as a country. Fifty years after she put pen to paper and made *Mockingbird* magic, we have an African American President. What does that mean for *Mockingbird*, its legacy and relevance? It means maybe, just maybe, Atticus’ effort was not so futile. (And, maybe, my losing that case over and over in every night’s show week after week was not so hopeless.) It means, above all, that when the fight for equal justice seems over, we will understand that it is not. Not for those of us honored to have on our wall a *license to serve justice*. When justice seems either lost—as it did then, or won—as it has to some since December 2009, the Atticus in each of us *must* remember the battle continues, and that it is both our moral responsibility and our greatest reward to persevere as warriors for what is fair, equal, and right.