

Shining Through

Young Lorenz Arnell breathes life into the tragic figure of Emmett Till

BY DARRELL L. HOPE PHOTOGRAPHY CRAIG CAMERON OLSEN

Ask most young men Lorenz Arnell's age, "Who was Emmett Till?" and if you get any answer at all, it will most likely be, "He was some black kid who got killed by racists in the pre-civil rights South." But in anchoring the strong ensemble cast of "The Ballad of Emmett Till" at the Fountain Theatre in Hollywood, Arnell's joyous performance reminds us that before the death that shocked the nation, there was a very vibrant life.

For those needing reminding, in the summer of 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Louis "Bobo" Till said goodbye to his mother in his hometown of Chicago and headed south for a few weeks to his uncle's cotton farm in Mississippi. Taking a respite from the hard labor, he and his cousins went into town where, the legend goes, the young jokester whistled at a white female store clerk, to the horror of his Southern-born family members. Later, the woman's relatives forcibly abducted him, and his brutalized, badly decomposed body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River three days later. The incident and the acquittal of the accused murderers outraged much of the nation and helped kindle the Civil Rights Movement. But what the legend doesn't tell you is how full of life Emmett Till was. The play, "The Ballad of Emmett Till," while covering the basics, reaches for the glorious, revealing the brightly glowing spark of the young man's life before it was so cruelly snuffed out.

Arnell first fell in love with acting in middle school and appeared in a production of "East of the Sun, West of the Moon." He enrolled in the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, where he first learned of "The Ballad of Emmett Till" when the original production was being mounted in Chicago. "I auditioned, but they said I was too young," he recalls. Years

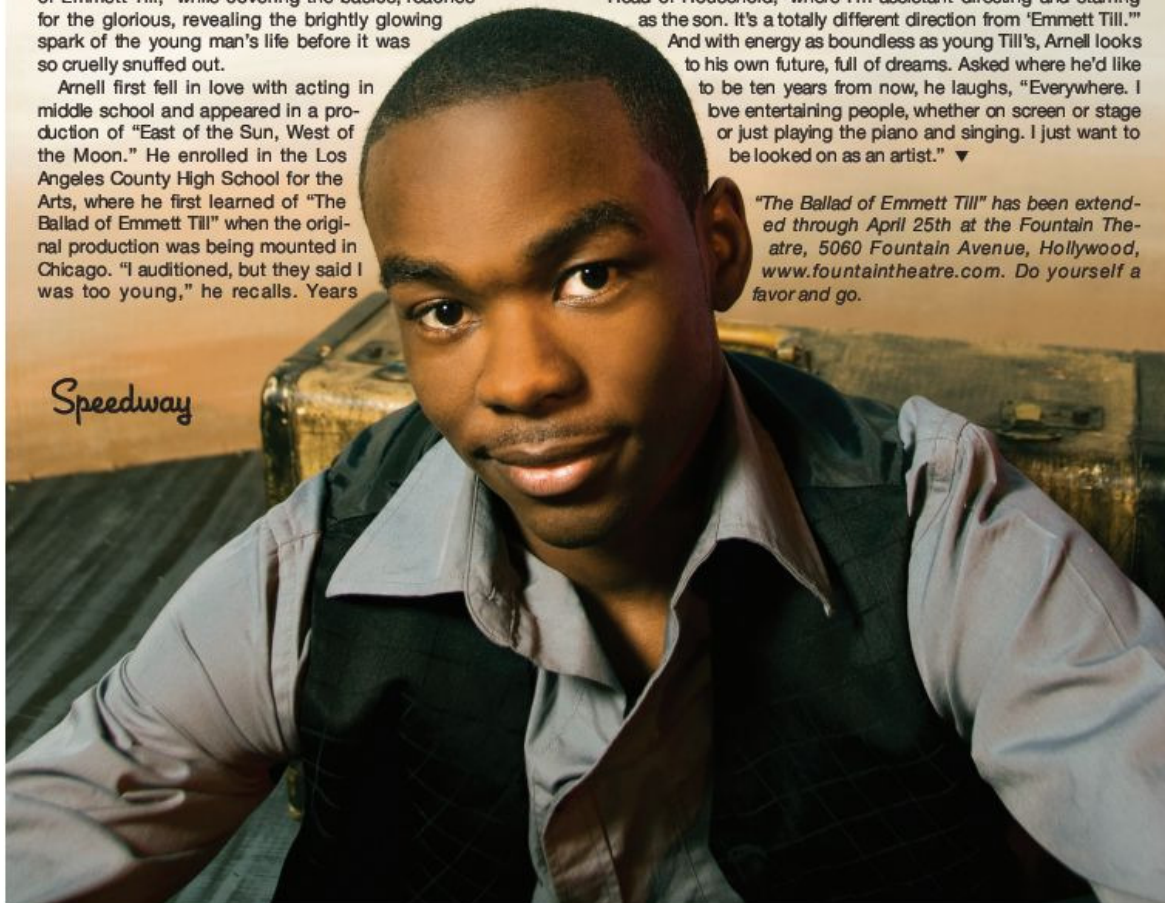
later, a friend told him that Los Angeles theater legend, the late Ben Bradley, was mounting a revised production and he finally won the part, his first in such a large production.

Seeing how well he carries the role, it's hard to believe Arnell hasn't been doing it for years. And given the subject matter, it's equally surprising how light-hearted much of the play is in depicting a young man's summer, where every dream seems attainable. Arnell is able to not only have fun with the role, but infectiously spread that feeling throughout the audience. "I love doing this part. I love that I get to be so full of energy the whole time and make people laugh. But the best part is what happens after the show. People come up to me and tell me that they were there and remember what went on back then and thank me for telling the story of his life." Arnell hopes the show also inspires a new generation unfamiliar with the story to go and do their own research. "I hope they grasp onto not just the fact that he died, but that he lived."

While the show has been extended through April, Arnell isn't resting on his laurels. He's already planning ahead via his own company, Blaqaale Productions. "We're doing a play called 'Head of Household,' where I'm assistant directing and starring as the son. It's a totally different direction from 'Emmett Till.'"

And with energy as boundless as young Till's, Arnell looks to his own future, full of dreams. Asked where he'd like to be ten years from now, he laughs, "Everywhere. I love entertaining people, whether on screen or stage or just playing the piano and singing. I just want to be looked on as an artist." ▼

"The Ballad of Emmett Till" has been extended through April 25th at the Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue, Hollywood, www.fountaintheatre.com. Do yourself a favor and go.



Speedway