

In 'Big River' you'd swear Huck & Jim were there

AUGUSTA — Emotions dramatic and joyful run at a high pitch through song and some wonderful portrayals in the Barn Theatre's production of "Big River."

Director Brendan Ragotzy has managed a good balance between song and story, despite the power of some of the songs.

He also has included straight-away language to capture the full impact of the slavery situation at the time Mark Twain wrote about Huckleberry Finn and his adventures on the Mississippi.

Roger Miller has wrapped some marvelous songs around the tale of Huck's escape from the smothering attention of Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, who have taken him in to try to civilize the unschooled youngster and make a home for him after his

Pappy has disappeared for a year.

Huck took to some of the learning and stuff, but Pap Finn has heard that Huck

and pal Tom Sawyer found a fortune in a cave, and Pap has come back to get some of the money.

Huck is forced to return to Pap's shack and undergo further physical abuse when the man is drunk, so Huck takes off for the river, his natural refuge. There he discovers Jim, Miss Watson's slave who has run away. Glad of a friend, Huck talks his way into joining Jim on his raft by saying he'll make it easier for Jim to get north and freedom by claiming



DAVE NICOLETTE

he's his slave.

Thus the adventure, with a lot of boy nonsense going on between Huck and Tom and their buddies in a wild "The Boys."

John C. Brown gives a very effective performance that puts the character of Tom right up there in the nonsense-making,

THEATER REVIEW

"BIG RIVER," by Roger Miller, presented Tuesday night by the Barn Theatre at Augusta, directed by Brendan Ragotzy; musical director, John Jay Espino; set designer, Tom Burch; lighting designer, Ann Marie Miller; costume designer, Elaine Kauffman; technical director, Fred Gillette. Performances 8:30 p.m. today Thursday, Friday; 6 and 9 p.m. Saturday; 5 p.m. Sunday. Tickets \$22.50 today and Thursday; \$25 Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Box office: (616) 731-4121.

Huckleberry Finn.....	Stephen Lynch
Jim.....	Jeff Coopwood
The King.....	Joe Aiello
The Duke.....	Robin Haynes
Miss Watson.....	Stacey Plaskett
Pap Finn.....	Eric Parker
Judge Thatcher.....	Tom Roland
Tom Sawyer.....	John C. Brown

even though Tom is a supporting character in this story. The most impressive part of the



In the lively vaudeville number "When the Sun Goes Down in the South" are, from left, Robin Haynes, Stephen Lynch, Joe Aiello, Jeff Coopwood.

telling of the tale in this production is the marvelous work by Stephen Lynch as Huck and Jeff Coopwood as Jim.

The two make for wonderful contrast, Lynch a bright-eyed and devil-may-care Huck and Coopwood a somber by easily liked Jim.

The two seem to have a rapport that makes touching the friendship of the white lad, whose upbringing has promoted nothing but race separation, and the slave. In song, their voices blend as naturally as wind and rain, sun and warmth.

Their duets for "Muddy Waters" and "River in the Rain," odes to the river, are beautiful. Their "World's Apart," a declaration of everlasting friendship, despite their extreme differences socially, is a heart-tugger.

The production is loaded with exceptional numbers. "The Crossing," a dirge sung by recaptured slaves, is a song that makes one wonder how such beauty can derive from such misery. Count Laws, R'Dria Pittman and Sophia Perkins do the harmonic trio for that one.

Another trio, this time white

This is the story of Huck Finn's adventures set to music.

females Carey Urban, Lauren Clark and Jennifer Kapitan, are touching in the rendition of "You Oughta Be Here With Me," in which they express grief at the loss of their father.

The production definitely also has light moments, most supplied by Joe Aiello and Robin Haynes as wandering rogues King and Duke. They have one very lively number, "When the Sun Goes Down," that would make them vaudeville headliners were there still vaudeville.

Brown also breaks in with a spirited "Hand for the Hog," a song that does nothing to advance the show except add some fun.

The musical can't quite capture the literary flow of Twain, but the characters do come to lively life. It seems certain that if Twain had a chance to see Lynch and Coopwood, he would have sworn they were Huck and Jim.