

# 'Big River' has perfect leads, great ensemble work

BY JAMES SANFORD  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

AUGUSTA — Trying to set Mark Twain to music as resulted in several mediocre movies and at least a couple of feeble stage shows. But songwriter Roger Miller pulled it off in "Big River," a tuneful extravaganza taken from "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," which won the Tony for Best Musical when it opened on Broadway in 1985, and is currently getting a rousing revival at the Barn Theatre.

"This is an ensemble show, if ever there was one," said Barn Theatre executive producer Jack Ragotzy in his curtain speech prior to "Big River." He wasn't kidding. Many of the numbers in "River" feature dozens of participants, complicated multi-part singing and some fairly intricate choreography. But though torrential rains drenched theatergoers on the way in, the weather did nothing to dampen the spirits of the Barnies. You'd be hard-pressed to find ten one wobbly performance in this cast.

Director Brendan Ragotzy couldn't have hoped to find a better duo to build this sprawling show around than Stephen Lynch's Huck and Jeff Coopwood's Jim. The bright-eyed Lynch has impeccable comic timing and charm to spare, while Coopwood invests Jim with a keen wit and some unexpected

pathos that humanize a character who too often comes off as a symbol in other Twain adaptations.

Not only do both actors have pure, powerful voices, their individual sounds weave together exquisitely in duets such as "Muddy Water," "Worlds Apart" and "River in the Rain." Equally important, they have credible chemistry, playing off each other as if they've been buddies for years.

In fact, Lynch, Coopwood and company turn the first act of "Big River" into a fairly exhilarating piece of theater, from the powerhouse opening number "Do You Want To Go To Heaven?" — in which the entire town of St. Petersburg, Mo., turns out to lecture Huck on morality — to the zippy "When the Sun Goes Down in the South," which introduces the Duke (Robin Haynes) and the King (Joe Aiello), the villains of the piece.

Charlie Misoyve's expert choreography shows to fine advantage in "Heaven" and "The Boys," a rowdy ditty performed by Huck, Tom Sawyer (a jovial, endearing John C. Brown) and their gang. But Ragotzy allows quieter moments such as the slaves' lament "The Crossing" and Huck's solo "Waitin' For the Light To Shine" to stand on their own, too.

If Act II seems to flag a bit, it's because William

Hauptman has strained to be faithful to Twain's text, making the second half of "River" seem slightly plot-heavy. There's also an abrupt tonal shift in the script: Jim's monologue about his treatment of his daughter is so heartbreaking it overwhelms several of the scenes that follow it, and the show doesn't quite regain its stride until a wonderfully funny escape scene involving Jim, Huck and an overambitious Tom.

Along the way, there's some strong singing from Sophia Perkins in the hymn "How Blest We Are," from Perkins, Coopwood, Count Laws and R'Dria Pittman in the gloriously soulful "Free At Last" and from Lynch and the company in a hand-clapping reprise of "Waitin'."

Among the supporting roles, an unrecognizable Eric Parker plays Huck's derelict dad as a scary but ultimately pathetic figure, while Aiello and Haynes wring numerous laughs from their clownish crooks. Carey Urban, Lauren Clark and Jennifer Kapitan contribute heavenly harmonies to "You Oughta Be Here With Me," and Brad Benedict and Brian Joseph Cooper demonstrate delightful versatility in a variety of roles. Tom Burch's set is a Missouri daydream in mellow watercolors and the sound mix by Ann Marie Miller is consistently clear.

## REVIEW

"Big River" is presented by the Augusta Barn Theatre. Music and lyrics by Roger Miller. Book by William Hauptman, adapted from the novel by Mark Twain. Directed by Brendan Ragotzy. Musical director John Jay Espino. Choreographer Charlie Misoyve. Scenic designer Tom Birch. Through Aug. 2. 731-4121.

### Cast:

Huckleberry Finn .....	Stephen Lynch
Jim .....	Jeff Coopwood
Widow Douglas .....	Laura Mann
Miss Watson .....	Stacey Plaskett
Pap Finn .....	Eric Parker
Judge Thatcher .....	Tom Roland
Tom Sawyer .....	John C. Brown
King .....	Joe Aiello
Duke .....	Robin Haynes
Mary Jane Wilkes .....	Carey Urban
Joanna Wilkes .....	Lauren Clark
Susan Wilkes .....	Jennifer Kapitan
Sally Phelps .....	Sara Lynn Krohn
Harvey Wilkes .....	Roy Brown
Dick .....	Brad Benedict
Ben Rogers .....	Brian Joseph Cooper
Joe Harper .....	Jay Belcher
Simon .....	John Del Gaudio
Strange Woman .....	Laura Dysarczyk
Slaves .....	Count Laws, R'Dria Pittman, Sophia Perkins
Overseer .....	Blake Bowen
First Man .....	Cain M. Bilbrey
Second Man .....	Sean Cercone
Posse .....	Ben Alt, Matt Ryan, Brian Joseph Cooper