Big River — BIG SHOW

By Jerl Kohler

Spellbinding is the only way to describe "Big River" now playing at *The Barn Theatre* in Augusta. With end of each scene, I, and everyone around me, took a deep breath and felt "they couldn't top that"... then they did. It just built and built until a jumping up standing ovation met the curtain call and continued with clapping in rhythm to the entire company singing a reprise of music that had been entertaining and exciting them all evening. The music was so moving and so well done it would have been enough even without the superb acting that accompanied it.

Enjoyment begins with a large scroll on stage that can be read while you are being seated, waiting for the lights to dim. It sets the tone and bears the authentic signature of Mark Twain.

Next you are greeted with toe-tapping music of the era that sounded like the entire audience was dancing to the overture tunes, directed by music director John Jay Espino.

Guest star Stephen Lynch turned Huck Finn into a delightful waif in such a way that the audience agonizes with him in the important decisions, right or wrong, he is forced to make throughout the show. Lynch has been at the Barn before and his return is even better.

His runaway slave friend, Jim, portrayed by Jeff Coopwood, took you back the 1840s with a vengeance. Coopwood's credits are long and prestigious, and no wonder. His voice can quaver with emotion, roar with pain or anger, and soothe with love and caring, always carrying the story of the raft escape, capture and freeing of Jim, riding the mighty Mississippi. This was his first appearance in Augusta, but hopefully he will return as well. His rendition of "Free at Last" is a definite highlight.

Perhaps we should explain that the staging of that rafting experience, and other actions along the "Big River", were very realistic and never let you down by interrupting even though there are a total of 18 scenes in the two act musical. We found trying to pick a favorite song impossible. From the goofy "Hand for the Hog" by a delightfully exuberant and imaginative Tom Sawyer, better known as John C. Brown, and prime comedy of "When the Sun Goes Down in the South", and through Huck's poignant rendition "Waitin' for the Light to Shine", you are enchanted. "River in the Rain" and "Muddy Water" along with the river mist that trails the rafters places you right there in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas with them, giving glimpses of life during that time along the river with every turn.

Everyone involved should be proud of the production. Particularly we would note that one "Barnie", Cain M. Bilbrey, who had been playing several small roles in several scenes, had severely injured his leg while dancing. Saturday, director Brendan Ragotzy found himself, with short notice, having to fill the spot. He did so very well, without a book.

Eric Parker, a strikingly handsome "Barnie" regular, took the part of Pap Finn and was virtually unrecognizable. He was dirty, drunk and despicable with a vengeance. His bout of DTs' was incredibly real. Another "Barn" veteran, Tom Roland made the perfect pompous Judge Thatcher.

The comic duo scoundrels played by Joe Aiello and Robin Haynes, working their usual magic off each other with such completely different styles, are totally synchronized for audience pleasure. A look, a slight twitch of body, or even just the facial expression that preceeded their outrageous lines sent the audience into gales of laughter, relieving the tension of the somberness of the story line.

We would be remiss not to mention the importance of scenes with other slaves. The voices of Count Laws, R'Dria Pittman and Sophia Perkins not only set the tone for the slave auction, but sent your heart into your toes as captured slaves "crossing" back over the river, and in their stirring vocal blend with the company of townspeople.

If you love music and/or good acting "Big River" is for you. Call the box office at 616-731-4121 right away between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. for reservations. Reviews have been so good they are fast selling out and it ends August 2. When you call get your reservation in for Tom Wopat starring in "South Pacific" coming up August 4 to 16, or you will miss out. They've already sold out and added two performances so more people will have the opportunity to see and hear this fabulous Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. There is also a bar show after each evening performance.

This is the year of "The Barn Theatre" in Augusta. They seem to have forgotten how not to be perfect.

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