

'Huckleberry Finn' among Barn's best productions

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Big River is big entertainment.

With voices larger than the stage and energy more massive than the mighty Mississippi itself, the Barn Theatre has pulled off a stunning production feat with *Big River*. You'd have to be a bottom feeder to find fault with this show.

The casting clicks. The voices blend and boom. And overall, the chemistry among characters is so rich and natural that this may rank right up there among the theater's all-time triumphs.

The show does more than entertain. It inspires.

When *Big River* opened on Broadway in 1985, it netted seven Tony Awards including best score, best book and best musical. Director Brendan Ragotzy took the material and ran with it. Or, more appropriately, he had the cast run with it, in a staging so energized it's electric.

Big River brings to life the characters of Mark Twain's classic novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It tells the tale of life on the Mississippi River in the 1840s when young Huck

REVIEW

Finn decides to leave civilized life behind and flee on a river raft. His companion is a runaway slave named Jim. On their travels they meet characters who force Huck to confront his own feelings of prejudice, loyalty and the demands of conscience. It is a thoughtful musical, laced as much with meaning as humor.

But *Big River* doesn't lend itself to deep analysis, nor does it take itself too seriously. As a sample of Twain's writing says in the beginning, "Persons trying to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted. Those trying to find a plot will be shot."

Stephen Lynch as Huck and Jeff Coopwood as Jim are so believable, you almost expect water marks on the cuffs of their frayed pants. Lynch takes an exhausting role and infuses it with boyish charm one minute and adult dignity the next. Coopwood is somber and commanding as the troubled slave, but knows how to make the most out of a comic moment, too. What timing!

Put the two of them together (as much of the musical does) and you've got a winning combination - never

more obvious than during the musical selections. Delicate harmony between the pair provide the highlights of the evening, particularly during *River in the Rain*.

Despite the demands of the lead roles, *Big River* draws its strength from a raftload of rich characters. And what characters they are!

Robin Haynes and Joe Aiello play a pair of theatrical con artists with obvious delight, smooth and poised, strutting and sputtering, perfect as Twain's example of civilization gone shoddy. Eric Parker makes one mean "Pap" and John C. Brown's too-brief performance as Tom Sawyer sparkles, as does the singing of Carey Urban and the mournful slaves.

But then nearly everything about this show - actually long with two very full acts - seems too brief. You want the songs to go on a little longer, Huck and Jim to linger on the raft to meet yet another character or two. But no reviewer should say more for fear of being prosecuted. Or shot.

'Big River' continues at the Barn Theatre through Aug. 2.