

Lynch & Co. sail the 'Big River'

By MARCIA FULMER
Entertainment Editor

AUGUSTA, Mich. — In the summer of '86, audiences at The Barn Theatre discovered just how powerful an actor former apprentice Stephen Lynch really is.

In his first year as an Equity company member, the Western Michigan University grad gave a shattering performance as the tormented young man in "Equus."

This summer, after a year of performing his one-man show in New York City, Lynch returns to reinforce that discovery with a show-stopping interpretation of Huck Finn in Roger Miller's Tony Award-winning musical, "Big River," which opened a two-week run Tuesday evening at The Barn.

To say that 75 percent of this "River" flows through the character of Huck is not an exaggeration. Mark Twain's rebellious Missouri boy hits the stage running — literally — and rarely slows to a walk.

During his search for adventures, Huck crosses paths with some amazing characters: his drunken and abusive Pap Finn (Eric Parker); his wildly imaginative friend Tom Sawyer (John C. Brown); his almost first love Mary Jane Wilkes (Carey Urban); two outrageous con men, The Duke (Robin Haynes) and The King (Joe Aiello); and Jim (Jeff Coopwood), a runaway slave who becomes a friend and, finally, has a profound effect on his view of life.

Plus, of course, the various residents (law abiding and otherwise) adjacent to the mighty Mississippi River who people Twain's "The Adventures of



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"Big River": Huck Finn (Stephen Lynch, seated), Widow Douglas (Laura Mann, right), Miss Watson (Stacey Plaskett) and Jim (Jeff Coopwood) in The Barn Theatre production of "Big River."

Huckleberry Finn," the classic book from which William Hauptman's script is taken.

Having seen four productions of "Big River," my once and always conclusion is that it could be about 15-20 minutes shorter . . . or maybe it just seems to go on and on. It's not an easy show to stage, moving quickly among a wide variety of locations. Director Brendan Ragotzy wisely opts for one basic, open set (three large trees on each side with an up-stage platform) and adds set pieces as needed to suggest locales.

Faster pacing of individual scenes would be helpful, as would a word to the sound technician who, for whatever reason, bumped the solos up

several decibels too many throughout the evening.

The chorus, onstage infrequently, is called upon to inhabit a wide selection of characters. Without exception, they do their parts well with special nods to Brad Benedict as a Young Fool ("Arkansas") and Cain M. Bibbey, who goes from snaggle-toothed troublemaker to hard-working farmer with the flip of a diphthong.

Brown is infectious as the too-eager Tom Sawyer, who never does simple when elaborate is there for the planning. He leads his "gang" in the high-spirited "The Boys" and coaxes the audiences into giving an hilarious "Band for the Hog."

Parker, usually cast in a ro-

mantic lead, is deliciously derided as the wild-eyed, slack-jawed Pap, "dad-gumming" the "Gov'ment" and attacking his son in a drunken delusion before coming to a watery end.

Aiello and Haynes are as comfortable as a pair of old boots as the wildly comedic duo who join forces after a jail-break to hustle their own brand of humbug, commandeering Huck, Jim and their raft to abet their schemes.

Aiello does "seedy" to perfection, especially as "The Royal Nonesuch" (although his costume is a disappointment) and as a "British" heir delivering his "brother's" funeral "orgy." Haynes slaughters Shakespeare and film-flams yokels with the aplomb of a Barrymore and his end is deservedly "sticky."

Guest star Coopwood brings authority, believability and a powerful voice to the role of Jim. He successfully illuminates the frustrations and sublimated but ever-present hopes of a human being who determines his value by the price for which he can be sold. His relationship to Huck shifts slowly from low man to equal as their journey continues. Their duets, "Muddy Water," "River in the Rain" and "Worlds Apart" are highlights of the Miller score.

Then there is Lynch. An impish grin lurking on his lips, eyes observing and mind weighing the harsh realities of life and always with a firm grasp of right and wrong, even if he chooses to ignore it, Lynch gets so close to the real Huck that Samuel Clemens would have to look twice.

He can belt an up-tempo tune ("I, Huckleberry, Me") or

Big River

Music and lyrics by Roger Miller

Book by William Hauptman
Based on: "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain

Where: The Barn Theatre, 1536 Highway 48, Augusta, Mich.
When: Through Aug. 2
Performances at 8:30 p.m.

Tuesday through Friday, 6 and 7 p.m., Saturday and 5 p.m.; Sunday (Michigan Times)

Tickets: \$20 Tuesday through Thursday, \$25 Friday through Sunday

Call: (616) 784-4121 between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. daily (Michigan Times)

whisper a plantsair ("Leavin' Me the Only Way Go") with equal ease. He also serves as narrator of the 2 1/2 hour tale, busy off stage 1 more than a few minutes at time. In addition to his scene he frequently steps out (character) to enlighten the audience as to his own feelings and/or fill in the gaps. In other words, he hardly ever stops talking. And he's never bored and always articulate.

He also, and perhaps more difficult of all, makes his perception of Jim as a piece of property understandable, giving the time and setting. His gradual realization that this man thinks, feels and deserves respect is beautifully accomplished.

His performance deserves the ovation with which it was recognized by the open night's capacity audience.