

BIG RIVER



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Press Packet

May 27 – June 28, 2010

STAGES
ST. LOUIS

Big River' makes a big splash at Stages

By: Judith Newmark

June 4, 2010

Three scenes in "Big River," the show that opens the 2010 season at Stages St. Louis, take your breath away.

In the first, Huck (Adam Shonkwiler) and his friend Jim (Ken Robinson), a runaway slave, head down the Mississippi, aiming for Cairo, Ill., and a route north to the free states. As they sing "Muddy Water" — one of the wonderfully apt songs that country star Roger Miller wrote for this stage adaptation of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" — their raft really seems to move along the water, rippling beneath and behind them.

In the second, our travelers are touched and frightened when they hear a group of runaway slaves who have been captured and are being marched back (the fate that Jim risks). As Jim and the prisoners sing "Crossin' Over," a song that promises freedom in Heaven if not on Earth, the row of shadowed figures in chains moves slowly across the "hills" at the back of the stage while Jim, on the raft, expresses his solidarity with them in song.

In the third scene, Huck, Jim and lovely Mary Jane Wilkes (Leah Berry), a well-bred girl they've encountered on their travels, find solitary spots on the wooden set, now shot through with shafts of clear light. "Leaving's Not the Only Way To Go," they sing, a message that obviously has a different meaning for each of them. It's followed by a reprise of Huck's signature hymn, "Waiting for the Light To Shine."

Theater relies on collaboration, everybody knows. But rarely do we see that so clearly as we do in these three beautiful moments, moments that draw on stagecraft as much as performance.

Of course the scenes rely on the considerable talents of Shonkwiler, Robinson and Berry, as well as director Michael Hamilton. (The production also features nice work from Darrel Blackburn and David Schmittou as a pair of crooks, Zoe Vonder Haar as Aunt Sally Phelps, Justin Bowen as Tom Sawyer and Lisa M. Ramey as Alice, a slave.) But the big scenes' impact stems just as much from the exquisite work of lighting designer Matthew McCarthy and set designer James Wolk.

Through their combined efforts, McCarthy and Wolk provide a texture and tenderness that evokes the Mark Twain novel that inspired the show. "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is a masterpiece, a regular contender for Great American Novel status along with "The Scarlet Letter," "Moby Dick," "The Great Gatsby," "The Grapes of Wrath" and "As I Lay Dying." Notice that the others haven't been turned into well-known musicals (though there have been operas).

But "Big River" works, partly because its story is sunnier and, in this production, partly because

stage artists conspire to use their talents to create transcendent moments. It's not the same thing as great literature. But it's not entirely different, either.

KFUO-FM

By: Steve Allen

Once again, strong casting and excellent design elements and direction take over as Stages opens their 2010 season. The only problem is, despite winning several Tony Awards including Best Musical, Big River is not a powerful show.

Roger Miller was known for his novelty songs with a country twang like "King of the Road," but only a few songs from Big River are truly worthy of a Broadway show. And as undeniably a great book as Huckleberry Finn is, it doesn't translate well to the stage- the story is too vast.

But once again, Stages takes a less than great musical and elevates it with strong voices and their special brand of turning the small Kirkwood stage into a broad canvas worthy of the Mark Twain classic.

Adam Shonkwiler is a perfect Huckleberry Finn. He has the down home charm and the perfect voice for the role. He creates the perfect character. As his raft companion- the slave Jim-Ken Robinson makes a worthy companion as they blend both musically and as a pair that truly go together. You believe in their freindship.

David Schmittou and Darrel Blackburn make a delightful pair as a couple of con men who hook up with Huck and Jim while Leah Berry is terrific as the woman who captures Huck's heart. Ben Nordstrom is his usual steady self as several characters including the Young Fool who sets the stage for their misguided trip to Arkansas.

Justin Bowen is strong as Tom Sawyer and Lisa M. Ramey shines as a slave that, like Jim, knows they deserve more than the lot fate has cast them. A large supporting cast that is professional through and through is another hallmark of a Stages show and this one excels.

Michael Hamilton has outdone himself with strong direction and has surrounded himself with a beautiful set designed by James Wolk and an equally powerful lighting design by Matthew McCarthy. It provides a gorgeous stage picture that is visually stunning.

Although Big River is not my cup of tea, it's a production that offers outstanding work from top to bottom. You can't go wrong with visiting the Mark Twain classic as it runs at Stages through June 27th. This is Steve Allen with a look at theatre in St. Louis for Classic 99.



KMOX

By: Harry Hamm

An expansive, beautiful set maximizes the stage and pleases the eye when you walk into the Robert Reim Theater to see BIG RIVER. In fact, Stages's set design is one of the major successes of their current production. And some of the smaller roles or performers playing multiple parts is also a meaningful achievement: Ben Nordstrom as the Young Fool singing "Arkansas;" Lynn Humphrey as the Widow (or is it "Widder") Douglas; Zoe Vonder Haar as the prissy Miss Watson

and Lisa Ramey singing a moving rendition of "How Blest We Are." Adam Shonwalker as Huck Finn uses a voice that is annoying at first, and somewhat non-Missourian, but you'll get used to it. And he seemed to warm to the role more in Act II. Richard Pruitt was nearly bereft of laughs on opening night as the mean-spirited Pap Finn. James Robinson as Jim was good, but his voice didn't seem to convey the real power of the man's anguish, ambition and struggles. Stages BIG RIVER is an uneven production, always charming but not always consistent in its energy, chemistry and need for free spirit. There are times when it's sluggish, and other moments when it's a hoot. Stages is the perfect place to mount this well-known midwestern musical. Stages keeps the audience close. And that's always a good thing, especially with BIG RIVER.



KDHX

Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

By: Sheila R. Schultz

"At least I ain't lived no humdrum life." That claim belongs to Forrest Gump, but Huckleberry Finn could easily have uttered that sentiment without stretching the truth—for once. Adapted from Mark Twain's classic tale, Big River follows Huckleberry's journey down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave named Jim (Ken Robinson). William Hauptman's book draws heavily from the source material. The score by songwriter Roger Miller includes gospel, blue grass, and Country with lyrics and music that sashay gracefully into the dialogue. Miller's previous single hits include "Dang Me" and "[Do-Wacka-Do](#)," but if you are not a fan of this (hard to classify) genre, don't let that deter you.

Here's the back story of Big River : abandoned by his drunken father, Huck (Adam Shonkwiler) becomes the ward of two elderly sisters in St. Petersburg, Missouri: the widow Douglas, who tries to civilize him, and her spinster sister, Miss Watson, who wants to "lock him in the closet and pray for his soul". That combination is as welcome as a dose of castor oil to Huck, who yearns to spread his wings and shake off the trappings of respectability. Moreover, he's itching to travel "far beyond horizons [he has] seen". His options seem limited, but Huck is a resourceful lad, known to prevaricate and hoodwink in the service of a pressing cause.

After faking his death, he flees to nearby Jackson's Island, where he discovers Jim preparing to escape. They arrange to float a raft down the Mississippi River together, then head for one of the free states where Jim intends to earn enough money to buy his wife and two children out of slavery. For Huck, it seems a boyish escapade. For Jim, it's serious business involving perilous risk.

During the course of their journey, the two unlikely companions share their deepest thoughts and feelings. This leads to a close personal relationship, reflected harmonically in their duets, like "Worlds Apart". The harmony is a contrast to Huck's contrapuntal singing with the St. Petersburg town folk, who are antagonistic toward the boy.

Shonkwiler captures Huck's boyish charm, but his talent is eclipsed by Justin Bowen, who portrays the colorful Tom Sawyer. Tom's novelty solo, "Hand for the Hog" is a comic gem and Tom's Gang song, "The Boys" is a masterpiece of singing, acting and dancing on the part of all participants. The

staging and naturalistic choreography reveal the talents of director Michael Hamilton and choreographer Dana Lewis.

The morality of slavery permeates the story. (Remember that the story begins in Missouri.) As the companion of a runaway slave, Huck is confronted with a series of moral dilemmas. He has promised to help Jim escape and a promise is a promise, yet Huck knows that abetting a runaway slave is considered a sin as well as a crime. At the start of the journey, Huck exclaims, "People can call me a dirty abolitionist and despise me for it – that don't make no difference." At this point, despite his heartfelt sentiments, Huck does not fully appreciate the ramifications of his decision.

Later, when he is put to the test, he weighs both sides of each dilemma, expressing to the audience a mixture of uncertainty and confusion before surrendering, sometimes ambivalently, to his conscience. Finally, in one decisive moment he declares, "All right then, I'll go to Hell. I'll take up wickedness again...And for a starter, I'll steal Jim out of slavery again." What brilliant irony! This is a climactic turning point in Huck's moral development. It is curious that Shonkwiler chooses to underplay it.

Robinson creates a likable character in Jim, one with a sense of honor and dignity, but the actor's performance lacks the muscle necessary to reinforce the irony of a full-grown male at the mercy of a puny kid in an era of slavery.

The rustic two-level set appears to be the pine-boarded interior of a cabin (scenic design by James Wolk). With clever lighting (Matthew McCarthy), it becomes the backdrop to a variety of scenes. A scrim is used judiciously for momentary effects that linger in the mind.

Big River is entertaining, but lengthy at 3 hours, including intermission and preliminary remarks. Having viewed other productions of Big River, I'm not sure why this one is more drawn out, especially considering its cuts to both script and score. Sluggish pacing? Prolonged schmoozing with the audience prior to the show?

Thankfully, this production is faithful to the libretto and to Twain's vision. It has not been bowdlerized for political correctness. Its depiction of slavery and other unsavory practices of the time is not sanitized. The show is not recommended for young children. The subject matter of the show will surely spark lively discussion.

Big River runs through runs through June 27, 2010 at STAGES, located at 111 S. Geyer Road in Kirkwood. For information, 314-821-2407 or visit www.stagesstlouis.org.



Broadway World.com

Stages St.Louis Does Terrific Work with Their Production of BIG RIVER

By: Chris Gibson
June 6, 2010

This was my first time seeing *Big River*, and I must confess to some misgivings I harbored concerning [William Hauptman](#)'s adaptation of [Mark Twain](#)'s classic tale, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The original is a work of great American literature, filled with dialogue that's now considered controversial, but which was pitch perfect and true to its characters and its time. Happily, Hauptman and composer/lyricist [Roger Miller](#) have crafted a wonderful version that manages to capture the flavor and feel of the times, while remaining fairly faithful to its source material. Stage St. Louis has put together a production that's a feast for the eyes and ears, conjuring up the muddy Mississippi on stage with considerable technical wizardry, while a talented cast works its own magic under Michael Hamilton's expert direction.

The story takes place after the events that occurred in *The Adventures of [Tom Sawyer](#)*, but unlike his buddy Tom, Huck hasn't adjusted to the normal routines of life, including attending school on a regular basis. He's a restless spirit, and when his drunken pappy comes back to claim him, and the money he and Tom discovered, he decides to hit the road, or in this case, the water. After staging his own demise, he runs into Jim, a runaway slave who worked for the ladies who took Huck into their home. Huck decides to aid Jim in his attempt to reunite his family, all of whom have been sold into slavery. They meet up with a couple of charlatans in the person of the King and the Duke, and the foursome head down the Mississippi. Along the way, Huck learns the true meaning and value of friendship, although he continues to resist any attempts to civilize him.

[Adam Shonkwiler](#) does strong work as Huck, bringing a nice sense of depth to his characterization. He's well matched with [Ken Robinson](#), who brings a quiet power and dignity to his role as Jim. They're especially good on the transcendent number "River in the Rain", as well as "Worlds Apart", which finds Huck apologizing for some insensitive behavior towards Jim. Their stories are at the core of this tale, and both make you care about their fates.

Standouts among a large and talented supporting cast include: [Darrel Blackburn](#) and [David Schmitt](#) as the King and the Duke, respectively; [Richard Pruitt](#) as Huck's dangerously inebriated father; Justin Bowen as [Tom Sawyer](#); Zoe Vonder Haar as [Miss Watson](#); and Leah Berry as [Mary Jane](#) Wilkes.

Director Michael Hamilton does an excellent job staging this show. The pace is brisk, and the action and the actors are clear and focused throughout. He's greatly aided by the splendidly rustic scenic design of [James Wolk](#), [Lisa Campbell](#) Albert's music direction, and Matthew McCarthy's expert lighting. The lively choreography by Dana Lewis also adds a bit of sparkle, and neatly fills the space with movement. Lou Bird's costumes help to create the right atmosphere and feel, and Stuart Elmore's orchestral design nicely recreates all the acoustic instruments that populate the score.

Stages St. Louis' terrific production of *Big River* continues through June 27, 2010 at the [Robert Reim](#) Theatre in Kirkwood, MO.

TodaySeniorsNetwork.com

'Big River' success thanks to chemistry of 'Huck' and 'Jim', outstanding stage design and lighting
By Daniel Hines

Stages St. Louis has become one of the top regional theaters in the U.S. because it has assembled a unique resource of outstanding performers who seem to become real, identifiable characters irrespective of the roles they are performing. The most recent example is provided by the current production of 'Big River', a musical adaptation of 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'.

'Big River' is a success because of a rare chemistry between Huck, played with just the right amount of bravado and raw common sense, by Adam Shonkwiler and Jim, the runaway slave, performed to perfection by Ken Robinson, as they both seek freedom from the conditions that have bound them, for Huck a caring but judgmental community and a drunken, abusive father, and for Jim, the inhumanity of a human being treated as a commodity to be sold and bought.

Written by the late Roger Miller, country music star and surprisingly to many a superb lyricist, 'Big River' is at its best when Shonkwiler and Robinson finally emerge as the central characters.

I was especially impressed by the quality of the bonding and the sensitivity that came to life as they prepared for their star-crossed journey, originally to a 'free state', but because of a fog that came at the start of their journey, a travel that instead took them into the heart of the slave states.

The mood is established, almost disturbingly, at the start of the relationship as Huck and Jim sing 'Muddy Water,' in what is really a tribute to the mystery and dignity of the Mighty Mississippi, a tribute soon to be followed by a moving reminder of just what slavery really was as three 'runaways' appear in the background, moving almost like and sounding almost like ghosts, as they sing 'Crossin' Over'. It illustrates how slaves used spirituals to provide the hope of eventual freedom, hopefully in their lifetime, if not, then in eternity.

The 'considerable troubles' that Jim read in the palm of Huck's hands were more than amply demonstrated in what would be considered a rare piece of political courage today by Stages St. Louis. While it did not use the 'N' word as a part of Jim's name which might have made it seem to be a term of endearment, it did provide an insight into the ugliness of the term when slave hunters prepare to board Huck and Jim's raft to make sure there are no 'n-----s' on board. By using the term in such a fashion, we are reminded that it was indeed used to relegate an entire race of people to a status that was less than human.

Had that been the theme of the show, it would have indeed been a 'heavy' production. But, Huck, using his quick mind, not only scares them off by saying that the covered figure of Jim is his smallpox-stricken father, he induces the slave hunters to actually leave him with two \$20 gold pieces because he (Huck) is such a loving child caring for his 'father' all alone. It is a wonderful insight into the mind of Mark Twain.

There are others who especially shine during the show. Justin Bowen is exceptional as Tom Sawyer and his 'A Hand for the Hog' is hilarious, reflecting Miller's style.

And, what can we say about David Schmittou, who wowed everyone in 'The Drowsy Chaperone' last season. As 'the Duke,' really a down-and-out actor, he provides a comic relief to the evening, and he and his counterpart 'the King' (proof that the first liar doesn't have a chance) played by Darrel Blackburn establish a con scheme that takes Huck in entirely. Jim, however, almost from the start has a sense of uneasiness.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the outstanding set production. I have always believed that Stages St. Louis does an unequalled job of designing its stage sets, and that such excellence is a prime reason that the company establishes such an intimacy with its audiences. 'Big River' is likely the best example I have seen of this. Set designer James Wolk and lighting designer Matthew McCarthy have developed a work of art that is exquisite. It transports us into the era, and its highly creative use of backdrops and the occasional oversight of Mark Twain is highly poignant, reaffirming the totality of the artistic quality of productions from Stages St. Louis.



Ladue News

Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

By: Mark Bretz

June 7, 2010

Play: "Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"
Group: Stages St. Louis
Venue: Robert Reim Theatre, Kirkwood Civic Center, 111 South Geyer Road
Dates: Through June 27
Tickets: \$49; contact 314-821-2407 or www.stagesstlouis.org

Story: Mark Twain's classic American novel traces the journey of young Huckleberry Finn from St. Petersburg, Missouri down the Mississippi River as he attempts to help his friend, the runaway slave Jim, to freedom in the northern state of Ohio. Missing the point in Cairo, Illinois where the Mississippi meets the Ohio River, Huck and Jim sail down the Mississippi into Arkansas, encountering townsfolk and scoundrels alike on their journey to freedom.

Highlights: Stages St. Louis opens its 2010 season with Roger Miller's paean to Twain's perennially popular Great American Novel in this year that marks the centennial of Twain's death, the 175th anniversary of his birth and the sesquicentennial of the publication of "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." First produced on Broadway in 1985, "Big River" features music and lyrics by the late pop recording star Miller as well as a book by William Hauptman adapted from the novel by Missouri's favorite literary son.

Other Info: Stages' adaptation of the multiple-Tony Award winning musical actually succeeds more as a history lesson than a show. To his credit, director Michael Hamilton doesn't shy away from the stark language of the times, particularly the 'n' word used both maliciously and matter-of-factly in describing slaves in the Old South. Indeed, Hauptman's adaptation retains a colorful and often nasty brigade of rogues, roustabouts and con artists, from Huck's wastrel father to Tom Sawyer's loutish uncle to a nefarious pair of brigands, the King and the Duke, who commandeer Huck and Jim's raft and threaten to sell Jim into slavery while simultaneously bilking an Arkansas family out of its inheritance.

Hamilton keeps the show moving along for the most part, and benefits from strong performances by the two leads. Adam Shonkwiler is highly believable as the fiercely independent Huck, capably discoursing Huck's homespun philosophy and ruminations upon human nature with a deft and convincing manner. As Jim, Ken Robinson displays a wonderfully human touch, showing the runaway slave's determination to win freedom not only for himself but also for his wife and children. Musically, Robinson and Shonkwiler blend nicely on the show's best ballad, "Worlds Apart," as well as another appealing number, "River in the Rain."

There's solid supporting work by David Schmittou and Darrel Blackburn as the scheming con man, the Duke, and his insidious partner, the King, respectively. Zoe Vonder Haar and Lynn Humphrey play the genial Miss Watson and Widow Douglas, respectively, while Richard Pruitt is excellent as Huck's alcoholic, menacing father. Ben Nordstrom has fun as a "Young Fool" who belts out the silly tune, "Arkansas," while Larry Mabrey oversees the goings-on in his white suit and mane of wild white hair as Twain himself.

Justin Bowen is an oddly goofy Tom Sawyer, Alexis Kinney is Becky Thatcher and John Flack is the kindly Judge Thatcher as well as Tom's Uncle Silas Phelps, with Vonder Haar as Silas' wife Sally. Shaun Sheley, Darin Wood and Lisa M. Ramey effectively play a number of smaller roles.

James Wolk's rustic, two-tiered set evokes the period, accentuated by a handsome raft that glides along on wheels to give the effect of moving down the river, allowing multiple scene changes from river to land in smooth fashion. Dana Lewis provides some pleasing choreography on a number of the show's tunes, and Lou Brid's costumes satisfactorily represent the era. Matthew McCarthy's lighting is most effective on the nocturnal river scenes with Huck and Jim gazing into the starry sky. Lisa Campbell Albert provides the smooth musical direction with an orchestral design by Stuart Elmore that plays up the score's bluegrass and country influences.

"Big River" lacks the usual flair of a Stages production, but offers an appealing study of 19th century American history in its presentation.

Rating: A 3.5 on a scale of 1-to-5.

Adam Shonkwiler, Ken Robinson to Star in Stages St. Louis' *Big River*
By: Dan Bacalzo
May 20, 2010

Adam Shonkwiler and Ken Robinson will star as Huck Finn and Jim, respectively, in Stages St. Louis' production of [*Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*](#), to be presented in The Robert G. Reim Theatre in Kirkwood, May 28 - June 27. Direction and musical staging are by Michael Hamilton, with choreography by Dana Lewis and musical direction by Lisa Campbell-Albert.

This Tony Award-winning musical is filled with humanity, wisdom and a homespun humor all its own. Music and lyrics are by Roger Miller; the book by William Hauptman was adapted from the novel by Mark Twain.

The cast will also feature Richard Pruitt as Pap Finn, David Schmittou, Ben Nordstrom, and Zoe Vonder Haar.

The creative team will include scenic designer James Wolk, costume designer Lou Bird, lighting designer Matthew McCarthy, and orchestral designer Stuart M. Elmore.

For more information, visit www.stagesstlouis.org.

www.stlouiseats.typepad.com

Big River
By: Joe Pollack
June 3, 2010

Adam Shonkwiler lists five dialects among his skills on his Internet resume. None of them came close to the one he used last night as Huckleberry Finn in "Big River," the Roger Miller musical that opened the 2010 season for Stages St. Louis at the Robert Reim Theatre in the Kirkwood Civic Center.

What did he use? Don't rightly know, but it didn't sound like anyone I've ever heard in Hannibal (Mark Twain called it St. Petersburg), St. Louis or Bricktown, Ark.

In any event, Shonkwiler created a mostly believable river rat, and Miller's blue-grassy, country, rootsy score was enjoyable to hear after many years. Miller had a blockbuster hit in "King of the Road," but his work on "Big River," earned him a Tony, the only one yet for a composer with a country twang to his music. The Broadway production ran for more than 1000 performances, earned seven Tonys and was the first Broadway hit for two St. Louisans, producer Rocco Landesman, the current chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and actor John Goodman, who originated the role of Pap. Landesman, a long-time Miller fan, persuaded the

composer to get involved, and also convinced William Hauptman to work on the Mark Twain classic for the book.

The local production also earns high marks for director Michael Hamilton, scenic designer James Wolk and lighting designer Matthew McCarthy. Using an upper level against a backstage wall, some scrims and imaginative lighting brought Twain (Larry Mabry) into the action, stepping out of a picture frame and into the magic world. The passage also became a place for other action and singing to take place.

Among the cast, James Robinson stood out as Jim, the dignified, powerful fugitive slave whose relationship with Huck provides the core of the story. They did extremely well in "River in the Rain," "Worlds Apart" and "Muddy Water," and Robinson, later joined by the company, was special in "Free at Last." Lisa M. Ramey brought great feeling to "How Blest We Are," and she added great tone and depth to her work as a backup singer.

David Schmittou, a Stages regular the last few years, and newcomer Darrel Blackburn teamed in wonderfully as the Duke and the King, respectively, providing villainy as broad as the river itself and bringing laughs in between the expected hisses; they closed the first act stylishly in "When the Sun Goes Down in the South," with Shonkwiler joining in. Schmittou opened the second act brilliantly with "The Royal Nonesuch." Shonkwiler also delivered nicely in "I, Huckleberry, Me."

Richard Pruitt, in another Stages debut, was an effective Pap and delivered handsomely in "Gov'ment," a 1985 demand that the "dad-gum gummint" keep its dad-gum hands out of his pockets, though it was difficult to see what his sources of income might be.

Jim Bowen was charming as Tom Sawyer, delivering marvelously complex and involved solutions to any and all problems. He could figure out a way to use an entire Army battalion to mail a letter, each soldier having a different, convoluted task along the way. His song, "Hand for the Hog," was another winner.

St. Louis-based actors and Stages regulars like John Flack, Zoe Vonder Haar, Alexis L. Kinney and Ben Nordstrom were fine, with Nordstrom a bright moment in "Arkansas," that's the song and not the state.

 **St. Louis Jewish Light**

SLSO Party of Note; Circus Flora; Stages offers 'Big River'

By: Lois Caplan

June 3, 2010

"BIG RIVER: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," STAGES' opening show of the season, was St. Louis native Rocco Landesman's first big hit. Landesman is now the head of the National Endowment for the Arts. I remember when he was looking for financial help to get the show on the road and a lot of his friends kicked in some considerable bucks. It opened on Broadway 25

years ago and ran for over 1,000 performances. "Big River" won a bunch of Tony Awards including the Tony for Best Musical, best Original Score, best Book of a Musical as well as several Drama Desk Awards. In 1985 it was the hottest ticket in the Big Apple and Landesman's St. Louis friends were busting their buttons. Don't miss it at Stages in the Robert G. Reim Theatre, Kirkwood Civic Center, 111 S. Geyer Road. For tickets call the box office at 314-821-2407 or visit www.stagesstlouis.org.



By Ron Gibbs, Stages managing director
Posted 11:21 am Fri., 05.21.10

Based on Mark Twain's classic novel, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," the stage production of "Big River" brought a treasured story to life and offered a truly American voice in an emerging chorus of British musicals being produced during the mid-1980s.

Hailed as "the best musical of the season" by New York theater critics, "Big River" was the big winner at the 1985 Tony Awards, bringing home seven awards including best musical, outstanding original score and outstanding book of a musical.

"The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," more than any other American novel of its day, tells the story of our country - a country as wild and varied as the people who inhabit it. Our history, in its very broadest outline, chronicles two prominent themes - themes that permeate much of Mark Twain's writing - racial conflict and the human quest for freedom.

Thankfully in the conflict that arises from the abolitionist actions of our hero, Huck, and the slave, Jim, the coming together of two different races has a most happy reconciliation. And certainly both Jim's and Huck's quests for freedom are equally influenced by the seduction of the frontier; a seduction that urges the civilized (or too civilized) individual to trade his rule-bound existence for one of a more adventurous and ideal state.

Just as our country yearned for independence and freedom only a hundred years before Twain created Huck and Jim, they too are yearning for freedom - from tyranny and oppression.

It was these very themes that first drew Stages St. Louis to "Big River" and that convinced us this is an important story to tell. Add in the very real sense of pride all Missourians have in Mark Twain, their favorite son, and "Big River" seemed like a natural for St. Louis audiences.

Twain fans certainly have much to celebrate in 2010. Not only does this year mark the 100th anniversary of his death, but the 175th anniversary of his birth, and the 125th anniversary of the publication of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

Ernest Hemingway was quoted as saying that "all American literature comes from one book and that book was written by Mark Twain." He is referring to "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Stages is proud and excited to introduce a whole new generation of theater-goers to this great American classic. Not only is the story populated by so many unusual and fascinating characters, but at its core is a serious and very pertinent message. Created as he was from the pen of one of our great American humorists, Huckleberry Finn speaks to all young people today, much as he did then, and his message of tolerance and friendship without regard to racial difference is one for the ages.

Most fascinating to me about the message of this piece is that we learn this lesson of tolerance from the youngest member of the cast, Huck Finn.

He is in a moral conflict with the perceived values of the society in which he lives, and while he is unable to consciously refute those values, he makes a moral choice based on his own valuation of Jim's friendship and human worth, even though his decision is in direct opposition to what he has been taught. His internal struggle is between what he is told is "proper," "legal" and "ethical," and what he believes is right.

Or as Twain himself proposed in his lecture notes, "a sound heart is a surer guide than an ill-trained conscience."

It is interesting that in another musical, "Show Boat," we learn this same lesson, and also from the youngest character in the story, Magnolia. In "South Pacific," it is from the young lieutenant who sings, "You've Got to be Carefully Taught." But those pieces were written in the 20th century. Twain gave us this lesson in 1880; a lesson we are still learning today.



St. Louis Globe Democrat

'Big River' offers big learning opportunity, So did panel discussion last week

By Alvin Reid

Wednesday, June 16, 2010

Long before it became a Karaoke favorite, I knew every word to Roger Miller's "King of the Road."

One of the first albums I ever requested that my parents buy for me was "Roger Miller's Greatest Hits." I think I was eight years old. As a result, I can also sing many Miller tunes including "Kansas City Star," "Dang Me," and "Do Wacka doo." Years later, I also learned another Miller song from the musical "Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

Miller wrote all the music and lyrics for the Tony Award winning musical that made its debut in Cambridge, Mass., in February 1984. It made its Broadway debut in April 25, 1985.

The musical is currently being performed by Stages at the Reim Theater in the Kirkwood Community Center.

Last Saturday, I moderated a panel entitled *Morality and Mark Twain 2010: How Far Have We Come?* Sponsored by Stages and the Diversity Awareness Project, the discussion, which included questions from the audience, created an opportunity to discuss pertinent current topics through the lens of the musical *Big River*.

Dr. Robert Archibald, president of the Missouri History Museum; Rudy Nickens, Missouri Department of Transportation director of EEO and diversity; and Dr. Cindy Lovell, director of the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum in Hannibal comprised the panel.

Big River is a poignant, yet fun musical that deals with the moral dichotomy many Americans felt during the years of slavery. Huck Finn personally must confront his own feelings on the subject and he makes the “immoral” choice of helping Jim escape slavery and travel back up the Mississippi River.

Archibald and Nickens are well known in the region for their work through St. Louis 2004 and other civic endeavors. This was certainly not the first time they had been asked to share their views on race in this region.

In fact, the Missouri History Museum recently concluded a well-attended exhibit entitled RACE. It caught many people off guard because it did not discuss “racism,” just race – particularly the many things that all races of people share including getting their respective start on the continent of Africa.

We discussed why race relations is critical to this region, how the demographics of the area now include many other minority populations and what each individual in attendance could do to advance the conversation.

No offense to Archibald or Nickens, but Lovell was the star of the day. Her gifts as a historian, teacher and museum director all flowed through her answers, especially those when she described the American way of life when Mark Twain was penning the exploits of his boy hero Huckleberry Finn.

That dreaded “N-Word” is used more than 200 times in the book, and it is an integral part of *Big River*, as well. “I think Mark Twain purposely did that,” she said. “He was showing what life was really like in those times.”

She also reminded the audience – and me – that the book was written in the times of the failed era of Reconstruction, a world where Twain saw Jim Crow laws keeping black people from reaching their full potential as Americans.

She said her museum and other sites in Hannibal had plenty of straw hats and corn cob pipes for sale for tourists, but there was not much historical reference to slavery. That is changing. How slaves were treated in Hannibal, where they slept and what their family lives were like are now part of the dynamic of a tour of this famous Missouri city.

Lovell also shared a story from her past to describe how racism begins with the family you grow up with.

As Archibald said, “no child is born racist.”

Lovell said she was raised in Pennsylvania and honestly admitted her parents had some racist views. In fact, on an April afternoon in 1968 she had been out hunting with her father and when they returned home, her mother greeted them with the news that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated in Memphis.

“The first word out of my mouth was ‘good.’ ”

I could hear a few people in the audience gasp.

Lovell said throughout her young life all she had heard was what a troublemaker King was. Thus, when he died, that was her natural reaction. She said she shares that story with her classes and many other people to demonstrate the impact that family has on your beliefs about other people.

I’ve never been to Hannibal. I really have no explanation as to why. I love American history, Hannibal is not that far away and our family is always looking for fun things to do together. I promised Lovell we are coming to visit her. Not just because of the panel discussion, but because I want my girls to hear her speak of Twain, Hannibal, racism and slavery.

She does this as well as any college professor I’ve heard speak on the subject. That’s because it is not only coming from a book; it’s coming from her heart.

The Riverfront Times

River Wild

By Alison Sieloff

When kids learn about our world at school, they retain that classroom-gained information so much more readily when it is reinforced by real-life experience. Just as a trip to Washington D.C. bolsters social-studies and political-science coursework, on a simpler, more attainable level, a theater experience can emphasize key points in a literary work by making them come alive onstage. With Stages St. Louis' season-opening production of ***Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***, students and adults



alike will be reminded of Jim's all-too-important pursuit of freedom, Huck's growing up despite his best efforts to avoid being civilized, and Tom Sawyer's sense of adventure through songs written by Roger "King of the Road" Miller. This musical, adapted from Mark Twain's work, may not be suitable for children younger than ten years old due to racially sensitive content. *Big River*,

performed in the Robert G. Reim Theatre at the Kirkwood Community Center (111 South Geyer Road), runs from Friday, May 28, through Sunday, June 27, with performances scheduled every day except Monday. Tickets cost \$28 to \$49; call 314-821-2407 or visit www.stagesstlouis.com to make a purchase.

Webster Kirkwood Times

Stages 2010

From Hannibal To New York, Then On To A State Fair

June 11, 2010

Stages St. Louis opened its 24th season with the Tony Award-winning musical "Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," on stage now through June 27. The journey from Hannibal continues as Stages travels to New York's Madison Avenue in the 1960s with Neil Simon's "Promises, Promises," then on to true romance on the midway in 1940s Iowa in "State Fair." In addition, the Theatre for Young Audiences presents Disney's "The Aristocats," beginning Aug. 4.



Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

May 28 - June 27

Celebrate the 175th anniversary of the birth of Missouri's favorite son, Mark Twain! Bursting from the pages of Mark Twain's classic novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," this Tony Award-winning musical features bluegrass and country music in the style of the famous novel.

The 2010 season opener features the most sophisticated stage design Stages has ever attempted, a \$70,000 investment, with full-stage decking and a multi-tiered set that allows scenes in multiple locations to bring the epic adventures of Huck and Jim to life.

Join Huck, Tom Sawyer, and Jim as they take audiences on a thrilling journey down the mighty Mississippi. "Big River" features a score by Roger ("King of the Road") Miller, based on a book by William Hauptman, and adapted from the novel by Mark Twain.

Promises, Promises

July 16 - Aug. 15

So nice, they named it twice! It's Manhattan in the 1960s and Stages will have audience members tapping their toes to the Burt Bacharach beat with Neil Simon's "Promises, Promises."

This smart and sexy musical adapted from Billy Wilder's 1960 Oscar-winning film "The Apartment" is set in the Mad Men era of Manhattan's Madison Avenue and focuses on a rising executive who tries to curry favor with his superiors by letting them borrow his apartment for romantic trysts.

The music is by Burt Bacharach; lyrics are by Hal David; and the book is by Neil Simon, adapted from the screenplay "The Apartment" by Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond.

State Fair

Sept. 3 - Oct. 3

With a soaring score by Rodgers and Hammerstein, "State Fair" invites viewers to travel with the Frakes as they leave behind the routine of the family farm in 1946 for three days of adventure at the annual Iowa State Fair.

Featuring the lilting melodies of "It's a Grand Night for Singing" and the Academy Award-winning song "It Might As Well Be Spring," "State Fair" is a tuneful treat for the entire family.

Music by Richard Rodgers; lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II; book by Tom Briggs and Louis Mattioli, based on the screenplay by Oscar Hammerstein II and the novel by Phil Strong.

Disney's The Aristocats

Aug. 4 - 15

Thomas O'Malley and his rag-tag Alley Cats come to the rescue of the cat-napped Duchess and her Aristokittens in "The Aristocats," a modern update of the beloved Disney classic featuring the jazzy beats of "Scales and Arpeggios," and "Ev'rybody Wants to Be a Cat." At just 50-plus minutes, it's the perfect show for children of all ages.

Music and lyrics by Richard M. Sherman, Robert B. Sherman, Al Rinker, Floyd Huddlestone and Terry Giklyson. Music adapted and arranged and additional music by Bryan Louiselle. Book adapted and additional lyrics by Michael Bernard. Based on the 1970 Disney film "The Aristocats."

Ticket Information

Stages performs in the 384-seat Robert G. Reim Theatre at the Kirkwood Civic Center, 111 S. Geyer Road. For more information or to purchase tickets call 821-2407 or visit www.stagesstlouis.org.

Each mainstage production will run for a total of five weeks with matinee and evening performances Tuesdays through Sundays. The Theatre for Young Audiences performs Wednesday through Sunday for two weeks.
