

Review

BIG RIVER from Tennessee Repertory Theatre

By: Jeffrey Ellis, *Broadway World*

March 23, 2010

Bakari King and Patrick Waller give such winning performances as Jim and Huck in Tennessee Repertory Theatre's revival of Roger Miller's multiple Tony Award-winning *Big River* that they alone are enough to entice audiences to TPAC's Johnson Theatre for a re-sampling, if you will, of this particularly American musical.

But three other individuals are perhaps most responsible for the overall delight that is Tennessee Rep's 25th Anniversary season production: director Rene Dunshee Copeland, whose imaginative work helps to re-invent this musical on a basis that is at once more intimate while, somehow, is on a grander scale; music director Paul Carrol Binkley, whose concept for performing the work's music gives it the ideal down-home feel that only a band of expert Nashville players can give it; and design genius Gary Hoff, who transforms Johnson's black box space into something we've never seen in that venue before—the proscenium theatre you've only seen in your mind's eye - and who, in so doing, elevates Nashville theatrical design beyond its previous limits, fashioning it into something of opulently epic proportions.

Hoff's stunningly realized set is the very stuff of theatre magic: You walk into the Johnson Theatre not knowing what to expect only to find yourself immediately transported to a place only your wildest dreams could take you. Do I exaggerate? Perhaps, a bit, in my zeal to commit to words the visual feast I beheld on opening night; but Hoff's set for *Big River* is something you have to see to believe. It frames the musical from Roger Miller and William Hauptman with beautiful physical trappings, giving Copeland's thoroughly talented and completely committed cast the perfect backdrop for their engaging performances.

Hauptman's book is extremely sensitive, evoking the spirit and tone of Twain's time-honored writings, but it doesn't flinch in translating the realities of a slave-based Southern economy of the mid-19th century. The liberal use of the "N-word" is off-putting, certainly, but it is necessary to capture the tone of the times in which the story is placed. We should be made uncomfortable by its use as it underscores the very truth of The Situation and reminds us of our shared heritage, whatever the color of our skin. That is the lesson learned by young Huck Finn and, ultimately, that is the lesson the viewer takes away from *Big River*, even if that lesson is wrapped up in an exquisitely designed package replete with a memorable musical score. Any lesson of history is more easily accepted when it is made more palatable.

Waller, playing the central role of Mark Twain's vagabond archetype Huckleberry Finn, gives the performance only he could give. Full of playful charm and wholesome wit, with a mature and seasoned take on what is required of the role, from birth Waller may have been destined to play Huck Finn. Waller and Huck are as winning a combination you'll ever find.

King's heartfelt and beautifully sung portrayal of the runaway slave Jim places him on the very same plateau as Waller, and watching the two men interact with each other and hearing them perform the score's gorgeous anthems to the mighty Mississippi River ("Muddy Water" and "River in the Rain") is worth the price of multiple tickets. Further, King's performance rings with a blend of both authenticity

and integrity, making the injustices of society's view of the slave in 19th century America all the more compellingly horrifying. When Jim talks of his children (particularly of his realization that his daughter Elizabeth had been rendered deaf and dumb by a virulent case of scarlet fever) you cannot help but be moved - something that is credited in equal parts to Hauptman's treatment of Twain's work and King's excellent interpretation.

Waller and King are given strong support by Copeland's capable cast of actors. Henry Haggard, as the King, and Bobby Wyckoff, as the Duke, give superbly comic performances that very nearly steal the show from the play's nominal leads. Haggard is gruffly amusing as the wry grifter, while Wyckoff is almost outrageously funny as the egotistical "actor of the theatre." In the whole scene-stealing stakes, they are given a run for their money by Larry Tobias, whose portrayal of Pap Finn, may be the best we've seen of the role (more than a few patrons were seen thumbing through their playbill to determine who the actor was playing Pap seconds after his arrival on the scene).

Peter Vann gives a laudable performance as Huck's boyhood chum Tom Sawyer, leading his gang in grand musical style in "The Boys" and the raucous "Hand for the Hog." Jeff Boyet, playing several roles in the ensemble, is given the opportunity to display his own vocal prowess (and not just a little bit of great comic timing) on "Arkansas."

Act Two's musical score is highlighted by two exceptionally talented women: Aleta Miles performs her wonderfully soulful and stirring version of "How Blest We Are," while Carrie Tillis sings the heartfelt "You Oughta Be Here With Me" with unerring style. Rona Carter, cast as the Widow Douglas and as Sally Phelps, brings her understated warmth to the proceedings in both roles and you can hear her lovely voice soaring to the rafters of the Johnson theatre in "Do You Wanna Go to Heaven" and other ensemble performances.

And special attention should be paid to Samuel Whited, who plays Mark Twain with his signature panache and understanding of his place in the show's eloquent storytelling.

Copeland's direction of her cast and her vision for the show (which reduces the cast to a relatively small number of 15 actors—down from the Broadway version's cast of seeming thousands) makes *Big River* shine just as it should, perhaps more effectively and appropriately so: One of American literature's most enduring classics. Her visual treatment of the work is well-conceived and is extraordinarily realized in this sumptuously mounted production.

Representing what is perhaps the perfect confluence of imaginative minds in bringing this new vision to the stage, the creative collective also includes music director Binkley and choreographer Richard Browder. Binkley's band of musicians perform Miller's score with skill and finesse and are brought onstage at key moments to become integral parts of the show's cast. Browder's folk-inspired, Americana-tinged choreography gives cast members the perfect means for expressing themselves and their emotions through dance.

While Hoff's set design is amazing, the overall production design is exemplary, including Trish Clark's antebellum costuming and Michael Barnett's evocative lighting design.

Tennessee Rep's 2010 production of *Big River* crowns the company's 25th anniversary season in the perfect way – while also commemorating the 25th anniversary of the musical's Broadway debut in 1985 – and proving once again that no one does musicals better than the theatre companies in Music City USA. What could be a more appropriate celebration?