

## Review

# Rep newcomers spice up Roger Miller's musical *Big River, Twain*

By: Martin Brady,

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Tennessee Repertory Theatre closes its 25th anniversary season in upbeat fashion with *Big River*, Roger Miller's musical based on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Gentle ballads, cornpone country tunes and foot-stomping gospel numbers are the primary raison d'être for the production, which boasts a strong multiracial cast led by Patrick Waller. He's supported by key members of director Rene Copeland's virtual rep company of familiar locals, including Jeff Boyet, Rona Carter, Henry Haggard, Peter Vann, Samuel Whited and Bobby Wyckoff. Those vets give forth with their typically solid efforts, but it's the newcomers to the Rep stage that enliven the landscape most, with Bakari King, Aleta Myles, Larry Tobias and Carrie Tillis offering colorful characterizations plus vocals that range from delightfully humorous to outright stirring.

Paul Carrol Binkley's musical direction is notable, his seven musicians (including himself on guitar and harmonica) ably capturing the rural spirit of Miller's score, which ranges from the pointedly witty and silly ("Guv'ment," "The Royal Nonesuch," "Arkansas") to the inspirational ("Muddy Water," "River in the Rain," "How Blest We Are," "Free At Last").

William Hauptman's book is a reasonably intelligible adaptation of the Twain novel, providing a folksy, agreeable portrait of young Huck and his appealing sense of adventure. There's also a good dose of the pre-Civil War attitudes that make his river journey with slave friend Jim such a dangerous undertaking.

Act 2 drags a little, and sometimes it takes too long for the next song to propel the action forward. Yet that happens eventually with the assured bounce of a Jew's harp, and the appreciative opening night audience went home happy as clams.