

Tennessee Rep's 'Big River' reimagines Twain classic

By Evans Donnell

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Tennessee Repertory Theatre has been around for 25 years. The group's future is promising if it continues to entertain as well as its current rousing revival of "Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" does.

Director René D. Copeland and her collaborators end the troupe's silver jubilee season by not just reviving but reimagining the award-winning 1985 Roger Miller/William Hauptman musical adaptation of Mark Twain's 1885 novel "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" for the intimate confines of Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Johnson Theater. That reimagining is anchored by one of the most remarkable sets designer Gary C. Hoff has produced in his exceptional career. Miller's music and lyrics won a "Best Original Score" Tony Award, and it's truly a great American score for a great American story. Hauptman's "Big River" book doesn't shy away from racism and other aspects of 19th-century Southern antebellum life contained in Twain's classic and still-controversial novel, but it makes the multi-layered tale flow well theatrically.

The music in this mounting is directed by Paul Carrol Binkley, who spends a great deal of time onstage playing it as well along with other musicians and actors. There are few things more enchanting than hearing Binkley pick a guitar or strum a banjo. In this "Big River," we get that and more from this gentle man of music and his colleagues.

The cast is a mix of Tennessee Rep vets and newcomers who in most cases play multiple roles. The show gives the ensemble moments to shine, and they do, but there are also opportunities for solo standouts among Miller's numbers. Among those standouts are Larry Tobias as Pap, who masterfully handles the hellzapopin' show-stopper "Guv'ment," and Jeff Boyet as Young Fool, who enthusiastically and humorously delivers the musical tribute "Arkansas."

Those are not the only instances where ensemble members make an impressive mark, though. Others among several are Carrie Tillis as Mary Jane Wilkes in the tender "You Oughta Be Here with Me" and Aleta Myles as Alice leading a stirring rendition of the hymn "How Blest We Are."

There's great support from such stalwarts as Rona Carter, Henry Haggard, Bobby Wyckoff, Peter Vann and Samuel Whited too. Their satisfying character work goes well with the music (and Richard Browder's invigorating choreography, also a highlight of this production). And as Huck and Jim, Patrick Waller and Bakari King are superb leads. Their voices, and acting, always strike the right notes.

All the fine performances take place on a marvel of a set that occupies one end of Johnson Theater's black box. Hoff has created a mix of wood and wild that simultaneously conjures up a riverboat, church, various homes, a raft, a cemetery, docks and the natural environment that intermingles with towns on the river. He's one of American theater's top scenic designers — and has received acclaim as such from national publications and his peers — so the inventive craftsmanship for this show is not surprising. It's breathtaking nevertheless.

It's been an extraordinary journey for Tennessee Repertory Theatre since 1985. Through its ebbs and flows it has managed to inspire and delight many. Here's hoping the plays and musicals Tennessee Rep brings us in the future are as entertaining as this ride down "Big River."