

## Review

**By: Chad Young, Managing Editor**

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# Rep Wraps Up 25th Season with a Big Classic

Tennessee Repertory Theatre chose a down-home musical to wrap up its silver anniversary — *Big River*, a popular and fabulous musical embracing Mark Twain's adventures of Tom Sawyer's sidekick, Huckleberry Finn. The show itself is so well loved that several performances quickly sold out, and the Rep added four extended performances to accommodate demand for tickets. That's an amazing thing.

Overall, *Big River* proves to be the Rep's standout achievement of its 2009–2010 season. While I love how the Rep brings a good dose of diversity to its stage in form of show selection, *Big River* is a major reason why I would love to see the company incorporate more musical theater in its repertoire.

The true star of the show, regardless of what company produces it, is the music itself. You just can't go wrong when the music and lyrics come from a multiple Grammy Award-winning legend like Roger Miller. Every song in the show is memorable and poignant, supporting the reality of Mr. Miller's deft, unparalleled way of telling a story through song.

Patrick Waller enjoys the starring role of Huck Finn. Waller's acting skill is among the best he's put forth to date. I wish his singing ability, though, was on the same level as his script delivery during his spoken lines, which draw appropriate chuckles from the audience thanks to Waller's comedic timing.

Director René Copeland does a good job with the show, however one of her directorial shortcomings was charging Waller to sing with his character's speaking accent. It proves a little annoying and distracting when it comes to supporting the musical numbers. Even if a character in a given show possesses a particular dialect/accents, in musical numbers, the character should be allowed to break away from it enough to deliver an incredible vocal performance, drive it home and truly shine. The lack of direction Waller received in this arena is evident. I wanted to hear a true standout delivery from him in song, but unfortunately that didn't happen. Delivering a song is different from a line, because the musical numbers are meant to take the audience to emotional places far beyond the dialogue. They are supposed to be outside the box and permit the actor to step into a different spotlight. For example, if the great Julie Andrews had sung her songs in *The Sound of Music* with her character's cockney accent, it would have inhibited the power of the musical moments.

Bakari King is excellent in the role of Huck's slave friend, Jim, despite a few encounters with enunciation issues. King grasps his role with succinct heavy-hearted passion, primarily in his soul-stirring delivery of musical numbers he performs.

Larry Tobias gives a comical performance in his role as Huck's drunkard dad, Pap. His rendition of the song, "Guv'ment," is a true show-stopping number. His execution is exact and on target, and it's interesting how this number in particular resonates today.

The real standout musical offering, however, comes from Aleta Myles (Alice) during her spine-tingling delivery of "How Blest We Are." There are only two words to describe her magnificent performance: PASSION and SOUL.

Like I mentioned earlier, overall this is a really good production, but further direction from Copeland could have made it outstanding. Case in point is the thin direction of Nashville stage veteran Rona Carter, whom I love seeing on stage. Carter's primary role is Widow Douglas, but she also appears in ensemble roles, including Tom Sawyer's aunt. The problem with the direction here is that all of her characters throughout the show seem to be the same, without any distinct differentiation among them. Her Douglas persona is not as nearly harsh and stern as it should be to stay true to the staunch, stalwart character in Twain's story.

Huge props go to scenic designer Gary Hoff. The stage set is impeccable, perfectly presenting the show's setting in top-notch manner. Michael Barnett's lighting and fog machine effects hug the set, creating a wonderful ambiance suitable to a swampy romp down the muddy Mississippi River.

If you take your kids to the show, be aware that the script holds true to Twain's writing and dialect from that time period. The word "nigger" is prevalent in the show, so if you take your kids, it will behoove you to explain its existence in the musical and why.

The Rep's production of *Big River* is a festive, entertaining night of musical theater. So, go support the Rep and enjoy one of the best shows in its 25-year history.