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The Sound of Musicals

Theater review: Big River

by Elisabeth Crean

The Great American Novel might just be *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. So trying to turn Mark Twain's beloved classic into a Broadway musical seems as treacherous, and potentially foolhardy, an undertaking as Huck's trip down the Mississippi. But *Big River* succeeds because it captures both the absurdist humor and the moving core of the story, faithfully hewing to Twain's text while enhancing its emotional impact with a raft of good songs. The lively and polished St. Michael's Playhouse production, playfully directed and choreographed by Keith Andrews, features a boatload of strong performances in lead and supporting roles.

In *Big River*, Huck narrates his tale to the audience, jumping in and out of the action to provide commentary on his adventures, scrapes and narrow escapes. It is a tall order for a young actor, and John Gardiner filled it with a refreshing combination of boyish earnestness and knowing deadpan. His winning stage presence connected the play's sometimes disparate elements, propelled the action forward, and made the long show move with surprising speed.

As the story begins, Huck is the object of a custody dispute between his well-intentioned spinster guardian, Miss Watson, and his whiskey-soaked, abusive father, Pap. Mr. Finn is after the money Huck made in his last caper with pal Tom Sawyer. To escape, Huck fakes his own death and goes into hiding on an island in the Mississippi, where he stumbles across Miss Watson's slave, Jim, who has just fled because he feared he was about to be sold. The two runaways join forces and raft down the river. They are aiming for the Ohio River junction at Cairo, where Jim can head north for the free states to work and earn enough money to buy his wife and two children out of slavery. To avoid capture, Huck and Jim travel only at night. But they overshoot Cairo in a fog, wind up deeper in the slaveholding South, and take aboard two scruffy stranded noblemen -- the "King" and the "Duke" -- who turn out to be royal con men. Hilarity and high drama ensue.

Roger Miller's music draws on an all-American array of styles -- blues, gospel, country and more -- to underscore the emotional swings in the action. For example, the hokey hillbilly silliness of Tom Sawyer's nonsensical tribute to pigs, "Hand for the Hog" -- performed with goofy charm by Jason Nettle -- contrasted sharply with the plaintive spiritual, "The Crossing," sung mournfully by Tymia R. Green and Simone Zamore. As recaptured slaves, they banged their heavy chains against the floor in time to the song.

Big River is a reminder that well-written musicals and operas do something that novels cannot: provide extra emotional depth through stop-and-sing moments of reflection. The close harmonies of three powerful duets -- "Muddy Water," "River in the Rain" and "Worlds Apart"-- give a rich clarity to the spiritual connection between Huck and Jim.

Dwelve David gave a dynamic performance as Jim, a character whom society views as simple, but whose inner world is rich, complex and troubled. David's broad face and flashing eyes communicated the savvy beneath Jim's surface naivete, especially his prescient understanding of the natural world and innate sense about people. He also expressed Jim's pain at his forcible separation from his family. This, more than anything, is what helps Huck see Jim as a man, rather than a piece of Miss Watson's property.

The warmth and robustness of David's voice expressed his character eloquently. When he sang "Free at Last" near the end of the show, Jim's conviction and passion was palpable to the audience.

Huck and Jim's duets were musical and emotional high points of *Big River* -- and their voices blended with buttery richness. "Worlds Apart" is a potent song with universal resonance: "I see the same stars through my window / You see through yours ... / I see the same sky through brown eyes / That you see through blue." It was a testament to the singers' professionalism that they stayed on course despite the trumpet's off-key entry midway through the song. The occasional rough patch from that instrument was the only weak spot in Tom Cleary's otherwise solid sextet, which created a sound much larger than its size.

Huck struggles with his conscience about helping "steal" Jim out of slavery, but the essential morality of his quest is thrown into relief by the utter amorality of the King and the Duke, played with comic gusto by Kenneth Kimmins and Bill Farley. "They had as many schemes as a possum does ticks," Huck soon realizes. The "royal" rogues incited a laugh riot, but Kimmins often overmatched Farley: His singing was stronger, his dancing more precise, his con more convincing, even when the Duke was supposed to be teaching him the game.

Jason Nettle as Tom Sawyer was also a comic highlight: charming but harebrained, secure in his self-importance. Tom is a dreamer, a hatcher of impossibly elaborate schemes; Huck doesn't so much plan his adventures as stumble into them and muddle through.

Another key supporting player, John Alexander, played Pap with a broad odiousness, and sang a brilliantly bluesy, syncopated version of his drunken rant, "Guv'ment."

Sets, lighting and costuming all served to enhance the storytelling. The backdrop, painted Hudson River School-style, was especially effective; it glowed or receded as the lighting changed. Multiple stage levels allowed for plenty of motion, and the moving raft worked well.

Problems with the wireless body microphones did prove a minor distraction throughout the show. While the lead characters' sound levels were mostly consistent, some of the supporting actors' mikes performed erratically. The feed dimmed when someone removed a hat, turned his head sharply, or sometimes for no apparent reason at all.

At the end of the show, Huck reflects on his Mississippi voyage before planning his next adventure. "Considerable trouble, considerable joy -- that's how it fell out, just like Jim's fortune predicted." *Big River* is a joyful journey, worthy of a trip up -- or down -- the mighty Winooski.