

ROGER MILLER'S BIG RIVER

Twain's timeless classic sweeps us down the mighty Mississippi as the irrepressible Huck Finn helps his friend Jim, a slave, escape to freedom at the mouth of the Ohio River. Their adventures along the way are hilarious, suspenseful and heartwarming, bringing to life your favorite characters from the novel: the Widow Douglas and her stern sister, Miss Watson; the uproarious King and Duke, who may or may not be as harmless as they seem; Huck's partner in crime, Tom Sawyer, and their rowdy gang of pals; Huck's drunken father, the sinister Pap Finn; the lovely Mary Jane Wilkes and her trusting family. Propelled by an award winning score from Roger Miller, the king of country music, this jaunty journey provides a brilliantly theatrical celebration of pure Americana.



MARK TWAIN & HUCK FINN

Writing for The San Francisco Chronicle on March 15, 1885, the paper's review discusses a recent book, as follows: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* must be pronounced the most amusing book Mark Twain has written for years. Mark Twain may be called the Edison of our literature. There is no limit to his inventive genius, and the best proof of its range and originality is found in this book, in which the reader's interest is so strongly enlisted in the fortunes of two boys and a runaway Negro that he follows their adventures with keen curiosity. Nothing else can explain such a tour de force as this, in which the most unlikely materials are transmuted into a work of literary art. The plot is extremely simple. Huckleberry Finn, who appeared incidentally in the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, concludes to go down the Mississippi to get rid of his drunken father. He falls in with a runaway Negro, and the book is

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ROGER MILLER, PLAYWRIGHT, SINGER, COMPOSER

Roger Dean Miller was born January 2, 1936, in Fort Worth, Texas, the youngest of three boys. His father, Jean Miller, died at the age of 26 from spinal meningitis. Roger was only a year old. It was during the depression and Roger's mother, Laudene Holt Miller, was in her early 20's. She was not able to provide for the boys, so each of Jean's three brothers came and took one of the boys to live with them. Roger moved in with Armelia and Elmer Miller on a farm outside Erick, Oklahoma.

While he was still in high school, Roger started running away. His drifting came to an abrupt halt when he stole a guitar in Texas and crossed the state line back into Oklahoma. Roger turned himself in the next day and rather than put him in jail they offered to let him join the Army. Although he was only 17, he chose to go into the service. He was eager to be going someplace else and before long he was shipped to Korea, where he drove a jeep and earned one of his favorite one-liners, "My education was Korea, Clash of '52."

After Roger's discharge from the Army, he headed directly for Nashville. His first break finally came when he was hired to play fiddle in Minnie Pearl's road band. His second break came when he met George Jones at the WSM radio station one night and played him some



HE WROTE.

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ARTIST SPOTLIGHT MUSICAL DIRECTOR

Most days you find *Big River's* Musical Director Brett Peppo directing choral work of a different kind. He is Director of USA Music Department's Chorale and Concert Choir. He especially enjoys jazz and in a totally different direction madrigal singing. But he also has a deep regard for Musical Theatre. "It's a different animal. It's not all about creating a nice blended sound. That's important, don't get me wrong. But in Musical Theatre it's all about the characters. It's good to hear vocal qualities like the characters the actors create. And *Big River* if nothing else, is very character driven. And we need to hear that in the sound. The show is not your typical musical theatre score either. It's a blend of country, gospel, folk and pop."

Peppo remembers hearing music from the show as a freshman in college. "There was this phenomenal singer who sang Jim's songs 'Free At Last' and 'River In the Rain' in a showcase. I remember thinking it was beautiful. But it wasn't until I actually saw a production of the show and heard the music in context that I realized how powerful it was. The performance captured the audience-you felt the racial conflict. I've seen other productions since that first one. Some were just fluff, singing the songs without much of the characters coming thru. I hope we capture the heart of that first one."

Originally from Illinois he received his Bachelor of Music from Eastern Illinois University and his Masters in Music from Illinois State University. While teaching there he met the former Chair of Music from USA. When he started looking for a teaching job, he knew a little about Mobile and USA. He saw the choral position was available and applied. "And here I am." Last year was not only his first year here but also the first for the fledgling B.F.A. in Music Theatre. He became involved with the program as music director for last years *Reluctant Dragon*. *Big River* is a little different. Not only is he dealing with the choral music but he's putting together the orchestra. "Big River requires banjo players, harmonica players, fiddle players on top of your typical instrumentalists." The production is also a first time collaboration between the Theatre and Music Departments. "The cast is a nice mix of Theatre and Music students. Doing a joint production is a good thing. Each gets to see how the other half works. It's a chance for the music students to have that experience of a fully produced show with scenery, costumes and lights. The music department doesn't have the budget for that."

How does he like it in Mobile? Laughing he replies, "I like the town and the people. And it's warm. I grew up in the frozen north." With that we have to bring our conversation to an end. "Sorry, I've got to run. I've got a lead on a harmonica player."

CAST FOR BIG RIVER

Johnny	Sean Alexander	King	David Peden
Jim	Maurice Bonner	Silas/Harvey	Jason Peregoy
Duke	Zebulon Brown	Joanna Wilkes	Beth Pirtle
Lafe	James Key	Susan Wilkes	Camille Perillo
Miss D	Sarah Kennemer	Huck	Paul Thomas
Mary Jane	Holly Ladnier	Widow D	Katie Vickers
Pap	Tim Lashley	Tom	Michael Waldron
Jo	Courtney Milligan	Strange Woman	Carly York
Elizabeth	Soncitharai Moore	Bob Schmidt	Roderick Aust
Fool	Alex Murdock	Lenny Nyland	Aaron Smock
Alice	Ashley Odoms		

DIRECTOR NOTES

The approach to *Big River* has to do with economy, simplicity, and respect. Taken in reverse order, there is great power and genuine respect for Mark Twain's work. I happen to hold his early work which also happens to be closest to his adopted pen name, as his best. Simplicity itself, Huck Finn and his friend Jim are characters who have touched the heart of the American spirit. They are generous, observant, resilient, forgiving, and adventure-some. These two boys become men as they drift down the river.

Linked to the respect and simplicity of Mark Twain's work in this musical version of *Huckleberry Finn*, we should identify that tune smith of a distinctive American musical style, Roger Miller. In Roger Miller's lyrics and tunes written for this play, but also the ones I happen to have grown up hearing, I find a use of language which is at once both clever and especially economical. On certain days, is there a simpler way to express yourself than to quote a line or two from one of Roger Miller's popular songs?

Dang me, dang me

You oughta take a rope and hang me

Or

And if that ain't lovin' me, then all I gotta say

Is God don't make little green apples

And it don't rain in Indianapolis in the summer time

So to approach this play, centered upon these two artists and characters, one need only apply: respect, simplicity and economy. These principles can be thought to speak to the very core of making art. Dr. Leon J. Van Dyke



TOM SAWYER'S BAND OF ROBBERS.

TICKET & BOX OFFICE INFORMATION

Tickets for Theatre USA's Production of
Big River

General Admission	\$15.00
Faculty/ Staff/Seniors	\$13.00
Students *	\$11.00

Tickets may be reserved and held at the box office using your Mastercard or Visa.

The Box Office will be open weekdays Monday, April 7 through April 21 (except weekend) from 1:00 pm till 5:00 pm and starting one hour before each performance.

The Box Office is located in the lobby of the Laidlaw Performing Arts Center on the main campus of The University of South Alabama. All seats reserved. All sales final. No refund or exchange.

*Students tickets available for all students with valid ID. One ticket per ID.

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of his songs. Jones then introduced Roger to Don Pierce and Pappy Daily of Mercury-Starday Records and asked them to listen to some of the new kid's material.

The story of *Big River* is as fantastic as any of Roger's life. The key man was Rocco Landesman, a former Yale professor at the Yale School of Drama who happened to be the world's #1 Roger Miller fan. "I thought he was an absolute genius," Landesman says. On the way to a New York appearance by Roger at the Lone Star Cafe, Landesman conceived the notion that Miller ought to write a Broadway score - and the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn would be the perfect vehicle. He approached Roger's wife, Mary, after the show. She encouraged him to write a letter to Roger with the idea. Roger jokes, "He made me an offer I couldn't understand."

Big River opened at New York's Eugene O'Neill Theatre on April 25, 1985. The play was a smash hit, earning seven Tony Awards, including Miller's for best score. For Roger, *Big River* was the crowning achievement of a fantastic career that to him only then seemed complete. He is the only Country artist to win a Tony Award. With *Big River* a proven success, Roger was able to relax at his Santa Fe home and focus on the family life he had made with Mary and their two young children, Taylor and Adam. "I have a brother who's five and sister who's seven," says Dean Miller, "and they were his all-consuming passion." Roger had found a happiness with Mary and the children he had longed for all his life.

In the fall of 1991, Miller found out he had a form of lung cancer. His last performance was during CMA week in Nashville. Publicly, he refused to let his illness phase him. After a year of treatment and one remission, Roger Miller died at the Century City Hospital on October 25, 1992, at the young age of 56.

In 1995, Miller was posthumously inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. "This would have been his ultimate dream come true," says Mary Miller, "the ultimate recognition of his songwriting and musical artistry."

When asked how Roger wanted to be remembered, he replied, "I just don't want to be forgotten."

(Edit and Reprinted from Roger Miller's website, www.rogermiller.com)

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given up to the adventures of this couple on a raft on the river, re-enforced by two sharpers known as the Duke and the King, and afterward by Tom Sawyer. The very best episodes are those which detail the swindling schemes of the two river sharpers, who impose upon Huckleberry and the Negro by declaring that they are scions of royalty. These chapters were printed in the Century under the title of "Royalty on the Mississippi," but they left the fate of the two heroes in doubt, so that most readers of the performances of the "Royal Nonesuch," and the personation of the two brothers from England will want to know what was the final result of their schemes."

Of course, not only has the book survived since then to have become a favored classic, it has also become noteworthy as one of the most frequently banned books, because of confused accounts of it being racist. But what is the book really about? It's about nothing less than freedom and the quest for freedom. It's about a slave who breaks the law and risks his life to win his freedom and be reunited with his family, and a white boy who becomes his friend and helps him escape. Because of his upbringing, the boy starts out believing that slavery is part of the natural order; but as the story unfolds he wrestles with his conscience, and when the crucial moment comes he decides he will be damned to the flames of hell rather than betray his black friend. And Jim, as Twain presents him, is hardly a caricature. Rather, he is the moral center of the book, a man of courage and nobility, who risks his freedom -- risks his life - - for the sake of his friend Huck. Note, too, that it is not just white critics who make this point. Booker T. Washington noted how Twain "succeeded in making his readers feel a genuine respect for 'Jim,'" and pointed out that Twain, in creating Jim's character, had "exhibited his sympathy and interest in the masses of the Negro people."

The great black novelist Ralph Ellison, too, noted how Twain allows Jim's "dignity and human capacity" to emerge in the novel.

"Huckleberry Finn knew, as did Mark Twain [Ellison wrote], that Jim was not only a slave but a human being [and] a symbol of humanity . . . and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town" -- in other words, of the abomination of slavery itself.

The music of Roger Miller is a great tribute to freedom of the human spirit found in the book itself. Join us as we fight the good fight to make Huck, Jim, Mark Twain, and Roger Miller live on.



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