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## Review: Good Directing and Performances Make Temple Theatre's 'Big River' Worth the Trip

By Lauren Van Hemert

Nearly 130 years after its first publication, Mark Twain's book [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#) is still the subject of debate. Deemed either as the first great American novel or as a piece of racist trash, the book has been banned as required reading in many school systems for years. As a result, many of today's young 'uns don't even know who Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn are.

Now they can find out without even having to open the controversial text. That's because the Temple Theatre production of the Tony Award-winning musical *Big River* not only sanitizes Twain's story in a way that is palpable perhaps for folks sensitive to the book's language, but it also shines a light on the undercurrents of love, freedom, friendship, and understanding that are present throughout.

There is no objectionable language or use of the N-word here, and yet, Twain's commentary on racism and stereotypes remains intact. Director Gavan Pamer

needs to take credit for that. Pamer not only has a keen sense of what works and doesn't within this restricted theater environment but also is masterful at capturing the nuances of Twain's work. The subtleties of the story, an unlikely friendship forged between a clever 12-year-old Huck and Jim, a runaway slave in search of freedom and his family, is told through small momentary gestures, a handshake, a pat on the head, or a look. The bigger, more garish moments are reserved for the more comedic, outrageous scenes, as in the musical numbers *Hand for the Hog* or *The Royal Nonesuch*. This is a big Broadway musical after all.

And speaking of music, no review of *Big River* would be complete without mentioning the Tony Award-winning score by Roger Miller. Yes, the same Roger Miller who wrote *King of the Road* and *Dang Me*, wrote the music and lyrics for this show, which results in a sound that is more country, gospel, and bluegrass than Broadway. The only thing that would've made this Temple Theatre production better would've been the presence of some live musicians in lieu of a recorded track, which at times drowns out the cast.

Chris Inhulsen's genuineness and boyish naiveté as Huck could charm the cottonmouths out of the Mississippi. And Khawon Porter's stellar portrayal of Jim is expressive and rousing. It is one of the best local performances so far this year. And while this show hinges on the chemistry between Huck and Jim, which is incontestable, there are other notable performances too, such as Patrick Holt's Tom Sawyer, Mike Jones' Pap Finn, and Janeta Jackson's portrayal of both the enslaved Hannah in Act One and Alice in Act Two. In fact, Jackson's rendition of *The Crossing*, along with the reprise of *How Blest We Are*, are both hauntingly beautiful and pure.

At one point early on the show, Jim makes a prediction that the journey might be one of either considerable joy or considerable trouble. The same could be

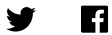
said about this show, which could land on the side of joy or trouble contingent on performance, direction, and production values. Fortunately, this Temple Theatre production leans closer to the side of joy and is totally worth a trip to Sanford.

*Big River* runs through March 31st at the Temple Theatre. For more information visit: <http://templeshows.com/>.

[Click here to watch the RDU on Stage video interview with the two stars of \*Big River\*.](#)

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