

Temple Theatre of Sanford's *Big River* Is a Family-Friendly, Rollicking Adventure Tale

by MELANIE SIMMONS • MARCH 22, 2019



Adventure has come to the **Temple Theatre of Sanford** in a big way, as ***Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*** triumphantly takes the stage through Sunday, March 31st. This rousing musical sets

Mark Twain's iconic 1884 novel ***Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*** to a lilting, folksy country score, written by **Roger Miller** (with a book by **William Hauptman**).

Staying admirably close to the source material, ***Big River*** takes the audience along the winding, episodic story of young **Huckleberry Finn** (played by **Chris Inhulsen**), a precocious youth who can't decide if he wants to embrace the wicked ways of his ne'er do well father, **Pap Finn (Mike Jones)**, or let the Widow Douglas (**Jeanne Adams-Koonce**) and other upstanding citizens mold him into a "proper" member of society. All Huck knows for certain is that he yearns for freedom.



Big River stars Chris Inhulsen (left) and Khawon Porter as Huck and Jim (photo by Ben Bashinski)

So, following the logic only a mischievous adolescent could weave, he fakes his own death and hits the Mississippi River, seeking to shed all responsibility and live life on his own terms. What he discovers along the way is that responsibility finds us all eventually, and no one life can be lived without profoundly affecting those around it.

This **Temple Theatre** production is family friendly and highly enjoyable, with great vocals by the large and talented cast. Chris Inhulsen plays the mischievous Huckleberry Finn with a blend of wide-eyed innocence and self interest. He plays well off of **Khawon Porter's** runaway slave **Jim**. Their chemistry is real, and their vocals blend beautifully. Porter's voice is as smooth and broad as the Mississippi itself, and provides some of the most evocative moments in the show.

Patrick Holt delights as the **Puck-ish Tom Sawyer**, and Mike Jones' turn as the ill-fated Pap Finn does a great job delivering the always timely musical rant against "Guv'ment". Among the Ensemble, standouts include **Tyler Graeper** and **Emma Sykes** for their comedic timing and humorous facial expression, whereas **Janeta Jackson** and **Elizabeth Camacho** took turns taking down the house with their incredible vocals.



Elizabeth "Eliz" Camacho (center) stars as Alice's daughter (photo by Ben Bashinski)

Director **Gavan Pamer** (who also choreographed the show) does a fantastic job staging such a large cast in this space, using every inch of the performance area for the larger production numbers, while bringing the scale down to capture the intimacy of the raft floating along the great Mississippi. Set designer (and technical director) **Dallas LaFon** has created a sprawling dock-like structure that allows the actors varying levels to play on, creating delightful visual compositions enhanced by **Jon Mckone's** lighting design. Played against the lilting tunes of bluegrass, Appalachian folk music, old fashioned country twang, and deeply stirring old spirituals, ***Big River*** is a treat for the eyes and ears, and appropriate for audiences of any age.

A Final Thought: Even though ***Big River*** brushes up against issues of race, equality, friendship, and identify, and the balance between freedom and justice, it never really addresses them head-on. To do so would most likely violate **Mark Twain's** warning in the foreword of this book that any attempt to find deeper meaning or a moral within the tale is an abomination. However, in today's climate of social justice, one almost hoped there would be more emotional payoff in Huckleberry Finn's final moments onstage. Audiences should see this rollicking adventure tale and decide for themselves if it's a commentary on how far we've come, or how far we have yet to go.





Big River stars Stephen Moore (center) as King (photo by Ben Bashinski)

SECOND OPINION: March 18th Cary, NC **RDU on Stage** review by **Lauren Van Hemert:** <https://rduonstage.com/2019/03/18/review/> and March 17th interview with actors **Chris Inhulsen** and **Khawon Porter**, conducted by **Lauren Van Hemert:** <https://rduonstage.com/2019/03/17/video-love-freedom-friendship-and-more-from-big-rivers-huck-jim/>; and March 12th Sanford, NC **Sanford Herald** preview by **Jasmine Gallup:** <https://sanfordherald.com/news/56037/mark-twain-musical-opens-at-the-temple-theatre/>.

The **Temple Theatre of Sanford** presents **BIG RIVER: THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN** at 7:30 p.m. March 22 and 23, 2 p.m. March 24, 2 p.m. March 28, 2 and 7:30 p.m. March 29, 7:30 p.m. March 30, and 2 p.m. March 31 at 120 Carthage St., Sanford, North Carolina 27330.

TICKETS: \$15-\$27.

BOX OFFICE: 919-774-4155, boxoffice@templeshows.com, or <https://www.vendini.com/>. GROUP RATES (10+ tickets): 919-774-4155, boxoffice@templeshows.com, or <http://templeshows.com/ticketinfo/group-packages-sales>.

SHOW: <https://www.templeshows.com/showsandevents/2018-19/big-river> and <https://www.facebook.com/events/2428153254078825/>.

VIDEO PREVIEWS: <https://youtu.be/UjcbECYsYc8> and <https://youtu.be/7TOS4aYY0Nc>.

2018-19 MAINSTAGE SEASON: <http://templeshows.com/showsandevents/2018-19>.

PRESENTER/VENUE: <http://www.templeshows.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/TheTempleTheatre>, and <https://twitter.com/TempleTheatreNC>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Theatre_\(Sanford,_North_Carolina\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Theatre_(Sanford,_North_Carolina)), and https://www.youtube.com/user/templetheatrenc?feature=results_main.

DIRECTIONS/PARKING/MAP: <http://templeshows.com/visit>.

OTHER LINKS:

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884 novel): <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Adventures-of-Huckleberry-Finn-novel-by-Twain> (Encyclopædia Britannica) and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adventures_of_Huckleberry_Finn (Wikipedia).

Mark Twain (novelist, nee Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835-1910): <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mark-Twain> (Encyclopædia Britannica) and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain (Wikipedia).

Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1985 Broadway musical): <https://www.rnh.com/show/18/Big-River> (Rodgers & Hammerstein Theatricals), <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/big-river-2018> (Internet Broadway Database), and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_River_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_River_(musical)) (Wikipedia).

The Script: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/165946120/Big-River-Libretto> (Scribd).

Study Guide: <https://www.bard.org/study-guides/big-river> (Utah Shakespeare Festival).

Roger Miller (singer-songwriter, 1936-92): <http://www.rogermiller.com/> (official website), <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/roger-miller-12151> (Internet Broadway Database), <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0589248/> (Internet Movie Database), and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Miller (Wikipedia).

William Hauptman (playwright and screenwriter): <http://www.williamhauptman.net/> (official website), <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/william-hauptman-6169> (Internet Broadway Database), <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1105330/> (Internet Movie Database), and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Hauptman (Wikipedia).

Gavan Pamer (director, choreographer, and music director): <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/gavan-pamer-511739> (Internet Broadway Database), <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4839379/> (Internet Movie Database), <https://www.facebook.com/gpamer9/> (Facebook page), and <https://twitter.com/gavanpamer> (Twitter page).

REVIEWER:

Melanie Simmons of Cary, NC is a film and stage actress with a BA degree in Theatre from **Point Loma Nazarene University** in San Diego, CA. She has studied acting with **Sande Shurin Acting Studios** in New York City and **The Actor's Workshop** in Los Angeles, CA; and she now trains locally with **Lynda Clark (stage)**, **Daryl Ray Carlisle** (film/commercial), and **Rebekah Holland** (voice). Simmons has performed at **Raleigh Little Theatre** in Raleigh, **Forest Moon Theater** in Wake Forest, **Stageworks Theatre** in Holly Springs, and many others. She is represented by **Talent One Agency** in Raleigh. Click [here](#) to read her reviews for **Triangle Review** and **Triangle Arts and Entertainment**.