



'BIG RIVER,' now playing at the Off Center Theatre in Crown Center, stars, clockwise from left, Mykell Hill, Craig Benton, George Harter, Kip Niven and Seth Golay.

## Confident cast keeps 'Big River' rolling along

**RUSS SIMMONS**

THEATER REVIEWER

Every now and then, a musical will have a story and score that fit like hand in glove. It's as though they were always meant to go together.

And so it is with "Big River," the wildly entertaining stage adaptation of Mark Twain's immortal "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," the current production from Musical Theatre Heritage at the Off Center Theatre at Crown Center.

The late country star Roger Miller had hits with peppy tunes like "Dang Me," "Kansas City Star" and "King of the Road." It's no wonder that people were surprised when he wrote the brilliant score for this Tony Award-winning Broadway show.

The MTH version is a "concert" or "readers theater" adaptation of the show, where the performers face the audience reading from scripts set on music stands.

But even though there are no conventional sets and few props or costumes to speak of, the show is a rousing crowd-pleaser that is easily one of the best shows of the year.

Of course, the story involves Huck (Seth Golay), the ornery and strong-willed Missouri boy who accompanies an African-American named Jim (Mykell Hill) down the mighty Mississippi River as he attempts to escape slavery in the 1840s.

The memorable, toe-tapping tunes that Miller provides include "Waiting For The Light to Shine," "You Oughta Be Here With Me," "Muddy Water" and "I, Huckleberry, Me."

The terrific supporting cast includes Craig Benton,

Jerry Jay Cranford, Kip Niven, Adam Branson, Julie Shaw, Shea Coffman, Katie Karel, Chad Gerlt, Ray Ettinger, Emily Harris, Doogin Brown, Izzie Baldwin and Erikka Dunn.

While Golay and Hill are fine in the leading roles, some of the smaller roles are the most memorable.

Niven gives one of the best performances in recent memory as Huck's drunken "Pap." His musical complaint about the dad gum "Guv'ment" is a marvel of precise comic timing and splendid acting.

Benton and Cranford each make an impression as a con man and a flamboyant actor, respectively. Newcomer Baldwin displays some fine vocal chops as the put-upon Mary Jane.

Even producer George Harter gets into the act as Twain, who accompanies some of the tunes on harmonica.

A strong but unidentified vocal chorus accompanies pianist Jeremy Watson and the crack stage band on some of Miller's lively tunes.

Director Sarah Crawford does an excellent job of staging this concert rendition of the show, ensuring that the drama is intact even though the cast members rarely make eye contact with one another.

In fact, the actors face forward for virtually the entire performance. Audience members seated in the theater's center section are in the best position to catch all of the important facial expressions. This could be problematic for others, since the show is being presented in three-quarter round with many viewers watching from the sides.

That quibble aside, "Big

River" is an outstanding, and thoroughly engaging adaptation of one of the great American stories. While some literary works get watered down as they are transformed into fodder for the musical theater, "Big River" survives with Twain's wit and scathing social criticisms intact.

"Big River" runs through Aug. 30 at the Off Center Theatre in Crown Center, 2450 Grand Blvd., Kansas City, Mo. for tickets, call (816) 842-9999 or visit [www.mthkc.com](http://www.mthkc.com).

### THEATER NOTES

Theatre for Young America is expanding its drama classes to both sides of the state line.

Beginning Sept. 22, children ages 3½ through 12th grade can attend a wide array of classes at the Wonderscope Children's Museum of Kansas City, 5700 King, Shawnee, or at the Goppert Theatre complex at Avila University, 11901 Wornall Road, Kansas City, Mo.

Schedule and class information is available at [www.tya.org](http://www.tya.org) or by calling (816) 460-2083.

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