



What We've Seen

Big River **Ford's Theatre**

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By Deryl Davis

Who would've imagined rafting down the Mississippi could be this much fun? Deaf West Theatre's unique spoken-and-signed production of the Tony Award-winning musical *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has tied up at Ford's

Theatre, and you'd be crazier than Huck's Pappy to miss it. This inventive staging, incorporating American Sign Language (ASL), spoken English, and gestures - as well as plain old fine acting - brings a freshness to this familiar comic tale that may send you back to your dog-eared copy of *Huck Finn* after the show. The combination of deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing cast members (including actors from Washington's Gallaudet University) adds a new and meaningful twist on the story's theme of brotherhood among races and peoples. And this being a musical, there are the songs - stirring spirituals and gospel numbers that will have you tapping your toes and humming throughout many a chorus.

The brainchild of director and choreographer Jeff Calhoun, this version of the 1985 musical by composer/lyricist Roger Miller and writer William Hauptman enjoyed an extended run on Broadway in 2003-2004. It comes to Ford's after a national tour, though with a different company, featuring the superb Michael McElroy, who played Jim to acclaim in the recent Broadway production. Other outstanding actors include Bill O'Brien as Mark Twain and the voice of Huck, and Gallaudet University student Christopher B. Corrigan as the endearing Huck Finn.



Michael McElroy (left) and Christopher B. Corrigan

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If you think a musical incorporating sign language is a paradox, or at least a gimmick, this production will prove you wrong. In Director Calhoun's hands, the sign language becomes another form of choreography, adding a new layer to the drama unfolding onstage about an adolescent boy and a runaway slave's adventures as they travel down the Mississippi. Hearing actors lend their voices to the non-speaking cast, sometimes appearing as doubles or mirror images of one another. Calhoun gets some good laughs from this trick, especially in the scene where Huck's drunken Pap (Darren Frazier, Jay Lusteck) sees himself in a mirror. Much of the time, the speaking actors appear (in costume) on a balcony above their non-speaking counterparts or on the edge of the stage, as when O'Brien's Mark Twain provides the voice for Corrigan's Huck. You'd think it would be distracting to see one actor speak another's lines, but it's not, so smooth and well-timed are the signing and accompanying vocal interpretation. In the context of the story itself, this pairing of non-hearing and hearing actors nicely complements the relationship between Huck and Jim, whose friendship bridges monumental racial and cultural divides. They are, as Huck observes, more alike than different, a theme this production's casting intends to underscore. (The germ of the idea behind this production may, in fact, lie in the story Jim tells Huck about his daughter, who became deaf as a result of scarlet fever.)

Tall and muscular, McElroy looks and sounds like you'd imagine the patient, faithful, and long-suffering Jim to be. His smooth, rich voice stands out on soulful numbers like "Muddy Water," "River in the Rain," "Free at Last" (in which he stands alone in chains), and the touching "Worlds Apart." He's joined in the duets by Bill O'Brien, providing the voice of Huck, whose pleasing tenor and bluegrass twang seem the perfect complement to McElroy's resonant bass. O'Brien also plays guitar and banjo while onstage, a nice enhancement of his role as the author-cum-stage manager. His Mark Twain is a steady, humorous, profoundly likeable presence, and as with all of the actors, his frontier dialect is pitch perfect. Deaf actor Christopher Corrigan provides Huck with a wonderfully expressive innocence and naiveté, especially engaging in the romantic "funeral" episode with Catherine Brunell's Mary Jane Wilkes. As the fourth lead member of the cast, hearing actor Stanley Bahorek endows Tom Sawyer with a winning sense of mischief and boyish enthusiasm. His face is so expressive, you'd swear it was made of putty.

All of the secondary cast members, both hearing and non-hearing, are equally

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superb. Particularly engaging (and funny) are Jay Lusteck, a hearing actor, as the miscreant “King,” and Darren Frazier, a deaf actor, as his devilish sidekick, “the Duke.” Jeannette Bayardelle stands out as the slave Alice; though she has limited stage time, her wonderful, bluesy voice catches your breath, especially on the deeply moving gospel number “How Blest We Are.” She adds that same punch to “Waitin’ For the Light to Shine (Reprise),” perhaps the musical’s most complex song, in which cast members sing multiple, interweaving harmonies. That song (coming near the close of the performance) ends on an especially moving note, as the cast signs, rather than sings, the final refrain.

Director Calhoun keeps the action flowing here, so you hardly notice that a full two and a half hours have gone by. And if you do, you wish things would slow down so you could enjoy it longer. Calhoun brings out the comedy in many clever and witty ways - having actors mimic dogs with a flutter of hand motions, doubling characters (in identical costumes and wigs), and developing a range of humorous gestures. The choreography is delightful, and often reminiscent of Vaudeville.

Ray Klausen’s inventive set features giant pages of *Huckleberry Finn*, which become doors, windows, and backdrop for the action. Fittingly enough, the giant page at center stage is the book’s cover, where the action begins and ends. For the river scenes, a portion of center stage lifts slightly to create the raft that Huck and Jim travel on, and the title page flies away to reveal a giant sky-blue screen behind. Michael Gilliam adds nice lighting touches, and Lynn Bowling’s period costumes, including dungarees, bowler hats, and seersucker suits, are remarkably authentic and attractive.

Humorous, wistful, and inventive, DeafWest’s production of *Big River* is an exhilarating musical journey that should appeal to everyone. Beautifully combining sign language, spoken dialogue, music, and choreography, it reminds us that there are, indeed, many ways to tell a story. Audiences will be grateful that Director Calhoun chose to tell Mark Twain’s timeless story about life on the Mississippi like this.