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## theater

### Big talent plus big production equal "Big River"

Charles Culbertson  
footlights & spotlights

While Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" has been a mainstay of American literature since 1885, it took 100 years for the story to make it to the musical stage. In 1985, Roger Miller opened "Big River" at the Eugene O'Neill Theater in New York, and raked in the profits as the show ran for 1,005 performances and won seven Tony Awards.

#### If You Go:

- what: "Big River"
- when: 8 p.m., today through Saturday and 2 p.m., Sunday
- where: Louis Spilman Auditorium, Waynesboro High School
- tickets: \$9 adults, \$5 children
- more info: 949-8842

This ambitious adaptation of Twain's classic novel is the season finale for the Waynesboro Players who, like Roger Miller, are likely to experience a successful show. "Big River" is long — about two and a half hours the night I saw it — but stacked with high-caliber talent and generously sprinkled with compelling music.

The play closely follows Twain's story of a rural boy, Huck Finn, and an escaped slave, Jim, making their way on a raft down the Mississippi in a quest for freedom at the mouth of the Ohio River. Along the way they encounter an array of characters — some scrupulous, some not — and make the personal journey from happenstance acquaintances to strong, devoted friends.

Finn frequently struggles with the morality (and legality) of helping a slave escape in the antebellum South, but always comes down on the side of his friend and of freedom. Their musical number, "Worlds Apart," is a poignant testament to the pair's realization of the differences that separate them, and to their insistence that the differences don't matter.

The two leads in this show — Colton Berry as Huck and James Stewart as Jim — are powerful. Berry is onstage nearly the entire play, singing, narrating and holding the story together with a skill beyond his years, while Stewart turns in a stunning performance highlighted by some of the most exhilarating singing you will ever hear. Berry and Stewart have a rare chemistry onstage, and their duets are the highlights of the show.

Danny Lee as the angry, greedy, drunken Pap Finn is wildly funny and for a brief time steals the show with the song, "Guv'ment" — a ditty that will resonate with anyone who pays taxes (Socialists, go out for a smoke during this one).

Brian Holsopple and Bob Wright turn in what are perhaps the funniest performances of the show, with Holsopple as a washed-up Shakespearean actor who claims he is a duke and Wright who purports to be a deposed king. Also, watch for Wright as a one-breasted carnie attraction, if you dare.

The cast is large and loaded with talent, both individually and as a group. Chris Moneymaker as Tom Sawyer, Karen Romig as Widow Douglas, Diane Heavener as Miss Watson and Michael Palmer as Judge Thatcher. Other members of the cast are Benji Stoll, Alex Maneval, Jake Frank, Jonathan Lambert, Rebekah Martin, Carol Conley, Lloyd Dollins, Bill Shook, Cookie Wright and Nancy Houseknecht.

The cast also includes Julie Beauchamp, Gloria Shook, Sarah Joyce Sanders, Leslie A. Rueff, Johnel Childress, Nina Jenkins, LaTisha Bell, Ed Tobias, Dave Baker, Cindy Cavanaugh, Bridget Armentrout-Edwards, Tommy Crawford Sr., Marsha Howard, Jo Ellen Opyoke, Eddie Randolph, Olive Stroud-Sheffey and Jennifer Vaughan.

"Big River" was directed by Barbara Spilman Lawson and Duane Hahn, with musical direction by Sarah Fauber. The show's musical coordinator is Don Roe, and producers are June Hall and Becky Price.

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