



Director's Vision **by Rob Ruggiero**

What is your vision for *Big River*?

I hope this production of *Big River* will distinguish itself from other productions by embracing the true spirit of storytelling in a very authentic and truthful way, and by focusing on the central relationship of Huck and Jim. Although in many ways it is a coming of age story for the character of Huck, ultimately it really is that central relationship where the power of the story can be found. The inner struggle Huck faces by helping Jim make him one of the most important and recognizable figures in all of Twain's stories. I continue to be incredibly moved by that unique friendship and the ways in which it crossed racial lines decades ahead of its time. Ironically one of the most read and most banned stories in American literature, "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" has proven itself time and time again to touch people in ways they do not expect to be touched.

My artistic team and I have also approached the physical production in a very authentic way: "clothes" instead of costumes, very realistic details in the textures on the set, and the addition of an onstage country musician who interacts with the story in a very unique and organic way. We are in effect visually "restoring" the Opera House to its 1876 charm, creating a very authentic landscape in which to articulate the story. There are also layers to the story and the characters that we hope to articulate with that same truthful approach. Without interfering with the show's entertainment values, we are approaching the book with a sense of exploration inspired by the wonderful spirit of the book and its author. Hopefully all these elements will weave together to give Goodspeed audiences a fresh and inspiring look at one of America's most beloved stories.

Why do you think Goodspeed audiences will enjoy the show?

I think that Goodspeed audiences will especially relate to both the innate charm and the powerful emotional message of *Big River*. It's a story that has been treasured for decades, and has endured the true test of time. Mark Twain was an amazing storyteller, and this musical version of "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" brings a very unique and inventive experience of the story of a boy, a slave, a raft, and their journey down the Mississippi River.

It seems a perfect marriage of play and venue to have it produced alongside the stunning vista of the Connecticut River in a theater with the same charm and authenticity of the novel. The heart of *Big River* lies in the connection to the river, and the journey it takes us on. That, combined with a glorious score and its potent message of a very unique friendship, wonderful entertainment values, and a classic coming of age story, makes it a very compelling and delightful evening in the theater.

Tell us about the cast – how you chose them and what the audience can expect to see.

Naturally the casting of Huck and Jim are critical to the success of any production of *Big River*. We saw dozens of actors, and invested a great deal of thought into our choices. Huck is played by an actor with great charm, innocence, and spunk. Since Huck is the main storyteller, his appeal and ability to connect with the audience is essential. Jim needs to possess quiet strength, honesty, and a trusting and open heart. Of course, the chemistry between these two actors is also vital to the success of the show. We are thrilled to have assembled two terrific actors we believe are a great fit.

The comic duo of the King and the Duke are also a casting challenge. We are fortunate to have found two extremely talented Broadway veterans to fill these roles and supply the show with the necessary humor, but also not feel like caricatures.

These four very talented performers join forces with an incredibly talented ensemble that play the multiple characters necessary to tell our story. I hope Goodspeed audiences will be as impressed as we are with this very special company.