



## From Page to Stage by Will Rhys, Education Director

There is no question that the story of Huck Finn is a great adventure, an adventure that seems to cry out for a theatrical treatment of some kind. It contains wonderful characters, a compelling story, and the magnificent “scenery” of the Mississippi River as a backdrop.

Shortly after “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” was published, Mark Twain, recognizing its dramatic potential, began using excerpts from it in his “Tour Around the World” lecture series. One excerpt that was especially popular dealt with how Huck saved Jim from slavery. In a review of a performance, the *Minneapolis Tribune* described the story as “one of the prettiest pictures of ante-emanicipation life on the Mississippi that has ever been penned.” The *Minneapolis Journal* followed this with, “possibly the best of all was the story of Huck Finn helping the Negro Jim to escape from slavery.” Audiences found all of this quite accessible and entertaining. It was time to put Huck “on the boards.”

While writing and editing “Huckleberry Finn,” Twain had tried, unsuccessfully, to dramatize “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.” As others have discovered, writing a play or musical requires a different skill set and understanding of conventions than that used in writing a novel. He turned to others, who completed a script, but it was never produced in his lifetime. Undeterred, in 1902 Twain contracted with Klaw & Erlanger, a powerful theatrical syndicate of the time, to create an elaborate musical dramatization of “Huck Finn.” The “for-hire” playwright, Lee Arthur, produced a piece that sounded nothing like Mark Twain and scarcely resembled the novel.

Although Twain was credited as co-author, he barely had anything to do with it. He did hear a reading of it and gave Klaw & Erlanger permission to advertise it as *Mark Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn” adapted for the Stage by Mark Twain and Lee Arthur*, but there is no record of his actually having seen a production. It opened in Hartford, Connecticut, on November 11, 1902, to “respectable” reviews (Twain did not attend, saying his daughter’s health did not permit it). It was an enormous spectacle and expensive to support on its subsequent tour, and it closed in Baltimore after less than forty performances. A New York trade paper, the *Dramatic News*, said it was “a dreadful fiasco. It is a little bit of everything and not much of anything, besides being extremely tiresome, without one redeeming feature.” Indeed, soon after opening, Twain insisted that the producers make certain that it was clear *he* had not written it.

In 1951, Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill, the creative team of *Lost in the Stars*, began work on a musicalization to be called *Raft on the River*” It seemed to be a natural fit for these two musical luminaries. As Weill biographer Foster Hirsch says, “Huckleberry Finn,” like *Lost in the Stars*, is a story that is, in part, “about a friendship between a black and a white character who must overcome ingrained prejudices.” Unfortunately, Weill died after just five songs had been written. “This Time Next Year,” written for Jim, was the last song Weill ever wrote. Anderson went to both Irving Berlin and Frank Loesser, trying to get them to continue with him on the project, but had no success. “This Time Next Year” and another of the five, “River Chanty,” are still sung by artists performing the Weill repertoire.

Except for an opera written for The Julliard Opera Center in May of 1971, the majority of “Huckleberry Finn” adaptations have been as films or productions for television. In the 1930’s, the novel was twice made into a black and white film, including a 1939 version that starred Mickey Rooney as Huck. Other films were produced in 1960 (with Eddie Hodges), 1974 (with Jeff East—who also played Tom Sawyer in an earlier film—and Paul Winfield as Jim), and 1985 (with such stars as Richard Kiley, Geraldine Page, Jim Dale, and Patrick Day as Huck). It is, of course, also possible to find dramatic adaptations that have had much less exposure, but are still available for an audience’s pleasure.

But it is *Big River* that catches the spirit, characters, and imagination of the Twain classic best. Perhaps that is because the creative team of Roger Miller and William Hauptman, along with director Des McAnuff, knew the power of the image of the Mississippi and that it should be the titular character, or they realized that the bluegrass and country music of Middle America would best convey Twain’s uncanny ear for language and rhythm, or they understood the dramatic flow of the novel better than those who came before. Some might even say that part of its success was that it appeared on Broadway at a time when what was needed was an authentic American musical sound in an era, the mid to late 1980’s, that was dominated by British musicals.

It is, finally, a strong and engaging musical that brings the mighty Mississippi, Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, Jim, and assorted characters both high and low onto our stage...a stage built during the same period that nurtured the unmatched voice of Mark Twain. May you all enjoy the journey down “The Father of Waters...*Big River!*”