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MUSICAL REVIEW: Show leisurely and relentless, much like inspiration

By Mark Hughes Cobb, Staff Writer

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Maybe it's not such a shock, since it's based on "Huck Finn," but the boys and men in "Big River" steal the show.

It's exhilarating, the athleticism, the seemingly effortless flying and high-stepping, all of it energetically, whimsically choreographed by Stacy Alley, a recent and welcome addition to the University of Alabama musical theater team. Seven years ago, when Alley was a UA graduate acting student with a dance background, she'd have been hard-pressed to find one or two guys who could move like this; it's a testament to the growth of the program that she has enough actor/

dancers to make numbers like "The Boys" jump like a Broadway chorus line. With twang.

This show isn't Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," despite the inspiration. It's definitely songwriter Roger Miller's "Big River," simple, down home music that ranges from stirring gospel to plaintive folk, topped with an occasional hoe-down such as "The Boys" or "When the Sun Goes Down in the South."

The latter features a couple of the grown men of the cast, grad actors Stephen Brunson and Jeff Horger, kicking the loveability level up another notch as the Duke and King (or the Duke and the Dauphin, if you're not confused by lofty foreign titles). Their foot-stomping starts out as almost a parody of the fleet-footed "Boys," but winds up in a kind of goofy greatness thanks to no-holds performances by the two. It's silly stuff, but to do silly this well, you've got to take it seriously.

There's plenty of serious stuff, too, though, even if it can't carry the weight of Twain's novel. But it's found in the lovely harmonies on pieces such as "River in the Rain," as a nicely matched Jim (Michael Luwoye) and Huck (Bobby Becher) rhapsodize on the pleasures of a free life on a floating raft, and on the flip side in "The Crossing," in which a gospel-tinged chorus of slaves being taken across the same water raises chillbumps.

"Big River" turns revival with a rousing "Muddy Water," and back to reflective in the lovely "Worlds Apart." Yet at times it goes completely silly, and not necessarily in the good way. Miller's score is never more Branson-branded than in pieces like "Hand for the Hog," an almost inexplicably awful number seemingly written for the sole purpose of telling a flat, ages-old joke, and "Hog's" second cousin "Arkansas." Happily, these bits don't go on long. Although the show runs about 2 1/2 hours, it seems to move paradoxically, leisurely and relentlessly, kind of like the Big Muddy itself.

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William Hauptman's book gives us a nice feel for Huck's voice, which is of course crucial to the story, told here through Becher's open-faced, expressive reading. Huck, Tom and the rest of the "boys" are in fact college-aged, although Bentley Black, as a cracking, easy to watch but somewhat bizarre Tom Sawyer, almost looks the right age.

Although Black and Becher, along with a chorus of townspeople and a nice drunken Pap turn from Joel Ingram (dang-gum "Guv'ment" is one of the cornball comedy songs that work), get things rolling in genial fashion, the show really starts when Luwoye's Jim arrives. It's a tough balance role, playing a dignified man who is also an undereducated slave of the 19th century, because Twain left in the superstition and beliefs that seem to derive from ignorance. But of course the story is about the gradual discovery, by Huck, that Jim is an actual real-live human being, just like any white man.

Because Huck is of his time, and of his background — abusive father, little education — it's all the more emotionally effecting when Becher's epiphany arises, out of simple connection and shared experiences. The reprise of "Waitin' for the Light to Shine," in which Becher decides to brave Hell for Jim, hits an emotional peak.

You can't say it's a brave show, substituting in "slave" where the much more offensive, yet historically correct, epithet belongs. In context, that choice undercuts the power of "Big River," just as recent bowdlerizations of Twain's text undercut the book.

Yet this production, its spare-ish set designed for UA's Gallaway Theatre and the much-larger Montgomery Performing Arts Center, where the show opened last week, layers over some of the scripted/musical flaws with energy, style and heart.

Even though the men get most of the spotlight, there are spotlight moments from the women, including Allie Jones as a sweet, strong Mary Jane, Alyssa Grubbs in a stirring solo moment as a slave about to be sold from her family, and Marianne McConnell and Sarah Jones as the Widow Douglas and Mrs. Watson, who try their darndest to civilize that ragamuffin Huck.

Costumer Jack Schmitz very simply outlines the class and character via dress, giving intentionally clownish looks to the Duke and King, keeping Huck and Jim straightforward while dressing Tom, who does have the benefit of family, up just a little higher. Brian Elliot's light design created extra dimensions for Andy Fitch's river backdrop suggesting storms and times and moods.

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