The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover Art for Big River by Cally Long.
# Big River

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Synopsis

This adaptation of Mark Twain’s literary classic takes us down the mighty Mississippi River as the wild child Huckleberry Finn and his friend Jim, a runaway slave, search for freedom. Once a homeless boy, Huck lives in the small town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, with Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, two spinster sisters who took him in. They are trying to teach him the only way to heaven is by reading the Bible. He wants nothing to do with education and religion and would rather leave town to go West, taking his share of $6,000 that he and his friend Tom Sawyer each have from finding stolen gold on a previous adventure. Trouble arises from Huck’s vagabond, alcoholic father, who wants the money, and Huck fakes his own death to escape to Jackson’s Island.

Here he runs into Jim, a runaway slave belonging to Miss Watson. Jim admits to running away to avoid being sold again and to look for his family. Huck promises to help him, even though he could get into trouble. Huck hears a rumor that the town believes Jim “killed” Huck because he ran away the same night as Huck “died,” and so they quickly load a raft and escape on the river.

Soon two desperate men who have recently broken out of jail intrude upon the raft. The King and the Duke are conmen who tell Huck and Jim they are a preacher and an actor. The men come up with the idea of putting on a show in a town they are passing to drum up money from the locals. Jim is left chained to the raft as the men and Huck go into town. The show is ridiculous, but they make some money that they use to celebrate and purchase new clothes.

At the next two on the river, the men and Huck waste no time in staging another elaborate hoax. This time it involves a mourning family, a significant inheritance, shooting, and even Tom Sawyer.

What happens next will determine the future and freedom of both Huck and Jim, on their adventure down the Big River.
Characters

Mark Twain: The pen name of Samuel Clemens, author of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn on which Big River is based.

Huckleberry Finn: A poor teenaged boy, with no mother. His father is a violent drunk who is rarely around. Huck had been homeless, living in a large barrel. Through a series of adventures told in the story of Tom Sawyer, Huck had gained a small fortune of $6000. At the beginning of the play, he had been taken in and cared for by two sisters.

Widow Douglas and Miss Watson: Two sisters who are taking care of Huck and his education. They both care very much about religion. Miss Watson is a slave owner.

Jim: A slave belonging to Miss Watson, Jim has run away to find his family. He is very superstitious but knows Huck and cares for him as they journey down the river.

Tom Sawyer: Huck’s friend, Tom is a teenaged boy who loves adventure novels.


Pap Finn: Huck’s father, Finn is a vagabond drunkard who loves whiskey and hates the government. Tries to get at Huck’s money.

Judge Thatcher: The trustee managing Huck’s money for him.

Strange Woman: A woman new to the town of St. Petersburg, she knows enough to know what’s going on with the search for Huck’s body and his murderer, but not enough to know that the person she is talking to is Huck.

The King and the Duke: Charlatans and conmen who tell Huck and Jim they are royalty, their goal is to make money any fast way they can, favoring methods that include lying.

Mary Jane, Susan, and Joanna Wilkes: Daughters in a well-off family, their father recently died. These trusting women who are almost taken in by the machinations of the King and the Duke.

Counselor Robinson: A lawyer, he cautions the Wilkes daughters against trusting the King and Duke.

Alice and Her Daughter: Slaves belonging to the Wilkes family.

Sheriff Bell: The local sheriff.

Harvey Wilkes: The real uncle of the Wilkes daughters.

Sally Phelps: Tom Sawyer’s aunt.

Silas Phelps: Tom Sawyer’s uncle.

Doctor: He helps save Tom from a gunshot wound and defends Jim.
The success of the Tony Award-winning musical *Big River* is something of a musical miracle: its musical composer Roger Miller and author William Hauptman were both in a creative lag when the opportunity to create this musical was presented by the producer, Rocco Landesman.

Singer, songwriter Roger Miller had not written a new song in six years and had only seen one play in his life, while playwright and author William Hauptman had not written a play in seven years when they agreed to take on Landesman and his wife Holly’s idea for a musical on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It would turn out to be a crowning moment in both their careers.

**Roger Miller**

Roger Dean Miller was born in the midst of the Great Depression in Fort Worth, Texas on January 2, 1936. Just one year later he lost his father to meningitis. Economic hardship forced his mother to separate her three sons, and Miller was sent to Erick, Oklahoma to be raised by his aunt and uncle. Erick claims Miller as its own, and despite his acceptance into the mainstream 1960s pop music scene, he always stayed true to his country music, honky tonk roots in both his musical style and songwriting.

As a young boy Miller rubbed shoulders with family friend and in-law Sheb Wooley, who later became famous as an entertainer and for his song, “Purple People Eater.” They spent a lot of time together nursing each other’s dreams. “During those early years near Erick, Roger and Sheb often rode out ‘fixin’ fences, chasing steer and talking about stardom,” Wooley was quoted as saying in an article on Travelok.com (“Roger Miller,” https://www.travelok.com/rhythm-and-routes/artists/roger-miller).

Miller was always a dreamer, and, while he was required to work on the farm, he was not especially good at it or at school. He dreamt of music and stardom. By the time he was eleven he had used his earnings from picking cotton to buy himself a guitar. Wooley, already a rising star, taught Miller his first chords on the guitar. During his late teen years, Miller left Erick to chase his dreams. At age seventeen, he had a run in with the law that led him to join the U.S. Army during the Korean War. The army brought him the opportunity to play in a band, and he spent the time there playing guitar, fiddle, and drums in the Circle A Wranglers.

Miller’s time in the service set him on the path to his next big break. While playing in the band, he met the brother to entertainer Jethro Burns, who helped arrange an audition for Miller at RCA Nashville. However, his first audition did not go well, and he was advised to work on his songs and return and try again. So, while Miller tried to break into the Nashville music scene, his first job in Nashville was actually as a bellhop at the Andrew Jackson Hotel, located in the middle of the Nashville music district. He quickly became known as the “singing bellhop” because Miller’s love of music overflowed into everything he did. He would sing for anybody who would listen as he took them up and down the elevator. During that time he did record a few songs with Mercury records and occasionally toured with Minnie Pearl as a fiddler and as a drummer with Faron Young. His recordings were unsuccessful, and he kept his day job as a bellhop until he signed on with Mercury-Starday as a songwriter.

Performers like George Jones and Jimmy Dean were some of the first recipients of his songs.
Eventually, he became a sought after “hillbilly songwriter” when his songs took performers like Faron Young, Rex Allen, and Ernest Young into the top ten with songs like “Billy Bayou,” which became a number one hit sung by Faron Young. “He spoke in songs,” Grand Ole Opry bassist said of Miller (Travelok, https://www.travelok.com/rhythm-and-routes/artists/roger-miller).

As his songwriting career took off, Miller decided it was time to try to sing his own songs again. His popularity was soaring as he moved to Hollywood and began appearing regularly on The Jimmy Dean Show and The Merv Griffin Show. Suddenly the country became enamored with his goofy personality and quirky novelty songs. He signed a record contract with Smash Records, and his first single, “Dang Me” rose to number one in 1964. A few months later he followed that song with another top ten hit “Chug-a-lug.” In 1965, Miller released the biggest song of his career, “King of the Road”—a song that would go on to win Miller five Grammy Awards in 1965. Miller continued to write and perform his own songs and had several hits in the 1960s including “Husbands and Wives,” “You Can’t Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd,” and “My Uncle Used to Love Me but She Died.”

In the 1970s and ‘80s his singing and songwriting career slowed down as he took his talents down some new avenues. He concentrated on his hotel chain aptly called King of the Road. In 1974 he wrote and sang songs for Disney’s animated “Robin Hood.” His biggest hit of the ’80s was a duet with Willie Nelson, titled “Old Friends.” So, when Miller was approached about writing the music for Big River, it took a while to convince him to venture into unknown territory; and, as rehearsals began, he still had not finished writing all the songs. In the end, however, it was a perfect match for Miller’s talents. Big River (1985) went on to win seven Tony awards, two of which went to Miller for outstanding score and best musical.

According to Miller’s obituary in the New York Times, when the producer invited him to write the score for Big River, “Mr. Miller had never read the Twain classic. Studying the book, he recalled, he was overcome with language and imagery that swept him back to his rural Oklahoma childhood” (“Roger Miller, Quirky Country Singer and Songwriter Is Dead at 56, http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/27/arts/roger-miller-quirky-country-singer-and-songwriter-is-dead-at-56.html).

Big River was Miller’s last big project before he was diagnosed with throat cancer. He died in 1992. He left behind his wife, Mary, seven children, and seven grandchildren and a legacy of quirky honky tonk, country music.

**William Hauptman**

William Hauptman was born in Wichita Falls, Texas in 1942. Hauptman credits his father with exposing him to the landscape and the themes that dominate many of his works of fiction, as well as introducing him to theatre. Hauptman went on many adventures through Arizona and Wyoming with his father who was a petroleum geologist, and his story “The Desert” is a reflection of these adventures. As a boy Hauptman learned to love theatre when his father took him to see Gene Autry and Champion, the Wonder Horse. Hauptman knew he wanted to be an actor and eventually studied drama at the University of Texas.

Hauptman then set out to become an actor and spent some time living what he called the “hippie life” and searching for himself (William Hauptman, Author,” http://williamhauptman.net/WH_about.html). He made his way to New York and started auditioning for acting jobs while paying the bills as a temp. When he couldn’t find a monologue that suited him for auditions, he began writing his own. Soon he discovered he had a knack for playwriting and writing. He submitted those monologues in the form of a play to the Yale School of Drama in New York and was accepted as a playwriting student.
In 1974 his plays *Shearwater* and *Heat* were published, and, as he saw his plays start to have some success in New York, he says he began to see himself as a writer (http://www.williamhauptman.net/WH_about.html). His comedy *Domino Courts/Comanche Café* about two 1930s gangsters couples who met at a hotel in Oklahoma, won an Obie Award in 1977. In 1985 his collaboration with Roger Miller garnered him his greatest success to date as he applied his gift for writing American adventure stories to the adaptation of another American adventure writer’s epic story, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for the musical *Big River*. The play won seven Tony Awards, including best book. In 1987, Hauptman’s play about the oil boom and bust, *Gillette* was published.

Hauptman is also a well-published fiction writer, and his short stories have appeared in the *Best American Short Stories* anthology, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Southwest Review*. He has also published a collection of stories, *Good Rockin/Tonight*, and a novel, *Storm Season*. Hauptman is currently working on a musical about John Wesley Powell who was the first explorer of the Grand Canyon.

Hauptman lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife Marjorie. They are the parents of a son and a daughter.
The Bard, the Boy, and the Big River

By Ryan D. Paul

Authors Note: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be . . .”

“You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.” Thus begins one of the most famous, controversial, loved, and maligned works in the canon of American literature. There are certain books that in the words of cultural historian Alan Trachtenberg, “accumulate an aura that possess the reader before he ventures into reading itself; it gives him a readiness to respond and a set of expectations to guide his response” (Alan Trachtenberg, Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas, [Hill and Wang: New York, 2007], 167). Such is the case with The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain. Like the works of William Shakespeare, each time we experience Finn, we bring along with us our life experiences, our cultural understandings, and our changing world views. Literary and artistic voyages such as these are important to our developing humanity, our understanding of the world, and our place in it. This season, the Utah Shakespeare Festival takes us on such a journey, a story of two runaways, and a Big River.

Big River premiered on Broadway in April of 1985 and like the twisting, winding river that gives the musical its namesake, the trek from page to stage was just as circuitous. The story begins with Rocco Landesman, a Yale professor, mutual fund investor, racehorse owner, and lover of the music of Roger Miller. Sometime in the early 1980s Landesman and his wife went to see Miller perform at the Lone Star Cafe in New York City. Landesman recalls, “Heidi and I got to talking and she said we ought to have him to a Broadway show. We had never produced a show, so we didn’t know any better. And it was immediately obvious to me that the show ought to be a musical based on ’Huckleberry Finn’ which is my favorite novel.” (http://www.davidowen.net/files/betting-on-broadway-6-13-1994.pdf). Later that night Rocco and his wife visited Miller backstage and made the pitch. Miller who had become famous with songs like “King of the Road” and “Dang Me” and had a pivotal role in Walt Disney’s animated feature Robin Hood, later stated that “he made me an offer I couldn’t understand” (http://rogermiller.com/bio4.html). Miller’s wife seemed more intrigued by the concept and encouraged Landesman to write a letter explaining in greater detail his idea. Landesman began an intensive letter writing campaign to Miller that soon evolved into phone calls, seemingly to no avail.

After nearly a year of letters, calls, and personal visits, Miller finally agreed to write the music for what would become Big River. Landesmann hired William Hauptman, a former Yale classmate to write the book, and the creative team got to work. Landesmann recalls that getting Miller “to agree was not the same thing as getting him to do it, because it turned out he hadn’t written a song in ten years” (http://www.davidowen.net/files/betting-on-broadway-6-13-1994.pdf). Hauptman and Landesmann traveled to Miller’s home in Santa Fe and began the laborious process of creating the show. Hauptman later recalled, “Roger told me that when he was growing up, he spent a lot of time hitchhiking from Erick, Oklahoma, the town where he was born, to Fort Worth, Texas, which had a famous strip of honky-tonks along the Jacksboro Highway. When his money was gone, he slept in the back seat of a used car on a lot and hitchhiked back to Erick the next day. When I mentioned that this was a dangerous thing to do, Roger said, ‘All I know is, it’s real important to get to Fort Worth when you’re a kid.’ He continued, ‘As we talked, I began to see that roads were the rivers of the Great Plains, and while hitchhiking along them the young Roger Miller was thinking up his great hits, “King of the
Road” and “Chug-a-Lug.” Not only was Roger the Jack Kerouac of country music—he was the real Huckleberry Finn. Born into a racist society, he had already learned to think otherwise by the time I met him” (http://www.playbill.com/article/why-big-river-writer-roger-miller-was-the-real-huckleberry-finn).

The issue of race certainly looms large in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Big River. The journey of young Huckleberry Finn and Jim, an escaped slave, floating along the Mississippi in a desperate search for freedom, a different kind of liberation for each of them, but freedom none the less, is well known to audiences. Critic Jesse Green writes, “But Twain was not writing about Huckleberry Finn’s awakening to fun. It was the moral awakening of the country to the sin of slavery that interested him, an awakening he traced in Huckleberry Finn’s changing attitude toward Jim. Well into the narrative, Huck still considers his adventures with Jim a lark, a vacation from the pressures of his own alternately sanctimonious and abusive adults. Jim’s humanity, let alone his equality, is only intermittently clear to him” (http://www.vulture.com/2017/02/big-river-and-why-its-never-coming-back-to-broadway.html). This of course will change as the musical reaches its conclusion.

One of the reasons Twain’s novel proved then, and continues to prove now, to be so controversial is the use of certain language to tell the story. Finn is credited as being the first American novel to be written in the American vernacular. Instead of using proper sentence construction and phraseology, Twain writes the way he heard the people of his youth speak. Paul Nedham, who authenticated some of Twain’s early drafts stated, “Twain revised the opening line of Huck Finn three times. He initially wrote, “You will not know about me”, which he changed to, “You do not know about me”, before settling on the final version, “You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain’t no matter” (Phillip Young, Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration, [University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1966], 212).

Still, while Twain certainly experiments with dialect in his writing, it is the use of one particular word, the n-word, that has proven to be the most controversial. In the 1885 United States printing (it was first published in the United Kingdom in December 1884) Twain uses the n-word 219 times, and the novel was banned one month later as “not suitable for trash” (http://pagosacenter.org/big-river-tells-the-truth-as-mark-twain-told-it). Hauptman’s book for the musical Big River also utilizes the word as a way to communicate the harsh realities of slavery and race relations of the time period. In 2010 Hauptman stated, “I felt that Twain’s lesson has now been learned so thoroughly that even my selective use of the word seems excessive. It would not do to eliminate the [n-word] entirely—I have to be true to the world of Twain’s novel or we can’t have Huck’s conversion” (Ibid).

To this point, Utah Shakespeare Festival Executive Producer Frank Mack notes that, “Big River is a Broadway musical based on Mark Twain’s classic American novel, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Twain used the ‘n-word’ in his novel and so it also is present in the musical. One of the main characters in the story is a slave, and by telling this story we are forced to confront the inhumanity of the reality of slavery, which is far more insidious and toxic than the offensive language associated with it alone. By bringing these stories to life on stage we engage with the personal, human impacts of slavery and discrimination for the purpose of finding meaning. If we were to eliminate, or otherwise diminish the cruelty and offensive language, it would be harder to find such meaning and to discover the insights and genius of Twain and the Broadway musical creators.”

True to its mission to present relevant theatre to its audiences, the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s production of Big River challenges us to continue to think, discuss, and even debate the issue of race in a society that is becoming increasingly divisive. After all, that is the true power of this art form, to bring us together in a darkened theatre and have a conversation.