

# Otterbein makes 'Big River' better than it is

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

*Big River* falls short of the artistry and depth of *Into the Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Evita*, *A Chorus Line* and *Man of La Mancha* — all first-rank Broadway musicals that have received first-class revivals at Otterbein College in recent years.

Yet, Otterbein's rousing production of *Big River*, which opened last night at Westerville's Cowan Hall, is so polished and professional that one easily overlooks the show's folksy, family-oriented vulgarizations.

This beautifully designed and perceptively staged revival grounds the Tony-winning musical comedy-drama in rich characterizations.

Director John Stefano allows author William Hauptman and composer-lyricist Roger Miller's adaptation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* its picaresque sweep and era-defining scope while adding apt nuances of tone and texture.

The solid 28-member cast plays more than three dozen roles with sly humor and a spunky confidence that matches the happy-go-lucky spirit of Mark Twain's all-American yarn.

The acting is superb. So is the singing (guided by vocal director Craig Johnson), the lively pit orchestra (conducted by music director David DeVenney), Rob Johnson's picturesque scenic design, Katie Robbins' rags-to-nouveau riche-style 19th-century costumes and lighting designer Fred Thayer's burnished sunsets, hazy sunrises and dramatic atmospheric effects.

The cast's soaring baritones, plangent tenors and lilting sopranos make Miller's catchall country-western-gospel-blues score sound better than it really is.

Guest Equity performer Ron Richardson, who won a Tony award for originating the role of Jim in New York, brings a bona fide Broadway pizzazz to the college show.

His assurance and charisma, as Huck's mentor on their raft trip down the Mississippi River, galvanized the student cast and the packed audience at Wednesday's preview.

Corey Moore exudes a brash/bashful charm as Huck, Twain's witty archetype of the rambunctious American boy who would rather play hooky and go fishing than stay at

home to be "civilized."

Richardson and Moore's stirring duets (*Muddy Water*, *River in the Rain* and especially *Worlds Apart*) reflect their growing bonds of trust and friendship.

The show's underlying spirituality is conveyed with grace and long-suffering strength by the black slaves in *Crossing Over* and by Alice's Daughter (Tonya Watson) in the gospel-style *How Blest We Are*.

How blessed indeed is Otterbein to have such a strong supporting cast: Nick Koesters, dangerous and funny as Huck's ill-tempered Pappy; Patti Ann Knoop, brimming with kindness and grief as the bereaved Mary Jane Wilkes; Todd Alan Crain, as the strutting, mincing Duke; and Keith Lorcan Weirich's equally hammy King, the Duke's conniving partner-in-crime.

## THEATER REVIEW

*Big River*, Otterbein College's student production of the musical adaptation of Huck Finn's adventures. Directed by John Stefano.

Jim .....	Ron Richardson
Huck Finn.....	Corey Moore
King.....	Keith Weirich
Duke .....	Todd Crain
Mark Twain .....	Daryl Lozupone
Tom Sawyer .....	Josh Gildrie
Pap Finn .....	Nick Koesters

### One of the year's best musicals

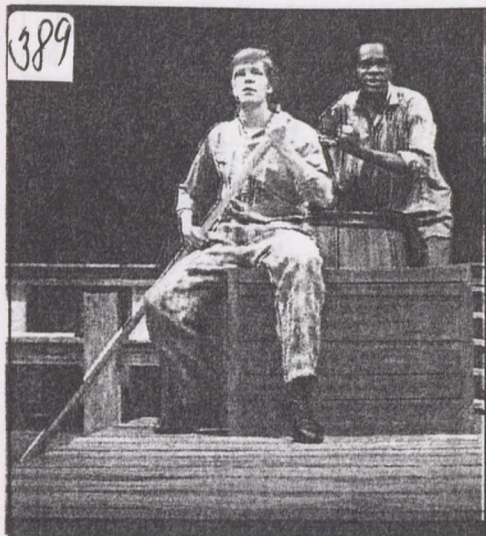
Performances are at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday; through May 8 in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets: \$10.50-\$12. Call 898-1109.



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Ken Chamberlain/Dispatch

Huck Finn (Corey Moore), left, and Jim (Ron Richardson) navigate the Mississippi in *Big River*.

## Richardson values the basic truths in 'Big River'

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

Broadway's Ron Richardson doesn't think he'll ever get tired of playing Jim, the black slave who befriends Huck Finn in *Big River*.

"I have a great love for the role, and a lot of people want to see me do it," said Richardson, who is in Columbus to rehearse Otterbein College's revival of the Tony-winning musical, which opens Thursday.

"*Big River* addresses some basic truths," Richardson said. "Mark Twain wrote about man's inhumanity to man. The story shows that people can love one another in the midst of a situation that doesn't necessarily dictate that kind of love."

Author William Hauptman and director Des

Otterbein College presents *Big River* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday; through May 8 in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$10.50-\$12. Call 898-1109.

McAnuff (Broadway's new *Tommy*) adapted the 1985 Tony winner for best musical from Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The gospel-folk-blues score is by Roger Miller, the country singer known for *King of the Road* and such novelty numbers as *Dang Me*, *Chug-A-Lug* and *Can't Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd*.

Richardson views *Big River* as "more of a play with music than a traditional musical comedy."

As Huck and Jim raft down the Mississippi River, they confront a potentially healthy rural America — but one sickened by the poisons of slavery, bigotry and racism.

"Jim is Huck's mentor," Richardson said. "Huck was an abused child who basically reared himself. It was easier for Huck to accept basic truths about living in society from Jim than from his (white) 'equals.'"

"*Big River* gives us a chance to look at the history of America and experience the pain of racism," Richardson said, "but it also shows us a solution."

"This is a show for all Americans, especially given today's racial tensions. They never really went away, but now they are more visible," he said, referring to the Rodney King case and the Los Angeles riots.

This will be Richardson's fifth production of *Big River*. Besides the original Broadway show, he starred in the first national tour, a Japanese tour to Tokyo and Osaka, and a student revival at Moorhead University in Moorhead, Minn.

"Being in a college setting is exciting," Richardson said. "Young actors bring a fresh, serious approach to working in the theater. They are still at the point where they are enjoying it, and it hasn't become a job."

The guest Equity actor will star opposite several of Otterbein's most promising students: Corey Moore, as Huck Finn; Keith Weirich, as the King; Todd Crain, as the Duke; and Daryl Lozupone, as Mark Twain.

Moore, Weirich and Crain played significant roles last year in Otterbein's acclaimed *Into the Woods*.

"The real challenge for me is to show the audience what's in Jim's mind — all of the survival techniques that he had to develop, and all the pain he had to absorb in putting back together his own family," Richardson said.

Richardson made his New York debut in the mid-1970s as Sportin' Life in the acclaimed Houston Grand Opera revival of *Porgy and Bess*.

His first Broadway musicals were *Timbuktu*, opposite Eartha Kitt; *The Wiz* (as the Scarecrow); and *Dreamgirls* (as James Thunder Early).

Then Richardson, who was approaching 30, decided to leave show business to get a "real job." He went to work for Atlantic Records and was among the first scriptwriters for MTV.

That experience led to a career re-evaluation.

"I found the theater far more sane than corporate America," Richardson said, "so I decided to return to the stage."

Richardson won a 1985 Tony award for best-supporting actor for his portrayal of Jim in *Big River*.

"It gave me a lot of opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise," Richardson said.

Since then, he has appeared on Broadway with Rae Dawn Chong in *Oh, Kay!*, in London's West End in the award-winning *Carmen Jones* and on television in NBC's *227* and ABC's *One Life To Live*. He is preparing two new Broadway musicals — *Nat King Cole: A Legacy* and *Black Broadway!*

"I have traveled all over the world: Japan, France, the Soviet Union, the Baltic states," he said. "And that changed my view of things."

"Every culture has a unique way of dealing with problems. When you get exposed to other cultures, you see your own in a new light."



## ONSTAGE

## Season's best needed no bells, whistles

Simple can be magical.

The simplest form of theater is a lone actor onstage. By using words, glances, gestures and a minimum of props and scenery, a single actor conjures living characters and complex worlds out of a willing audience's imagination.

It is the simplest theater that I remember best as I reflect on the local performances that defined the highs and lows of the 1992-93 season.

**Stellar solos.** Lynn Redgrave was spellbinding in *Shakespeare for My Father*, the season's best touring play. So were Brooks Almy in *Shirley Valentine* at Players Theatre Columbus and Lynne Wilde in *The Belle of Amherst* at New World Theatre.

Redgrave conceived, wrote, directed and performed her autobiographical play, now reaping plaudits on Broadway. Her enchantingly modest piece weaves crisply delivered excerpts from 19 Shakespearean roles and revealing flashbacks from her youth as an aspiring actress overshadowed by her famous British father's legacy.

Almy, in the season's best professional performance by an actress, charmed audiences in her juicy title role and as more than a dozen other amusing and convincing characters — male and female, young and old. Almy's lovable British housewife made *Shirley Valentine* one of the season's highlights.

Wilde's Emily Dickinson was the season's best performance by an actress in a semiprofessional production. Wilde's gentle *Belle* shed light on the translucent, evergreen soul within the New England poet.

**Best actor:** Allan Leatherman, a veteran Cleveland character actor, stood out as the wheedling, weak-willed grandfather in New World's superior *Buried Child*.

**Runner-up:** Ed Vaughan, horrifyingly amoral and creepily funny as the cane-wielding father in Contemporary American Theatre Company's challenging revival of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*.

**Honorable mentions:** Jim Zvanut's mannered but haunted Scrooge in New World's *A Christmas Carol* and T.J. Harler's conniving, demented Baron von Bluebeard in Reality Theatre's fun *Bluebeard*.

**Best actor, musical:** Mark Baker, a mesmerizing and macabre Emcee in Players' *Cabaret*.

**Best supporting actress:** A tie! Lynne Roth, a master of the



**MICHAEL GROSSBERG**

**ing actor:** Tom Fortman, endearing and wistful as *Prelude's* mysterious Old Man.

**Runner-up:** Ron Thomas, a college student who gave a persuasive middle-aged aura to the morally compromised father in Otterbein's powerful revival of *All My Sons*.

**Honorable mentions:** Jonathan Putnam and Michael Harper, whose uncanny body language made their canine impersonations so slyly on-target in Putnam's impish *Dogs Do* at CATCO. And Steve Weiss, fierce and pathetic as *Buried Child's* crippled son, deserves an award for "best theater critic in an on-stage supporting role."

**Best supporting actor, musical:** Jackie Patterson, whose exuberance and gleeful tap-dancing enlivened Players' *Sophisticated Ladies*.

**Runner-up:** Jerry Chapa, a Columbus newcomer with a big voice and ample stage presence who made a splash with performances at Players (*Assassins*), Spotlight Dinner Theatre (*Some Enchanted Evening*, *Chicago*), Gallery Players (*Fiddler on the Roof*) and Villa Milano Dinner Theatre. When will somebody give this guy the lead?

**Best supporting ...?** Wesley Campbell Coleman's imperious, hilarious Lady Bracknell was almost unclassifiable, but that's what made it such a scream in Actors' Masterworks Series revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Coleman's persuasive impersonation

zingy punch line, showed off her mastery again as the quirky mother in CATCO's *Prelude to a Kiss*. And Gail Griffith was funny, cranky and soberingly real as the world-weary prostitute in Shadowbox Theatre's one-act, *Snowangel*.

**Best support-**



**Brooks Almy**

... a "Valentine" to remember

ranks as the season's most unusual casting choice. And it worked!

**Saving graces.** A good supporting performance can't save a play that doesn't succeed for other reasons, but it can offer refreshing relief.

Five examples: Harold Eisenstein's good humor as the Jewish neighbor in Gallery Players' *Cantorial*; Angela Barch's vivaciousness in Actors' *Doctor Faustus* and *Earnest*; Jim Azelvandre's lunacy as a divine messenger in Spotlight's *God's Favorite*; and Robert Pivetta's songwriter and Mark Passerello's buddy in Gallery's *Doubles*.

The best was Jonathan Beck Reed's zany scene-stealing in *Balancing Act*, Dan Goggins' banal musical at Players.

**Best ensemble, play:** Players' *Lips Together*, *Teeth Apart* wouldn't have been so wise and witty without Linda Cook's smarter-than-she-sounds chatterbox, Malachy Cleary's snotty but scared husband, Thomas Nahrwald's homophobic but human brother and Kimberly King's grief-singed painter.

An honorable mention, recommended by *Dispatch* critic Tim Feran, goes to the "almost uniformly excellent" student cast in the world premiere of Judi Ann Mason's race drama at Ohio State University.

**Best ensemble, musical:** Players' *Assassins* brought together the best of central Ohio's semiprofessional actors and nine fine Equity actors. Together, they more than met the demands of Stephen Sondheim's vaudeville-style serio-comedy about the American dream's dark shadow.

**Runner-up:** The rousing student ensemble of Otterbein College's *Big River*. Director John Stefano added nuances of tone and texture to the musical's picaresque sweep by encouraging the 28-member cast to play more than three dozen roles with sly humor and confidence.

**Worst ensemble:** The hammy actors in Mystery Cafe's gimmicky *Killing Mr. Withers*.

Michael Grossberg is *Dispatch* theater critic.

■ Next Sunday: What makes a good stage designer? Plus, some final design awards.



**Wesley Campbell Coleman**

... imperious impersonation



# Theater groups have talent worth recognizing

Players, for one, had best season in history

Central Ohio theater has its bests, too.

Yes, it's time for the second annual "They-still-don't-have-a-name-but-it's-the-thought-that-counts" awards for outstanding theater in central Ohio.

Summer theater is off to a peppy start with Players Theatre Columbus' *Pump Boys and Dinettes* and Gallery Players' *Fiddler on the Roof*, but now is a good time to take stock of the 1992-93 season:

**■ Outstanding sophomore:** New World Theatre set an example of consistent excellence during its second season. The semiprofessional troupe, led by director-actor Jim Zvanut and his wife, actress Lynn Wilde, scored success (a persuasive revival of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*) after success (a deft *Christmas Carol* whose fast-moving staging recalled *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Wilde's lovely Emily Dickinson in *The Belle of Amherst*).

**■ Biggest disappointments:** Other theaters took admirable risks, but too many didn't pay off. Among them: many of the new playlets in Contemporary American Theatre Company's third annual Shorts Festival; *Balancing Act*, another silly (but unfunny) Dan Goggin musical at Players Theatre Columbus; *Macbush*, a heavy-handed new political satire at Ohio State University; *Murder on the Menu*, Larry Pfeil's new comedy-mystery for Spotlight Dinner Theatre; and *Of Thee I Sing*, a faltering revival of an outdated Gershwin classic, at Gallery Players.

**■ Best musical:** Players' thought-provoking area premiere of Stephen Sondheim's fascinatingly flawed *Assassins* was a risk that did pay off — if not in box-office returns (average), then in renewed artistic credibility for central Ohio's long-maturing Equity theater.

*Assassins* was merely one peak in Players' best season yet, but it was the most significant for its willingness to challenge audiences.

Runners-up: Otterbein College's rousing *Big River*, bolstered by Tony-winning guest artist Ron Richardson as Huck's black friend; and Players' dazzling *Sophisticated Ladies*, a Duke Ellington revue with tap dancing, singing and costumes that couldn't be beaten.

## ONSTAGE



MICHAEL GROSSBERG

**■ Best play:** The outstanding finalists include Players' charming *Shirley Valentine*, New World Theatre's simple but effective *The Belle of Amherst*, OSU's strikingly staged *Our Country's Good* and CATCO's touching *Prelude to a Kiss*.

The winner: Players' *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, which drew out the comedy and poignant drama of Terrence McNally's off-Broadway hit about two married couples.

**■ Best children's show:** The finalists, recommended by *Dispatch* Entertainment Reporter Nancy Gilson, include *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* at NewMarket Mall Family Theatre (now Family Theatre Playhouse), and Columbus Junior Theatre's *The Ballad of Robin Hood*. *Pied Piper* stood out for Darryl Bojanowski's original music and lyrics, while *Robin Hood* scored with William Goldsmith's fast-paced direction.

Gilson's pick for the winner: Players Youth Theatre's *Charlotte's Web*, buoyed by Ginger Lee McDermott's performance in the title role.

**■ Best director, play:** Finalists include Alan Woods, whose multimedia staging of OSU's otherwise-forgettable *Macbush* was brilliant; Ionia Zelenka, who made the con-

**■ Next Sunday:** The acting awards and more.

temporary romantic fable *Prelude to a Kiss* so believable; Ed Vaughan, who shaped the madcap symmetry of Otterbein's farce, *Lend Me a Tenor*; Joy Reilly, who boldly staged *Our Country's Good*; and Geoffrey Nelson, whose deft pacing helped CATCO's *The Homecoming* balance Harold Pinter's opaque words and sinister pauses.

The winner: Jay Raphael, for orchestrating *Lips*' well-balanced four-character ensemble.

**■ Best director, musical:** Steven Anderson wins for his innovative environmental staging of *Assassins*.

Runner-up: Ed Graczyk, who grounded Players' *Cabaret* in chilling drama while his design concept gave it flamboyance.

**■ Best choreography:** *Sophisticated Ladies* was a swinging good time thanks to snazzy tap dancing, choreographed by director Greg Ganakas.

Runner-up: Bob Rizzo, for his dizzy dancing in Players' *Arthur, the Musical*.

**■ Best onstage band:** Ray Eubanks' snazzy Jazz Arts Group kept *Sophisticated Ladies* hopping.

Runners-up: Connie Meng's dexterous musicians, playing the dissonant chords of Players' *Assassins*, and the Kit Kat band (again led by Meng) in Players' powerful *Cabaret*.

**■ Best scenic design:** The finalists include Rob Johnson's picturesque *Big River*; Fred Thayer's elegant cream-and-lavender hotel suite for *Lend Me a Tenor*; Chisha Siebert's imaginative evocation of ship, sea and shore in *Our Country's Good*; and Dennis Hassan's ingenious Oval Office gadgetry for *Macbush*.

The winner is no contest: Dan Gray, Players' resident set designer, for any one of several memorable shows. Take your pick: Gray's functional outdoor swimming pool and sleek beach cabin for *Lips Together*; his baronial, stone-and-wood English manor for *Sleuth*; his giant duck bath and Coney Island neon signs for *Arthur, the Musical*; or his funky, lovingly detailed diner for *Pump Boys and Dinettes*.

Michael Grossberg is *Dispatch* theater critic.

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