

Gannett Westchester Newspapers/Sunday, April 21, 1985



Ron Richardson, left, as Jim and Daniel H. Jenkins as Huck Finn in 'Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.'

A lyrical look at Twain

By Georgette Gouveia

Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a musical based on Mark Twain's classic novel, rolls onto Broadway Thursday amid three big Twain anniversaries. Feb. 18 marked the 100th anniversary of the American publication of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." (The book was first published in England on Dec. 10, 1884.) Seventy-five years ago today, Twain died in Redding, Conn. Nov. 30 will be the 150th anniversary of his birth in Florida, Mo.

The musical also comes at a time when there is renewed controversy over whether the book, about a boy and a runaway slave on the Mississippi River in the 1840s, is racist. In recent years, a small but vocal group has tried to ban "Huck Finn," which makes frequent use of the word "nigger," from school reading lists and theater productions.

But if the creators and cast of "Big River" have anything to do with it, such controversy will be laid to rest. "This is not a kiddie version of 'Huckleberry Finn,'" says René Auberjonois, a star of ABC-TV's "Benson" who plays the Duke, a con artist, in "Big River." "This is a reverent but joyous attempt to convey what writer Bill Hays and director Des McAnuff thought to be the best of Twain was anything but a racist."



René Auberjonois, who plays the Duke, says he was inspired to write the lyrics and music for "Big River" by his memories of growing up on a farm.

Cast members say that reverence starts, in part, from a thorough academic study of Twain and "Huck Finn," an almost masterful synthesis in Broadway research, while much of the joy comes from the score by Roger Miller, the 11-time Grammy Award winner who is making his Broadway debut.

For Miller, the experience from writing Broadway hits like "The Bare Necessities," "England Swings" and "Dang Me" to writing the music and lyrics for a story wasn't that hard.

"As I got into it, I saw more of myself in it," Miller says with a "soft gentleness," a phrase he uses to describe country people. "I'm sort of putting my memories to music, 'cause I grew up on a farm in

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POP BEAT

ANTHONY DECURTIS



All 17,000 tickets for Madonna's Radio City Music Hall concert sold out in a half-hour.

The 'material girl' strikes it rich on video and film

Madonna has, in large part, achieved her enormous popularity by offering herself as an alluring, if caricaturish, blend of traditional and feminist notions of womanhood. Her unblushing declaration that "We're living in a material world, and I am a material girl" strikes a sympathetic chord in a modern generation of young people who believe in the virtue of affluence. At the same time, her bellybutton-flashing "Boy Toy" image winkingly intimates that even girls who don't go off to earn MBAs can have some fun and score some goodies in what's still predominantly a man's world.

In her title role in the current film smash, "Desperately Seeking Susan," Madonna portrays a street-wise bohemian hustler who manages to exchange roles temporarily with an upper-middle-class New Jersey housewife. The film's sharpest comedic moment is its depiction of Susan's effortless adjustment to the bourgeois luxuries of suburban living. As she instinctively sizes up the quality of the wallpaper and samples the pleasures of the backyard pool, Susan makes it clear that her bohemianism is simply a way to suffer poverty in style, not a protest against society's governing values.

Similarly, Madonna's own writhing sexuality and fashion boldness are protests against nothing more substantial than boredom. And the four song videos comprising the "Madonna" compilation (Warner Music Video, \$19.95) are the furthest distance from boring. The most sophisticated video here, by far, is "Like A Virgin," which features the singer indulging in an elaborate wedding-night fantasy while floating through Venice in a gondola.

But Madonna's riveting erotic presence is all the more impressive in the less spectacular videos for "Burning Up," "Borderline" and "Lucky Star." Those vignettes depend almost entirely on Madonna's fleshy sexual magnetism for their visual power, and they succeed quite splendidly on that basis.

Madonna's presence is virtually ubiquitous these days. Along with "Desperately Seeking Susan," her triple-platinum "Like A Virgin" LP, her video compilation, and a first-ever national tour that will bring her to Radio City Music Hall June 6, 7 and 8, Madonna also has two tunes (the hit single "Crazy for You" and "Gambler") on the "Vision Quest" soundtrack. All 17,000 tickets for her New York concert sold out in a half-hour, a record for Radio City.

ON "SOUTHERN ACCENTS," his first album release since 1982, Tom Petty reaches back to his Florida roots to forge a cycle of songs that is rigorously old-fashioned and earnestly contemporary. While most successful LPs these days are collections of four or five potential hit singles and an equal amount of competent, high-gloss filler, "Southern Accents" (MCA) is a thematically unified meditation on the American South — its self-destructive parochialism and its nourishing sense of tradition.

"We got our own way of living, but everything gets done with a southern accent, where I come from," Petty croons on the album's deeply affecting title track. The quiet regional dignity of those lines contrasts sharply with the hell-bent cry of red-neck doom that constitutes the lyrical hook of "Rebels," the record's opening cut. "With one foot in the grave and one foot on the pedal, I was born to rebel." Both visions are dramatically presented and left to stand on their own terms — the listener is left to discern the full picture of a region's pride and narrowness, and the eventual fates of both types of characters.

But if Petty's thematic comprehensiveness and literary ambition are throwbacks to the concept-album idea prevalent in the late '60s, the California-based singer also has sought to update his sound on this LP. Known for their commitment to hard-hitting guitar-based rock, as evidenced on albums like "Hard Promises" and "Damn the Torpedoes," Petty and his band, the Heartbreakers, incorporate strings, horns, electronic voice treatments and more emphatic



Tom Petty

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Oklahoma. I was raised by people who were not that far removed from Mark Twain-type people."

Some of those memories are of his mother, a churchgoer who loved to sing hymns.

"She would work in the fields and sing those hymns," Miller says. "We didn't have money or anything, and we had crops to get in."

So "Big River" includes gospel songs, Miller's first venture into religious music.

SOME MEMORIES HE used are of his father.

"My dad was a farmer, not a man of the world. He would fuss about the government, but he didn't know what to fuss about, any better than anybody still does today," Miller says. "He wouldn't quite cuss the government, 'cause he respected it, but he would go through these rages."

That general ranting and raving is the subject of "Gov'ment," a bluesy number in which Huck's drunken, broken-down father vents his frustration with that faceless institution called government.

Given the range of music in "Big River" — gospel, blues, vaudeville numbers and Broadway production numbers, as well as the country songs that are Miller's trademark — will the public be surprised by his versatility?

"I HOPE IT'S a pleasant surprise for a lot of people," he says with a shy smile. "I didn't adhere to any musical boundary. I just let myself go."

Miller says his score does not deal explicitly with the issue of racism. Even in the song "Worlds Apart," for Huck (Daniel H. Jenkins) and the slave Jim (Ron Richardson), the idea that brown eyes and blue eyes see the world differently was an afterthought, he says.

"I wanted a friendship song," Miller says. "Huck and Jim are friends. Black and white is not in their talk or their feelings but in their lives. As they go along, each is faced with his own realities."

The theme of racism, veiled by Twain's humor, is addressed in William Hauptman's adaptation of



The King (Bob Gunton), left, and the Duke (Rene Auberjonois), right, lift Huckleberry Finn (Daniel H. Jenkins) in a scene from the play.

the novel. "TWAIN WORE THE mask of a humorist when he was writing about a lot of things he was very serious and angry about," Hauptman says. "I think in my adaptation I've done what I could to drop the mask a little bit and make his original anti-slavery intentions clearer."

One of the novel's themes that the play illustrates is the conflict between Huck's society-formed conscience, which tells him to return Jim to his "owner," and his heart, which urges him ultimately to help Jim find freedom.

Hauptman says the recent discovery of a letter, in which Samuel L. Clemens (Twain's real name) agreed to finance a black student's law school education, supports his view that "Huck Finn" is an anti-racist book about a racist world.

To cut through the veil of Twain's humor and ensure that the cast shared this vision, cast mem-

bers spent a week discussing the book and Hauptman's adaptation before rehearsals began.

"IT WAS A REAL luxury," Auberjonois said. "In a Broadway situation, you usually jump right in. But we worked on this like the classic that it is. It was like a college course in Mark Twain and 'Huckleberry Finn.'"

It's clear from talking to creators and cast members of "Big River" during rehearsals and the current preview performances at the Eugene O'Neill Theater that they hold Twain and "Huck" in affection.

"It is the great American novel," Hauptman says, echoing the view of many. "It embodies a lot of themes we're still struggling with — friendship, friendship between blacks and whites, the problem of growing up and the problem of what to do with one's freedom."

"The innocent survives and triumphs in a stifling atmosphere,

because of his heart," Jenkins says of the mischievous, but kind Huck, "and that's just wonderful."

ALREADY, MILLER SAYS, teachers are calling the box office and making plans to bring their students to see "Big River."

"I would love it if it brings renewed interest in the book and Mark Twain," he says. "Twain was so good. He must've had a real twinkle in his eye," Miller adds, with a twinkle in his own.

Performances of "Big River" are Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. except for opening night, which has a 6:30 p.m. curtain. Matinees are at 2 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays. Tickets range from \$30.50 to \$40. The Eugene O'Neill Theater is at 230 W. 49th St. For more information, call (212) 246-0220.

VOCAL SCOOPS

BY LOU CEVETILLO

Opera fails to stay afloat in Westchester

Even though interest in opera seems to be growing in the United States, in Westchester, it seems to be thwarted at each turn.

In the early 1960s, Westchester had two performing opera companies. Both are now dead. C. Andrew Randall's Westchester Lyric Opera performed throughout the county and offered performances in the Little Theater in the County Center in White Plains. Gene Talamo and his soprano/wife, Marge, had the Westchester Opera Guild, which held its performances in Yonkers and starred such luminaries as baritone James Buckley.

The 1970s saw the advent of two rather promising companies — the Westchester Lyric Festival and the Singers' Theater in Northern Westchester.

The Lyric Festival, under the direction of Franco Iglesias, made a splashy entrance into the operatic arena with full productions of "La Boheme" and "L'Elisir D'Amore" and, in the 1980s, "Aida," "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "I Pagliacci." Unfortunately, the Lyric Festival could not maintain a more predictable and stable calendar of performances, leaving their followers without shows too often.

Norma Bruce, 12 years ago, created Singers' Theater for the purpose of bringing vocal music, mostly opera, to the forefront of Westchester's arts circles. Miss Bruce, a mezzo soprano, brought some very enterprising events to the operatic scene by merging with Opera on the Sound. This collaboration brought fully staged, full orchestra performances to the Music Hall in Tarrytown for the past several years.

Standard repertory was the offering from Singers' Theater, but even so, attendance was at times marginal, and the level of performance was not always of acceptable quality. Nevertheless, Singers' Theater was the most stable of the operatic ventures, and it did hold performances with considerable regularity. Recently, however, it was learned that Singers' Theater is no longer in existence. Miss Bruce, in a recent telephone conversation, told Vocal Scoops, she is leaving the world of opera impresario to continue her own singing career. The demands of such an endeavor would not permit her to

continue producing operas in Westchester.

Therefore, the serious opera buff must either look toward New York City or Stamford to get his "operatic fix." Some operaphiles have avoided the productions of the Connecticut Grand Opera, located at the Palace Theater in Stamford, and the Connecticut State Opera at the Arts Center in Stamford. Both these organizations have produced operas of professional caliber and, at times, as fine if not better than some of the productions at the Met or at the City Opera at Lincoln Center. Outside of New York City, the Connecticut Grand Opera continues to have one of the most impressive seasons of any opera company in the tri-state area.

The Connecticut Grand Opera holds productions on subsequent Saturday evenings in two cities — Stamford and Bridgeport. Gounod's "Faust" is the Grand Opera's last production of the season with performances in Stamford May 11 and in Bridgeport May 18. The cast will include Diana Soviero and Justino Diaz as Marguerite and Mephistopheles.

For tenor buffs, the Grand Opera is sponsoring the inaugural Giuseppe Di Stefano International Vocal Competition for Tenors June 20-22, at the Palace Theater. Di Stefano will be joined by some of the greatest tenors of the post World War II period — Franco Corelli, Ferruccio Tagliavini and Carlo Bergonzi — as judges of the competition.

The competition will begin Thursday, June 20, from 2 to 7:30 p.m. The finals will begin Friday, June 21, at 8 p.m. The festivities will end Saturday evening with a concert by Di Stefano, "Canzoni Italiane," in which he will sing Italian, Sicilian and Neapolitan songs. This will be Di Stefano's only United States concert this year. Last year he sang at the Palace with unparalleled success. For information and tickets, call (203) 359-0009.

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drum tracks on "Southern Accents." To achieve these modernizations, Petty brought in Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics, who co-wrote and helped produce three songs. The droning, psychedelic single, "Don't Come Around Here No More," which uses a sitar, is one of the tunes Stewart worked on.

Not all of these innovations are integrated into the songs in a completely satisfying way, and many die-hard Petty fans have expressed initial objections to their hero's move away from rock purity. But "Southern Accents" assumes a worthy place beside the numerous other LPs that have taken America as their focus in one way or another in the past few years. Like the best of these records — Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." and John Cougar Mellencamp's "Uh-huh" — "Southern Accents" explores its vast subject with a thoughtful, critical affection. Avoiding both mindless chauvinism

and easy, enlightened cliches, "Southern Accents" restores Petty and the Heartbreakers to prominence and makes their summer tour an extremely welcome prospect.

That tour is scheduled to begin in late May. Reports indicate that Petty, who broke his hand when he put his fist through a studio wall last year, is able to play guitar again to a limited degree and should be restored to full powers by the tour's start.

COLUMBIA RECORDS WILL soon be releasing a collection of previously unissued Marvin Gaye songs. Titled "Dream of a Lifetime," the LP includes some of the tracks Gaye was working on at the

time of his shooting a year ago this month and some songs he had recorded earlier.

By all accounts, the album Gaye was working on when he died carried the sexual themes of his "Midnight Love" LP (which included the "Sexual Healing" single) still further. As it is, "Dream of a Lifetime" will include tunes called "Savage in the Sack" and "Masochistic Beauty." Gaye, one of the greatest soul singers of all times, is currently memorialized in two hit songs: Diana Ross' "Missing You" and the Commodores' "Night Shift."

BACKBEATS: The recent physi-

cal collapse of Thompson Twins' lead singer Tom Bailey in England has forced that popular British trio to postpone all touring and recording plans indefinitely... Texas blues guitarist Johnny Winter will be appearing at the Beacon Theater (212 874-1717) in Manhattan Friday. On the same night, reggae star Pablo Moses will be appearing at The Ritz (212 228-8888).

Advertisement for 'The Last Dragon' movie, featuring a dragon and text: 'A funny, high-energy combination of rock, romance, and karate.' - Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times

Advertisement for 'Alamo Bay' movie, featuring a man and text: 'Put 'Alamo Bay' on your must-see list. It's powerful, provocative and deeply engrossing.'

Advertisement for 'Lost in America' movie, featuring Albert Brooks and Julie Hagerty, with text: 'MORE BIG LAUGHS THAN ANY FILM THIS YEAR.'

Advertisement for 'Care Bears Movie' featuring the Care Bears characters, with text: 'HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOUR KIDS SEEN AMERICA'S #1 FAMILY HIT?'

Advertisement for 'Mask' movie, featuring a man in a mask, with text: 'EXPERIENCE THE JOY OF "MASK"'

Advertisement for 'Ladyhawke' movie, featuring a man and a woman, with text: 'I HAD A FANTASTIC TIME! SUSPENSE! EXCITEMENT!'

Advertisement for 'The Purple Rose of Cairo' movie, featuring a man and a woman, with text: '...funny and magical...'

Large advertisement for 'Police Academy' movie, featuring traffic signs and text: 'What The Creators Of "Police Academy" Did For Law Enforcement Is Nothing Compared To What They're Doing To Traffic School!'