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Ain't no river wide enough to keep 'em from gettin' together
Waynesboro Players production unites the races

By GINA FARTHING
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 Tuesday, April 18, 2006

The Waynesboro Players are about to put another theatrical season to bed. But before they do, they'll exit the stage with a bang from the gang.

Thursday begins a four-day run of the Players' production, "Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," adapted from the novel by Mark Twain, at the Waynesboro High School Louis Spilman Auditorium. It's a story about a boy growing into adulthood and a friendship that transcends hate. It's the saga of the maturing conscience of humanity that learns from history.

In the musical, set in the Mississippi River Valley of the 1840s, slavery is the law of the land and Huck Finn, played by Colton Berry, a 16-year-old Wilson Memorial High School sophomore, is a slave to his heritage and upbringing - at least in the beginning.

"Society tells Huck what will get him into Heaven," said Duane Hahn, one of the show's three directors. "It's a journey of discovery."

During the journey, Huck and his friend Jim, an escaped slave played by James Stewart, will discover the worth of human life.

"It's a story with two hearts," said Stewart, the director of clinical services at Liberty Point Residential Program in Staunton. "You have the adventures of Huck and the travels of Jim and the reconnection of him to his family."

Stewart reconnects himself with "Big River" to the Players, after his first performance with them in "Showboat," a decade ago.

What makes the Players' presentation of "Big River" different is its attitude toward the sensitive issues of slavery and language.

Hahn said the original language within the production off-put some of the

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people selected to the cast. So, changes were made, which encouraged many to participate.

"The Players have made adjustments that are still factual but are sensitive to the times and language," said Stewart. "Rehearsals have brought us together like a family.

"It's the story of friendship, if we look beyond the differences," he said. Stewart isn't the only one to feel this way.

"When I first read the script ... I wouldn't have done it," said Berry, who has strong feelings about opinions offered by the show. The n-word was removed, he added.

"But we've tried to stay true to the dialogue of the time. We replaced it with slave or runaway," he said, adding that it didn't alter the story.

"Huck's a fun character, different than me. He's completely changed by the end," Berry said. "Jim becomes his best friend.

"People know this story from their childhoods. They identify with it and grew up with it. It's so true to the book," said Berry.

Finn is the biggest role he's played to date, although he has had sizeable parts in the past.

"Big River" reunites Stewart and Berry, who worked together in "The Wiz" four years ago. Stewart played the lion and Colton the part of Michael Jackson's scarecrow. They also studied together last year for "Jesus Christ Superstar."

"Dr. Stewart was Judas, and I was his understudy," Berry said.

In "Big River," he says of Stewart, "He's fantastic. They couldn't have picked a better Jim."

Of Berry, Stewart said, "He's a delight."

In the end, the Players' actors, technical and set construction people, musicians, direction and production combine to construct a period piece that does more than entertain. It shows how people can come together and work toward a common goal.

"They are a phenomenally talented group," Stewart said.

Contact Features Editor Gina Farthing at 932-3559.

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