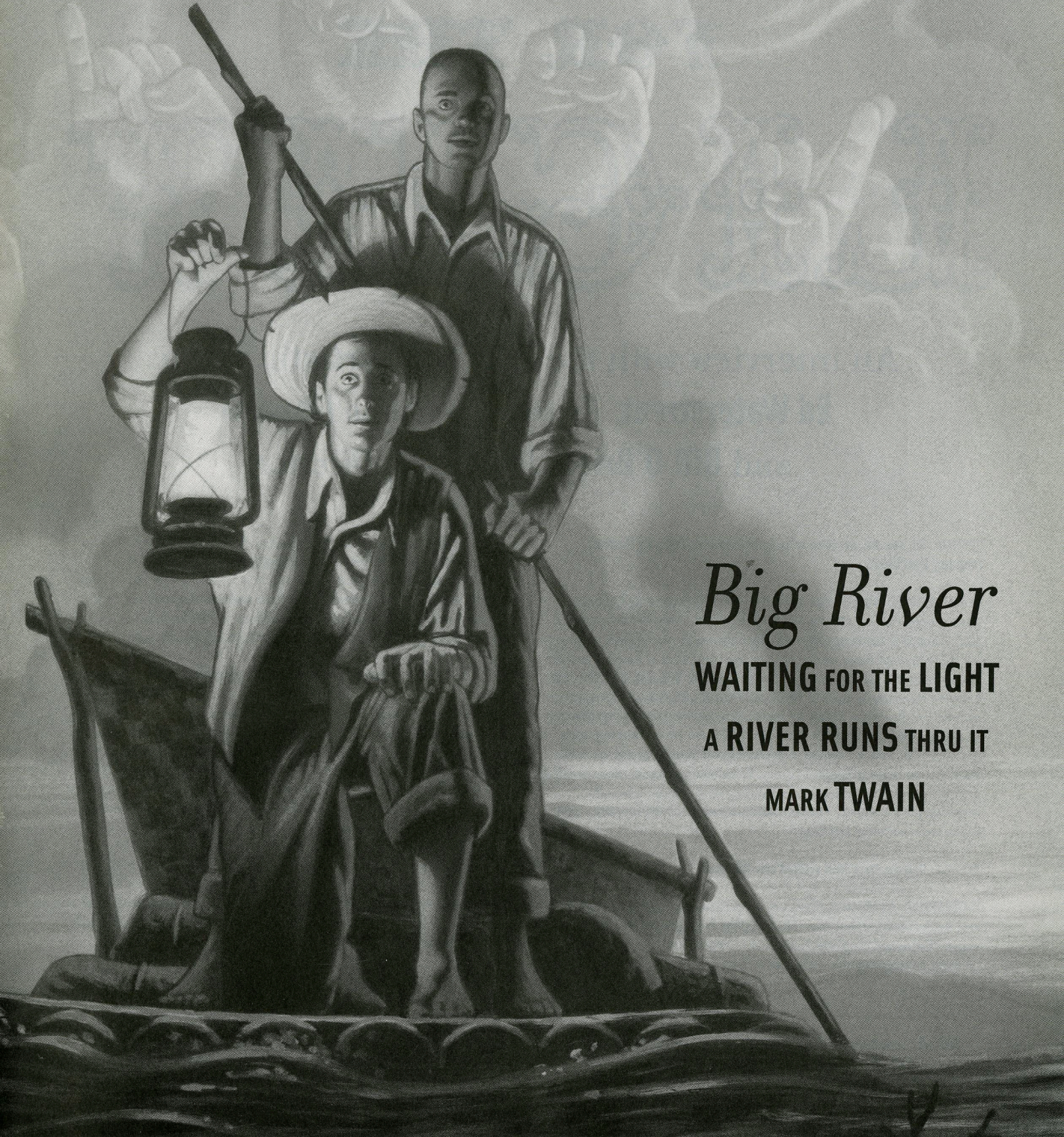


# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY SPRING 2003



## *Big River*

WAITING FOR THE LIGHT

A RIVER RUNS THRU IT

MARK TWAIN

W A R T H N G

F O R T H E

L I G H T

An interview with the **Deaf West** Artistic Team:  
**Ed Waterstreet**, *Founder, Artistic Director*  
and **Bill O'Brien**, *Producing Director*

**UPSTAGE:** Ed, how did you come up with the idea of creating the theatre company, Deaf West?

**ED WATERSTREET:** All my life I wanted to see deaf theatre in America. I used to perform with the National Theatre of the Deaf for fifteen years and I wanted something different. So I moved to Los Angeles. I found out that although there were 2 million deaf and hard of hearing people there, there was no theatrical art form for them. I was shocked by that. I started thinking to myself, "Well, let's build something." In 1990 we spent about two years doing the research to put everything together for Deaf West. We had specific goals for Deaf West: we wanted to please our audience, and we wanted to get American Sign Language on to the stage. From there, it began to grow. Somehow, each year these hearing people were coming and loving what they were seeing. The sign language was beautiful. The deaf audience wasn't even very big; 95% of the audience were hearing.

**UPSTAGE:** How has Deaf West evolved over the years?

**WATERSTREET:** As the years went on, my philosophy started to change and we decided to focus more on blending languages and cultures on stage. We looked for plays that would fit that model; two different cultures coming together in balance. For example, *One Flew Over the*

*Cuckoo's Nest* was one of our productions. We had McMurphy and the patients be deaf; therefore, the hearing nurse and the doctors had a kind of control on the situation. That's how it started, and the hearing audiences loved it completely. I saw that both the deaf and hearing worlds were experiencing this. And without really emphasizing the deafness, we get the hearing and the deaf to mingle and mix together.

**UPSTAGE:** Bill, how did you become involved with Deaf West?

**BILL O'BRIEN:** I initially was involved in sign language theatre through the National Technical Institute for the Deaf back in 1995 as a performer in a similar situation where we had deaf and hearing actors. Later, I moved to Los Angeles and started doing some TV and theatre work. I knew that Ed Waterstreet was the founding and artistic director of Deaf West and I became aware that he was developing a narrative style that incorporated sign language into the theatrical piece. In the past, I had seen people scratch the surface of this but they tended to use sign language more as a unique bizarre art form that the audience wasn't really accessing; it was as if it was chinese acrobatics. I found that Ed was finding ways to create theatrical events that exposed deaf and hearing audiences to the truth of the piece - not just a unique and foreign culture.

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Illustration by Ignacio Gomez. **ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY** 231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10018 Telephone: 212.719.9393 Fax: 212.869.8817 www.roundabouttheatre.org

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**UPSTAGE:** How did you come up with the idea of doing a musical for hearing and non-hearing?

**WATERSTREET:** As a deaf person, I've always been curious about the hearing person's enjoyment of music, how they feel the rhythm. My parents and family are hearing and they always enjoyed going to the theatre, and it left me out. I became curious, wondering how they heard music, how they enjoyed it. I would force them to interpret songs from what they were hearing on radio and TV so I could see what the music was about, and I was fascinated. Now, here we are at Deaf West, and we've done straight drama, translations of classics -- why not do a musical?

**O'BRIEN:** Integral to the whole idea of doing a sign language musical was what happens to communication through song. For a hearing person you are lifted into a more poetic level, the stakes are raised in song. The question was, what happens when deaf people in their own language are forced to break into song? Translating *Big River* into American Sign Language was all about why these emotions need to be expressed in a poetic way. So the real trick is finding pieces that are actually enhanced by translating it into American Sign Language, then you might find a way to run with it.

**UPSTAGE:** So how did you choose *Big River*?

**WATERSTREET:** When I first looked at the music, I had a friend sign the songs as he heard them. I could see it, the story was in the music. This one was a perfect fit. I could see Huck as deaf because the deaf people in the hearing world would recognize that, like themselves, Huck is alone and he is looking for a way to connect. Then, there's Jim, who understands, who lets Huck know that they're similar, they have the same frustrations, and they're actually very alike.

**O'BRIEN:** Working along with Jeff Calhoun, it was vital to find a work whose original intention would be enhanced by the nature of a Deaf

West production as well a work that would fit his directorial vision. One of the central themes is about how Huck and Jim are able to look across what they thought was a cultural divide and find out that they're both human. Their common humanity wins over society's customary way of thinking that they should be separate; as deaf and hearing and also as black and white. There is even a song in the show that the whole idea hinges on, "Worlds Apart." The lyrics talk about looking at the world through one's own eyes but seeing the same things even though they're different races, different cultures. Hopfully our audience will have that same mystical experience.

**UPSTAGE:** What has it been like for you moving this show to Broadway?

**WATERSTREET:** Of course I always had dreams of Broadway, but it was kind of hard to believe that Deaf West would ever get there. Of course, in the back of my mind I always thought how wonderful it would be. We just kept moving ahead like a snowball. It just kept building on itself. This morning, I saw the marquee for *Big River* up there on the Roundabout's American Airlines Theatre and I thought, "Yeah, this is really happening." I got chills.

**UPSTAGE:** What do you hope the audience will experience at *Big River*?

**WATERSTREET:** It's nice for us to feel that the hearing and the deaf can sit right next to each other and it won't matter; that they can laugh and be sad in the same experience at the same time. Really that's all I want.

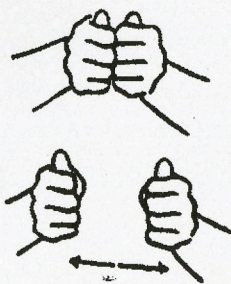
**O'BRIEN:** For this strange 2 1/2 hours deaf and hearing can experience without having to look to the side of the stage for accessibility, the same story, in a carefully translated and choreographed way. The lines begin to blur and they disappear, and the audience is taken in to this world. Hopefully, the show will bring a more universal sense of the human experience, not just with deaf and hearing but maybe, with black and white and Muslim and Christian, or any type of segregation. It seems like a worth while thing to explore. **U**

# A HAND-Y TOOL

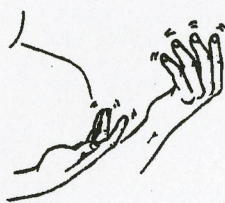
Watch for these *signs* as you listen to some of the *songs* in the show.



**WORLDS**



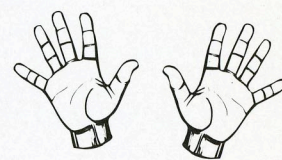
**APART**



**WAITING**



**LIGHT**



**SHINE**

A R R V E R

R U N S

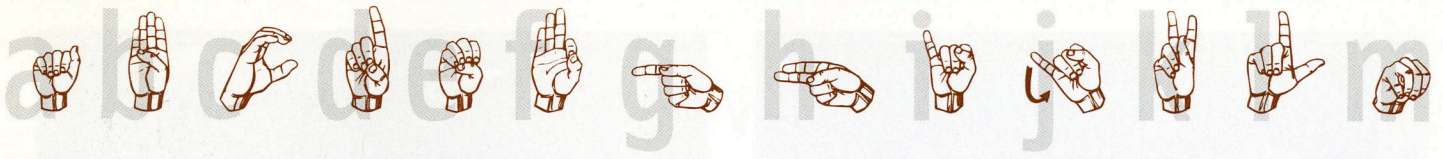
T H E R U

T H

Interviews  
with **BIG RIVER'S**  
Director,  
**Jeff Calhoun**

Set Designer,  
**Ray Klausen**  
and Lighting  
Designer,  
**Michael Gillian**

TYRONE GIORDANO AS HUCK FINN IN *Big River*.



## David Calhoun, Director

**UPSTAGE:** How do you think this production has impacted how both hearing and non-hearing audiences take in a live performance?

**JEFF CALHOUN:** I remember my first exposure to sign language was when I was standing by for Tommy Tune in a signed performance of a show called *My One and Only* with Twiggy, the famous model/performer. It was the first time I had seen such a thing, but back then and even now, they put the signers off to the side. So I missed the show because I spent the whole time watching the interpreter. I mean, forget Tommy and Twiggy; it was so much more interesting to watch the interpreter. What I realized when I went to Deaf West was that the deaf audience's only perspective of shows is staring at the side to watch the interpreter which made them miss the show. This is the first time that you're meant to look at the signing, your not missing the show by watching the signing in our show -- the signing is the show -- and so it takes that beauty that you used to have to look at off to the side and it's put it center stage in a spot light.

**UPSTAGE:** How did you go about directing scenes and creating dances that incorporate American Sign Language, and what was that experience like?

**CALHOUN:** I'm really reaping the benefits of a beautiful art form. The A.S.L. gives the whole evening the sense that it's a ballet. Even the spoken scenes feel like they're a ballet because of the movements that accompany the words. At every moment the show is voiced and signed.

I tried to create a different motivation for each voice that voices for a deaf actor. We have three or four different ways of doing that. In one case it's the author who voices for Huck; in another case it actually takes two actors, one deaf and one hearing, to create the role of Huck's father, Pap. There is no Pap if there are not two actors on stage. Another role may be voiced from someone standing in the background like you would loop a movie. In another case it might be the whole ensemble collectively, twelve voices, voicing for one person. And I hope to keep discovering new ways of doing that, but that's the fun for me, how many different ways can we give life to a deaf actor's performance from an audio experience. What's interesting is how much I have learned from the deaf actors. When you take away the voice you realize how much one relies on their body to communicate. So often, out of necessity, the deaf actors are much more accomplished at physical stage presence than hearing actors. Because they don't have the voice, they fill in with their whole body. It's so much more expressive and that has permeated the whole show. Also, the hearing actors who had to learn sign language for their own lines have been forced to use their bodies in a way, I'm sure, that they have never used before. It heightens the entire physicality of the show, and therefore deepens the emotion of the show.

**UPSTAGE:** In your collaboration with Deaf West how did you help to facilitate the creation of this new style of storytelling?

**CALHOUN:** It's interesting, because I don't view this as being any different than any other kind of storytelling. You have two cultures on

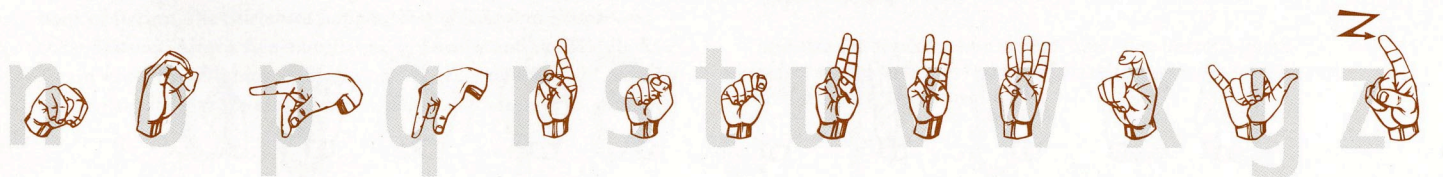
stage, but there is nothing different about this, because we're still putting on a show -- it just happens that half the cast is hearing impaired or deaf. All you need to do is solve the problems and in solving the problems it appears that there is a new style, but it's really nothing any different than directing a high school show. It's just solving different problems. For instance, if you relied on props you have to be very careful. You can't have as many props because you can't have a prop in your hand and still sign. However, you still need to incorporate props. How does an actor hold a stick in his hand but then sign? Well, you drill a hole in the floor and unbeknownst to the audience you stick the end of it in the stage so when they remove their hand to sign the stick magically stands there. Also, you can't have 'knock-knock' at the door and go answer the door because a deaf person wouldn't hear a 'knock-knock'. And it is not until I started doing this that I realized how much we take those things for granted in the hearing theatre.

**UPSTAGE:** What were some of the challenges that you faced as a director working in this new environment?

**CALHOUN:** I made the worst mistakes in the world until I understood how it works. I would ask these deaf actors to do things that they never do. I'd say, "Now you look at him and then this other actor will talk behind your back." Well, that never happens in the deaf world. They must be forced to face each other. How do you do a whole evening that way but still have the theatre magic? How do you replace the theatre magic you lose by not being able to have many things happening on stage at once? Because you can't split focus. In the hearing world we're used to hearing information as we're watching information. You can't have something happening down right and down left at the same time because the deaf audience can only experience what they're watching. I had to keep the hearing and the visual focused at the same place and time at any given moment without it becoming boring or stagnant. So that is the most difficult and the most fulfilling when I figure it out, and I think in figuring it out it's just made me a better story teller.

**UPSTAGE:** How has the casting of a non-hearing actor as Huck enhanced the connection between Huck and the character of Jim?

**CALHOUN:** I think organically in the story, Huck's plight was much more connected to the plight of the slaves. Huck always felt like the outcast in this town of people always telling him to read his Bible and this is what's right and this is what's wrong, and I imagine that's pretty much the way that the slaves felt. In the opening number called 'If You Are Gonna Go to Heaven' the whole town is lecturing Huck. They've all gathered around him and put him literally with his back up against the wall. You see him crawling out of this huddle between everyone's legs, and as that happens the door opens and you expose the slaves during their lunch hour and all the action freezes, and we have Huck sing a little piece of 'Waiting for the Light'. At that moment my attempt is to tie Huck's plight to that of the slaves. And the pay off is when he does go aboard the raft with Jim you realize they have more in common than one might first think. Even though one is black and one is white, and now in this production one is hearing and one is deaf, there's still a common denominator that I hope resonates more in this production than maybe in other productions.





THE COMPANY OF *Big River*.

## Ray Klausen, Set Designer

**UPSTAGE:** How did you begin your design process working with Jeff Calhoun, the director?

**RAY KLAUSEN, SET DESIGNER:** Jeff started off by saying, "I want it to look like Mark Twain came in and threw the book up in the air and all the pages exploded on stage. Then I want the set to do lots of tricks"...fun idea! So I came up with about 30 tricks. Jeff went with 20 of them and came up with 10 of his own. All this for Deaf West's tiny little black box theatre. It was quite remarkable because the audience coming into this theatre didn't expect a great deal as far as production values so when all the magic moments happened including the rain it really delighted them. It was one of those special productions and consequently the creative team won some major awards. The show then transferred to the Mark Taper, the first time a local production had ever been moved into the Taper. That was thrilling for us. We had worked on the show just for the sheer pleasure and joy of it and the reward of seeing it move to the Taper and now the Roundabout and reaching an even larger audience has been very satisfying.

The thing that I always need to be aware of as a designer with Jeff is that he never stops creating and that as he changes things, add scenic elements and fine tunes the production the show gets better and better. It is an extraordinary experience to work with a director like Jeff. Not only does he bring out the best in his designers, he creates a show one can be very proud of.

## Michael Gillian, Lighting Designer

**MICHAEL GILLIAN, LIGHTING DESIGNER:** The thing that is so great about this process with Jeff, is that it is completely collaborative. He doesn't care where an idea comes from, he just takes the best thing. So when Ray does his model of the set, and Jeff presents it to me, and Ray says, "I want these tricks how can you support them? Can you come up with any additional ones?" Ideas come from everybody and everyone just banter off each other. It becomes a very exciting process -- something that you don't always get as a designer. Many directors don't collaborate like that.

**UPSTAGE:** What is the role of the Lighting Designer as a part of the design team, and how has that role changed as the show has moved from Deaf West Theatre to the Mark Taper Forum to Roundabout Theatre Company?

**GILLIAN:** The job of a Lighting Designer is to be the camera; you are framing the picture and focusing it on the action. So I might say to the director, "If that actor came three feet onto the stage, I could get light on that set piece and they would have more focus," or "Can this actor move to here so this small spot could be in the light?" The give and take is so great. Jeff is really great because he is so visual that if I say that something can be done lighting-wise to make a prettier picture, he'll go for it. Unfortunately, at the Taper we didn't all have that time, because we were still editing the script. Everyday we'd come in and there'd be a piece gone because we were trying to make the piece shorter. So they spent all the preview rehearsal days cutting down the script, when usually those are my days to perfect the scenes. So I worked on them kind of blindly without Jeff. I'm excited about this production because we will have more time and I think we should be able to get a prettier picture.

**UPSTAGE:** What did you have to do differently to facilitate the non-hearing actors in the show and in the audience?

**GILLIAN:** The thing that is interesting about doing a deaf musical is that with other shows you might fade out the spot light on the last line of a song or you might discover a voice in the darkness. You can't do that with this show. The deaf audience has to see the hands. You can never leave that in the dark. There is a certain scene where the slaves are all singing up the stairs, and I kept getting from the artistic director of Deaf West, more light on the hands. First of all the hands were dark because they were black and it was really hard to pop them out. But it is really important to have them pop out for the deaf members of the audience.

**KLAUSEN:** One aspect of the set that is different with this cast is that we put big speakers under the platforming so the non-hearing actors can feel the beat of it. They can move in unison with the hearing dancers. Also sight lines are very important as the signing actors must be seen by the audience at all times...a real challenge. **U**



# MARK

# TWAIN

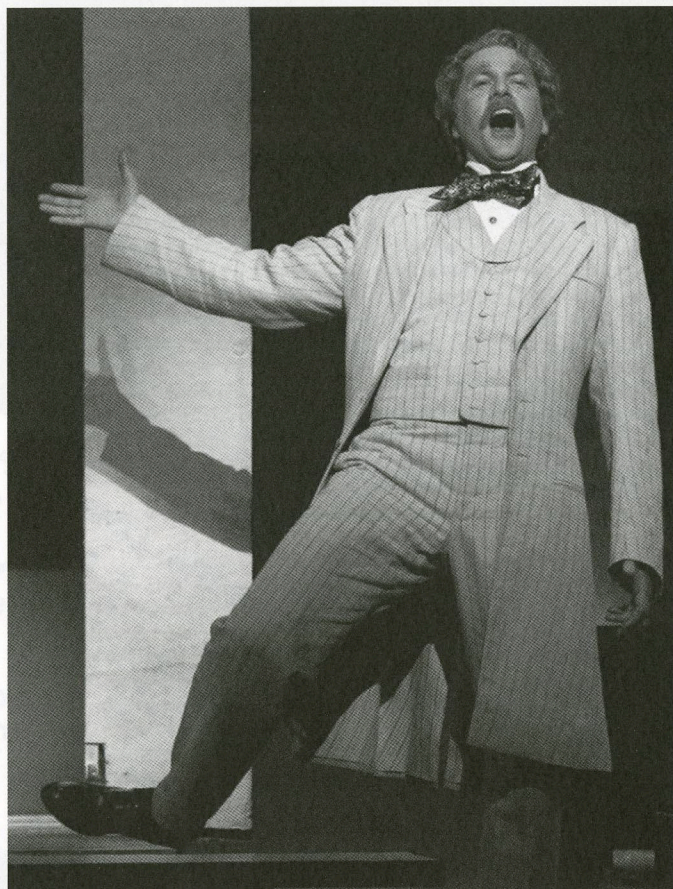
## A Writer's Life

TRAVEL IS FATAL TO PREJUDICE,  
BIGOTRY, AND NARROW-MINDEDNESS  
AND MANY OF OUR PEOPLE NEED IT  
SORELY ON THESE ACCOUNTS. BROAD,  
WHOLESOME, CHARITABLE VIEWS OF  
MEN AND THINGS CANNOT BE ACQUIRED  
BY VEGETATING IN ONE LITTLE CORNER  
OF THE EARTH ALL ONE'S LIFETIME.

*Mark Twain, 1869*

**The musical *Big River* is based on Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain was one of America's most influential authors, and many critics and historians consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be one of his most autobiographical works.**

Mark Twain was born as Samuel Langhorne Clemens on November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri. In 1847 after the death of his father, twelve-year-old Clemens began learning the printing trade to earn money for his family. At age seventeen, he left his home in Hannibal, Missouri, and worked as a printer in the Eastern and Midwestern United States. When he turned twenty-one, Clemens decided to seek his fortunes in South America. However, on his way to New Orleans to catch a ship to South America, he struck up a conversation with a Mississippi River steamboat pilot and got a job as an apprentice pilot. Clemens worked as a steamboat pilot until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Because of the war, steamboat trade on the Mississippi died, and Samuel was forced to find a new occupation. From the Mississippi, Clemens went to Nevada, where he was hired as a newspaper reporter. He wrote everything from news reports to funny editorials to travel pieces. In 1863 he penned his first article under the pseudonym Mark Twain, the pen name he would use for the rest of his life. ("Mark Twain," a nautical term used by riverboat pilots, means that water is two fathoms deep, or just deep enough to be safe.) In 1867 Twain left the West for New York City. While still working as a reporter, he published his first book of fiction, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*. After a five-month trip to Europe and the Middle East, Twain wrote the autobiographical novel *The Innocents Abroad*, his first big literary success. Twain married Olivia Langdon in 1870, and in



DANIEL JENKINS AS MARK TWAIN IN *Big River*.

1871, moved her and their infant daughter to Hartford, Connecticut. From 1863 to 1894, Twain wrote many books, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882). He started writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1876 but did not finish it until 1884. Twain's books and articles brought him international fame, and he continued to write until his death in 1910. His experiences as a Mississippi River steamboat pilot inspired many of his tales, especially *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Through his keen sense of humor and his special understanding of the American spirit, Twain became one of the most beloved and respected writers in our nation's history. Mark Twain's unflinching look at slavery in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has incited controversy for over one hundred years. **U**

Special Note: Twain was noteworthy for being one of the first American authors to use the everyday speech of Southern rural whites and blacks in his writing. This type of language is referred to as dialect or vernacular. Although some of this speech is considered offensive today, it was common and acceptable in the nineteenth century. To be true to the spirit of the novel, the adaptors of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* included this speech in the play.

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# When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

## TICKET POLICY

As a student participant in *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

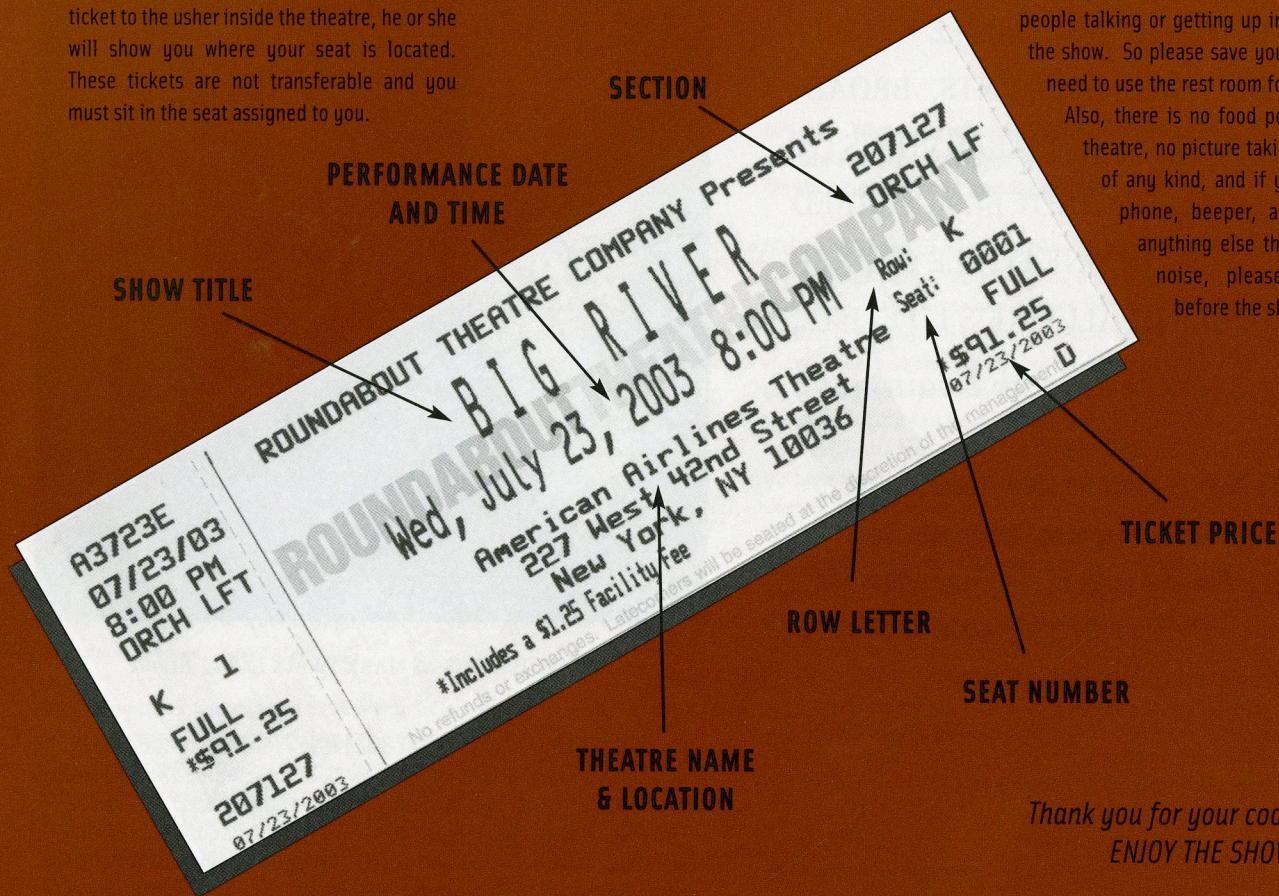
## PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission.

Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



Thank you for your cooperation.  
ENJOY THE SHOW!

## ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:

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