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Dramatic Publishing

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn

By
Rita Grauer
and
John Urquhart
and
Yellow Brick Road Shows



Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn

AATE Unpublished Play Reading Project Award Winner

Comedy. By Rita Grauer and John Urquhart. Based on the book by Mark Twain. From Yellow Brick Road Shows. Cast: 3m., 1w., 1 musician, with doubling, or up to 12 (8m., 3w., 1 musician). This adaptation is a true telling of Huck's adventures and never strays far from Twain's original text. Designed to tour with a small cast, it plays equally well for larger companies who wish to flesh out roles. In this comedy, Huck Finn is a noted outcast. He has no mother, and his father is a hopeless drunkard. The Widow Douglas takes him in but he rejects her "civilized" world and runs away. On his epic journey down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave named Jim, Huck finds acceptance for the first time in his life. On this series of adventures he learns responsibility, awareness of equality, and the meaning of true friendship. Director's notes are available in the script containing full details of costumes, set, staging and props. Open space staging. Simple costumes. Approximate running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Code: MJ3.

ISBN-13 978-0-87602-371-6



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RITA GRAUER & JOHN URQUHART
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(MARK TAWIN'S HUCLKEBERRY FINN)

ISBN: 978-0-87602-371-6

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DIRECTORS' NOTES

Sets and Properties

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn was originally developed for an extensive elementary school tour, with four actors and one musician utilizing minimal set pieces and properties. It can be effectively performed in any school cafeteria, library, or multi-purpose room. A flat floor area approximately 40' x 40' will accommodate both the actors and an audience of 250 children.

Staging for the original production was centered in one primary "thrust" playing area dominated by a large painted drop depicting a Mississippi River scene. From this area, two large aisles extended to the rear corners of the performance space creating two additional playing areas. These aisles, and the perimeter of the primary stage, were defined by ropes taped to the floor. The children were seated on the floor within the roped-off areas. Completing the set pieces were a large, low box used as a bench, a small barrel, and a wooden stool.

The primary stage in front of the drop was used for such scenes as "Pap's Cabin," "On the Raft," and "Sally's Woodshed." Other scenes were played in the aisles and through the audience.

All the props and costume pieces were carried in the box and barrel. The backdrop and its frame rolled into one, easily portable bundle.

This production concept is not integral to the play. Should economy not be a concern for your production, the play contains many opportunities for creative design and technical embellishment. It is easily converted to the proscenium stage and/or a larger company.

Costumes

If only four actors are used to produce *Huck*, simplicity in the costuming is a necessity, especially for Twain and the Widow who must play several roles. Twain requires a basic costume that can be easily modified by the addition of a different hat, coat, vest or kerchief. The Widow changes not only to Loftus but also to the Duke, and then back to Sally. The script allows for her costume changes.

Music

Although there are no songs and we have provided no written music, music is an integral part of this production. Throughout the script, you will find notes indicating where incidental music was used to enhance transitions, build tension, and create mood in the original production. This music was improvised in the style of American folk music of the 19th century and was produced, along with sound effects, by the voice and guitar of a single musician seated on a stool to the left of the primary playing area. Subsequent productions used banjo music, which brought a lively quality the guitar could not provide. Producers should feel free to experiment with musical options.

Warm-Up

Before every Yellow Brick Road Shows' performance, the actors seated the audience. This provides an opportunity to establish a rapport from the moment the children set foot in the performance area. The children are led into the space by groups (classroom-size), and shown to their seats on the floor. Interaction with the audience, during and immediately following the seating, should be casual and friendly, yet controlled. Topics of discussion should prepare the children for the play and initiate a rapport which will insure the success of the performance to follow. Should it not be possible for your company to seat the children, it is suggested your actors walk through the house to accomplish this "warm-up."

MARK TWAIN'S HUCKLEBERRY FINN: *a true telling of Huck's adventures* was adapted from Mark Twain's novel by Yellow Brick Road Shows for its 1979-80 educational theatre tour. The original production received over one hundred performances in elementary schools throughout the southwestern United States. The script was refined in subsequent productions at Lexington Children's Theatre and Indiana Repertory Theatre.

The script was originally created by the following company:

Huckleberry Finn	Randall Nott
Jim	Jason Coleman
The Widow, Judith Loftus, the Duke, Aunt Sally	Carmen Roman
Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer, Pap, Man, the King	Steve Peterson
Musician	Benay Radin

MARK TWAIN'S HUCKLEBERRY FINN was conceived, directed and edited by Rita Grauer and John Urquhart.

(At a cue from the stage manager, the preshow warm-up concludes. The actors excuse themselves and exit, leaving the Musician alone onstage to play a brief overture. The music fades as a young Mark Twain, fresh off the Mississippi River, steps out from behind the backdrop. He wears the dress of a riverboat pilot and carries a small book in his hand. After surveying the audience, he begins to speak.)

TWAIN: Good afternoon! My name, for those of you taking notes *(he chuckles)*, is Mark Twain. *(he looks at the backdrop)* And this is a representation of the Mississippi River -- it's a place where I spent a good deal of my life. And it's the scene of the story I'm about to tell you. A story about a young man I knew when I was a boy not much more than ten or eleven years old. He was a remarkable boy with an equally remarkable name . . . Huckleberry Finn.

(At the sound of his name, Huck peers out from behind the backdrop.)

Now some of you may know of Huckleberry Finn already if you read the book I wrote about him, or if you read another book of mine by the name of, "Tom Sawyer". A book which . . .

HUCK: *(interrupting)* Mr. Twain?

TWAIN: *(turning to Huck)* Why . . . Huckleberry Finn!

HUCK: You telling my story now?

TWAIN: I sure am, Huck. Come on in here.

(Huck enters a little uncertainly. He wears a plaid shirt and old blue jeans held up by a piece of rope tied across his shoulder. He seems shy of the audience.)

HUCK: Mind if I lend a hand?

TWAIN: *(caught off guard)* Why, uh . . . sure, Huckleberry!

HUCK: *(explaining)* So you won't tell so many stretchers.

TWAIN: *(joking)* Well, tell you what . . . you help me keep the story straight and I won't have to tell so many stretchers! *(putting his arm around Huck)* But, I never did know anyone who didn't stretch the truth every now and then, 'cept maybe the Widow Douglas. But then, she was . . .

(At the sound of her name, the Widow quickly pokes her head out from behind the backdrop.)

WIDOW: *(firmly)* Now, don't you be putting any funny ideas into his head, Mr. Twain! I'm doing my best to civilize that child!

(Huck winces as the Widow disappears behind the backdrop.)

HUCK: *(in a hushed voice)* What'd you have to turn me over to her for anyway?

TWAIN: Why, as I recall . . . when you and Tom Sawyer found that money in Injun Joe's cave and were given that reward money for it, it was Judge Thatcher that turned you over to the Widow to be raised.

(The music resumes as he hands the book to Huck with a wink, and slips behind the backdrop.)

HUCK: *(calling after him)* But what's the point of being rich if a body ain't free to do as he pleases?

(Jim peeks out from behind the backdrop.)

JIM: I wouldn't be complainin' if'n I was you, Huck. You's a lot freer den ol' Jim is!

(He disappears behind the drop. Feeling very sorry for himself, Huck moves to the down right playing area to begin the story. He sits on a stool, book in hand, and speaks directly to the audience.)

HUCK: If you call having to study when the fish are biting being free!

(He sits and opens the book. The Widow enters immediately from down right, dressed in a high necked blouse and simple skirt. She wears pince-nez on her nose and her hair is severely pulled back in a bun. As she speaks, the music fades. We are now on the Widow's porch.)

WIDOW: *(entering)* Sit up straight, Huckleberry Finn! *(she briskly adjusts his posture)* You can't think right if you aren't sitting up straight!

(he does so)

Now, spell civilized. *(She takes the book from him.)*

HUCK: *(struggling)* Civilized . . .

WIDOW: *(impatiently)* Spell civilized.

HUCK: S . . . I . . . V . . . *(lamenting)* Ohhh . . . What do I have to spell these words for anyway?

WIDOW: *(directly)* Because, Huckleberry, you are a rich boy now and if it breaks my back, I'm going to civilize you. I won't have you out sleeping in the tanyard like your father. That man is nothing but . . .

(Jim has entered quietly, down left, wearing overalls and a plain, well-worn shirt. He stands just opposite them with his head lowered, his hat is in his hand. He speaks humbly.)

JIM: 'Scuse me, mam . . .

HUCK: *(grateful for the interruption)* Howdy, Jim!

JIM: *(nodding)* Huck.

WIDOW: *(anxious to return to the lesson.)* Well. What is it you

want, Jim?

JIM: Miss Watson, she sen' me out to get some firewood, and she tol' me to ax you if'n you want some.

WIDOW: Isn't that nice, Huckleberry. Miss Watson sent her nigger over here to see if we want some wood. Yes, Jim, you get me some!

HUCK: *(rising quickly)* I'll help. *(he starts toward Jim)* It's awful heavy you know, mam.

WIDOW: *(deftly snaring him by the collar)* Huckleberry's going to stay right here and study his lessons!

(Jim nods to the Widow and winks surreptitiously at Huck. He exits. The Widow watches him leave. As soon as he is out of earshot, the Widow turns on Huck speaking in a hushed tone.)

Civilized folks don't work with slaves, Huckleberry!!

(Huckleberry sits back down, dejected and confused. The Widow softens.)

Oh, Child! Don't you want to study your lessons and lead a decent life so you can go up to the good place? *(proselytizing)* Why, that's what I'm going to do! I'm going up to the good place where I can sing at the angels. And they're going to sing back at me. Then we'll all play harps at each other! *(The Widow is lost in this vision.)*

HUCK: *(innocently)* Is Tom Sawyer going to be there?

WIDOW: *(scoffing)* Not by a considerable sight.

HUCK: *(decisively)* Then I ain't going there!

WIDOW: *(exasperated)* Huckleberry Finn!

(She grabs him by the ear and lifts him off the stool.)

WIDOW: You and I are going to the closet to pray!

(They freeze as Twain enters from behind the back-drop. He is obviously delighting in the story.)

TWAIN: And off they went to pray.

(Incidental music plays as they break their freeze. The Widow exits with the stool, down right. Huck turns and moves center stage, preparing for the next scene.)

Praying, like everything else done at the Widow's house, was done regular as clockwork. And for a boy like Huck, all that regularization got to be mighty tiresome and mighty lonely.

(As he speaks, Twain makes his way toward the down left playing area. Huck is now seated on the box by the backdrop looking "mighty lonely.")

Except for those occasional midnight visits by one . . .
(He takes his hat off and slips a kerchief from his pocket.) Tom Sawyer!

(He spins around and drops to his knees, slipping the kerchief over his face, "bandit-style." He is now Tom Sawyer. He begins to sneak through the audience, making his way to the left of where Huck is seated. The music fades.)

TOM: Meeow! *(no answer)* Meeowww!!!

(Huck has been waiting for this signal. He quietly crosses stage left to an imaginary window and returns the call.)

HUCK: Meeow!

Huck leaps through the window and begins to crawl through the audience in search of Tom. Tom is well hidden and Huck cannot immediately find him. They maintain contact through a series of "meows" which

become a language of their own.)

TOM: Meeoww!!

HUCK: Meow?

TOM: *(loudly)* Meeoww!!

(Tom grows impatient as he waits for Huck to find him. At last he speaks in a loud whisper.)

(exasperated) Come on, Huck, we got to get going!
(he rises to leave)

(Huck arrives and the two huddle together, whispering.)

HUCK: *(confused)* Where's the gang?

TOM: They're waiting for us down at the cave.
(with authority) Let's go!

(They both set off in different directions. Huck stops.)

HUCK: Tom!

(Tom stops)

We can't go that way!

TOM: Why not?

HUCK: Jim's out on the porch. He'll catch us.

TOM: So? That's the adventure of it! Ain't you got no . . .

HUCK: *(interrupting)* Sssh!

(Jim enters from down right. He is wearing his hat.)

JIM: *(suspiciously)* Who deh?

(Tom and Huck quickly hide in the audience. Jim steps cautiously down the aisle, peering into the darkness.)

JIM: I know I hud somebody out deh . . . an' if'n you don't say who you is, I's gonna sit right down heah til I heahs you again.

(He listens. Tom and Huck are silent.)

(with finality) Ain't nobody gettin' pas' ol' Jim.

(Jim sits. He takes off his hat. After a moment, he yawns. As he does this, Tom and Huck begin to sneak quietly out of the audience. Jim stretches out on the ground, pulls his hat over his face, and dozes off. The boys slip past and Tom has an idea. He stops and returns to Jim on tip-toe. Huck does not approve but is powerless to stop him. Tom signals Huck to be quiet, then he carefully slips Jim's hat off and carries it back to Huck.)

HUCK: *(whispering)* What did you want to go and do that for?

TOM: *(stifling a laugh)* He'll think witches done it!

(He looks around for a tall audience member and puts the hat on his/her head, breaking into a laugh. The noise awakens Jim.)

JIM: Who deh?

(The two boys scurry off. Jim looks around and spies his hat. Taken aback, he approaches it uncertainly. Gathering his courage, he quickly snatches it back and begins to examine it carefully. Finally, he looks up apprehensively.)

(to himself) Must be dem witches!

(Jim bolts down the stage right aisle and exits. Music plays as Huck re-enters, upstage. He moves to center

stage and begins to narrate, painting a vivid picture of the events he describes. The following sequence should be orchestrated on the guitar throughout, building to the entrance of Pap.)

HUCK: Well, sir . . . our gang had its first meeting that night, and we decided to call ourselves Tom Sawyer's gang, on account of Tom being just about the best friend a fellow could have. Then . . . three or four months went by and I was going to school right regular - - learning how to read and write. I could do the multiplication tables all the way up to 6 x 7 is 35! And I reckon I couldn't do much better than that even if I lived forever. The Widow said I was coming along slow but sure and she weren't ashamed of me. Things were going *real* good . . . and then . . .

(Huck's mood changes, accompanied by the guitar.)

. . . one morning at breakfast, I knocked over the salt shaker. I knew right off that was a bad sign, so I reached in real quick to grab some salt and throw it over my left shoulder to keep off the bad luck. But the widow . . .

(On cue, the Widow steps into the down right playing area. She speaks to an imaginary Huck while Huck looks on, remembering the incident.)

WIDOW: Huckleberry Finn!! Get your hands out of that salt! Look at the mess you're making . . . and don't you throw that salt over your shoulder, either! That's just a silly old superstition!

(The Widow freezes, and the music begins to build ominously.)

HUCK: *(to the audience)* I figured the Widow didn't know *much* about bad luck,

(she breaks her freeze and exits)

and I walked out of the house feeling kind of worried and shaky . . . then I saw Tom Sawyer . . .

(Stepping onstage, down left, Tom speaks to an imaginary Huck just as the Widow did. He bends down, examining some tracks.)

TOM: Hey, Huck! Come here quick and look at these boot tracks I followed up from the quarry! They go all the way around your house and never once go inside the fence. *(he kneels)* And look at this *left* boot heel! It's got a cross carved in it to keep off the Devil! Why, Huck . . . you're being followed by pirates! *(Tom freezes.)*

HUCK: *(to the audience)* I'd only seen *one* boot heel like that before and it was my pap's! *(Tom exits)* I knew right then what my bad luck was - - my pap was back and after my reward money! So I went to see Jim - - he had this hairball from the fourth stomach of an ox. People said it was magic and he could tell fortunes with it!

(Jim enters, down right, and speaks to an imaginary Huck.)

JIM: *(with conviction)* De hairball say deh's two angels hoverin' 'roun' yo' pap. One o' dem's a good'un, an' one o' dem's bad. Now de good'un, he get yo' pap to go de right way, den de bad'un sail in an' bust it all up. De hairball don't know which way yo' pap's gonna go in de las'.

(Jim freezes. Huck becomes extremely animated.)

HUCK: Well, I was up and hightailing it back to the widow's in a minute!

(Jim exits as Huck runs to the Widow, who enters, down left.)

(running) I knew I had to get rid of that reward money!

WIDOW: *(entering)* Why, child! What is the matter with you now?

HUCK: *(nervously)* I want you to take my money, mam. The \$6,000 and all. I can't have nothing to do with it no more!

WIDOW: *(confused)* You mean you want me to keep it for you til you want it back again?

HUCK: No, mam. *(deliberately)* Please don't ask me no questions, mam. I don't want to have to tell you no lies.

WIDOW: *(sensing his desperation)* All right, child. I'll tell you what I'll do. *(she slips a coin from her pocket)* I'll give you this bright shiny silver dollar . . .

HUCK: *(interrupting)* But, mam . . .

WIDOW: *(cutting him short)* That means I bought your money from you. Then when you want it back, all you have to do is buy it back for a silver dollar. Now does that rest your mind any easier?

HUCK: *(still worried)* Thank you, mam. I just can't have that money no more!

WIDOW: *(frowning)* Oh, child . . . how I fret over you so!

(She freezes as Huck turns from her and crosses to center stage, speaking directly to the audience.)

HUCK: I only felt a *little* relieved after that.

(Widow exits)

'Cause you see, I knew if my bad luck didn't catch up to me that day, it'd probably catch up with me the next!

(The ominous guitar playing has reached its crescendo. A final chord sounds and Pap lurches into

view, upstage center, behind Huck's back. He wears a hat pulled low over his face and is draped with a tattered coat. He focuses on Huck, draws himself up, and speaks in a booming voice.)

PAP: Boy!

(Huck jumps)

HUCK: *(he turns, frightened)* Pap!

(Pap swaggers as he approaches Huck. He is drunk, as usual.)

PAP: Give me your money, boy!

HUCK: *(evasively)* I ain't got no money.

PAP: *(threateningly)* Don't tell me that! All I hear about down in town is how rich Huckleberry Finn is.

(He grabs Huck violently by the shoulders and draws him close.)

Now I want your money!

HUCK: *(quickly)* I ain't got no money . . . you can ask the Widow!

PAP: *(viciously)* The Widow! *(he throws Huck back)* You tell the Widow you're my boy and what's yours belongs to me. *(deliberately)* And I'll be by directly to pick up what's mine!

(Pap turns, then staggers to the bench as Huck speaks.)

HUCK: *(to the audience)* Pap come back the next day rip roaring drunk. He laid in wait for me on my way home from school . . . took me way up river to a cabin in the woods where you couldn't see it if you weren't looking for it! *(crossing toward Pap)* He'd lock me up there all

day long.

(He looks over at Pap, then kneels down. We are now in the cabin.)

HUCK: I knew I had to get myself out of there!

(Huck begins to work on digging a small hole under an imaginary wall. As he does, Pap turns in his sleep, grunts, and awakens. He sees what Huck is doing and quickly lunges for him, striking at him with his hat.)

PAP: Get away from there!

(Huck scoots out of Pap's reach)

Come here.

(Huck obeys. Pap pulls him close and speaks directly into his face.)

You ain't got the sense God gave dirt if you think you're digging your way out of here! The only way out of this cabin is that door, and the only way out of that door is this key what's 'round my neck!

(He shakes the key in Huck's face and Huck cowers.)

Now . . . I don't get no respect from those "lily livers" down in town, but I'll get it from you even if I got to beat it into you!!!

(He slaps Huck viciously with the back of his hand. Huck reels across the stage.)

Now get my jug! Get it!!

(Huck, still unsteady from the blow, quickly does so.)

Give it here!!!

(Pap grabs the jug from Huck and staggers to the

bench. He takes a big, ungracious swig as Huck sits quietly on the barrel, stage left, watching cautiously.)

PAP: I don't know why I keep you 'round sometimes.

(He is having difficulty speaking.)

You're worse . . . than the gov . . . ment . . .

(Pap slips into a drunken stupor and falls limp on the bench. Huck turns to the audience with a pained expression and speaks.)

HUCK: Some nights Pap would hit that jug pretty hard and start seeing things coming out of the walls. One night, he even thought I was the Angel of Death.

(Pap has awakened while Huck was speaking and is beginning to exhibit the effects of delirium tremens. He believes that he sees "something" crawling across the room toward him. He speaks to it in a low, guttural voice.)

PAP: Get away from here . . . I didn't do nothing . . . *(He tries to "shoo" away the apparition with his hat.)*

HUCK: Pap . . . there's nothing there.

("It" has begun to crawl up Pap's leg. He slaps wildly at his leg with the hat. Huck approaches him gingerly.)

Ain't nothing there, Pap. Come on . . .

(Pap is now in the full throws of an ugly fit.)

PAP: *(deliriously)* Get out of here, I say . . . Git!! Git!!

HUCK: *(concerned)* Pap!

(For the first time Pap notices Huck. He recoils in fear.)