

Childhood days come alive in 'Tom Sawyer'

By JIM WINDELL
The National Theatre Company has vividly brought to life the carefree days of childhood in a small Missouri town along the Mississippi.

Their staging of the "Adventures of Tom Sawyer" Friday at the Birmingham Theatre seemed perfectly suited to the sultry days of August. It was a fast-paced musical filled with childish derring-do and suspense delightfully attuned to youngsters.

The story of Tom Sawyer has had numerous other film and stage versions. Credit for this musical version belongs to Richard Stocklin, who created the book, and Shelly Markham and Annette Leistan, who provided, respectively, music and lyrics.

Stocklin, in writing this short, snappy story of Tom Sawyer and his friends, has necessarily had to bend the original in spots and telescope some of the events in Mark Twain's 1876 book. The story flows smoothly without sacrifice of Twain's charming view of the adventures and misadventures of growing up.

STOCKLIN HAS included most of the best-loved incidents and characters and the players in the National Theatre Company have ably combined singing and acting to please both young and old in the audience.

Tom Sawyer, as played by Peter Hagan, is an antics lad who is forever tormenting his brother Sidney, a straight-laced, ingratiating, respected boy, or attempting to catch the eye of the new girl in St. PETERSBURG, Becky Thatcher.

Annie Willette is the apple-cheeked, freckle-covered 11 year old who is the epitome of little girls. She hates dead cats, is fearful of bats, somewhat shy, and has little use for dolls.

Aunt Polly, Susan Terry's character, is a dumpling of a woman who enjoys cooking, is a real softie at heart and has a cross to bear in trying to raise Tom Sawyer properly.

Review

Annette Leistan's lyrics sung by Tom introduce the con job Tom is going to pull on Huck and other boys so that Tom can avoid whitewashing the fence as Aunt Polly has ordered. "It's not every day a boy gets to paint a fence," he brags to Huck who is tricked into trading a whole apple for the privilege of using the brush on the fence.

MICHAEL McGRATH as Huck Finn is an appealing, curly-haired boy who is the envy of all other boys because Huck has no rules and can wear patched and ragged clothes and probably never has to wash. He warns Tom that girls "don't know nothing," and entices Tom away from Becky to meet him in the graveyard at midnight to bury a stiff carcass of a cat to rid them forever of warts.

It is this moonlight escapade that leads to their witnessing the murder of the doctor who is digging up corpses for experiments. Because they fear the revenge of the dreaded killer Injun Joe, Tom and Huck, prick their fingers and make a blood oath singing that they will "keep mum about this and may we drop dead and rot" if either of them ever tell what they have seen.

In between the suspense of their guilty secret and the trial of the innocent Muff Potter, Tom woots Becky and gives her a brass doorknob as an engagement gift. Tom explains about engagements in, "I've got a better plan for me and you; We'll get engaged to be engaged."

When he lets her know that he once kissed Aunt Polly, Susan Terry's character, Aunt Polly is miffed and they have their first lovers' quarrel. Soon after in despair Tom agrees to run away with Huck to become pirates.

Tom and Huck float off to Jackson

Island and fantasize wonderful adventures, while Aunt Polly has given Tom up for dead and his funeral is planned. The gloomy atmosphere is relieved when Tom and Huck reveal themselves and the errand boys are welcomed with open arms.

THE SCENE changes to Muff Potter's murder trial and a nervous Tom identifies Injun Joe as the wielder of

the fatal knife. After swearing revenge on Tom, the Indian bolts the courtroom, in a slight deviation from Twain, the story next turns to a birthday party for Becky. Tom and Becky explore a cave during the party and become hopelessly lost.

They stumble upon Injun Joe and his hidden treasure. While trying to kill the two children Injun Joe falls over a

precipice and is himself killed. The treasure is recovered, Tom and Becky are found, and the play ends happily as Tom and Huck are heroes. St. Petersburg is once more a quiet little hamlet and at a country fair Tom and Huck receive ribbons for bravery.

The National Theatre Company and director Richard Atwell can be commended for an action-packed, spar-

kling musical that retains the humorous perspective of childhood in a story that is still fascinating in a version 102 years after publication of the book.

The unfortunate part is that this production was only scheduled for one day, Aug. 4, and many children will be deprived of an opportunity to see a loveable musical.

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