

# PRC readies first full-scale musical

By KAREN ROSEN

Bland Simpson and Tommy Thompson must have looked mighty peculiar to anyone witnessing their early-morning wanderings around Thompson's neighborhood. They got their exercise not by jogging, but by jotting down ideas in a notebook and laughing hysterically.

"I'm sure we looked like vagrants," Simpson said. "Maybe we looked like appraisers, something respectable."

Isn't playwriting respectable enough? The two men were searching for lyrics to use in their musical version of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*.

The new play, a fanciful account of young Sam Clemens' career as a cub pilot, opens Sept. 22 as Playmakers Repertory Company's season premiere and runs through Oct. 3.

Simpson and Thompson began adapting pieces of Twain's memoir in 1979, then added a riproaring steamboat race and some voodoo and borrowed from some of Twain's other works. A *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* influenced their decision to send Twain back in time from the 1880s to 1850.

Two weeks before opening night, Twain—quite the time traveler—strolls into rehearsal at the Paul Green Theatre in cut-offs and with his hair a bit less unruly than it appears in photographs. But it's just a cigar-chomping James Harper who has the "Missoura" drawl intact, even as he sings in PRC's first full-scale musical ever.

*Life on the Mississippi* was originally produced in Memphis, but since arriving in Chapel Hill, the play has continually undergone experimental and permanent dialogue revisions and scene shiftings. Either Simpson or

Thompson has attended every rehearsal, where they often explain how they visualized a particular scene.

"It's good to be around," Simpson, a UNC creative writing professor, said. "New plays really do take a lot of fiddling with and tinkering with. A lot of times something better will come out by accidental interpretation."

During the grueling four-week rehearsal period, there's plenty of time for fiddling around with the play and with in the play as the Red Clay Ramblers improvise on the musical numbers.

Imagine a typical rehearsal session midway between the initial discussions of what motivates each actor and the first technical rehearsal, complete with lights and sound effects.

The Red Clay Ramblers, who specialize in old-timey music, gather around a piano beside the stage and practice the same song for an hour. Director David Rotenberg sits on the steps in an aisle, chewing gum and watching intently. Choreographer Laurie Boyd pirouettes in a corner of the stage, or rather, on the deck of the steamboat *Aleck Scott*, and actress Kee Strong slips on a hoop skirt over shorts. Stage manager Kimberly Kearsley doesn't have any stage hands yet and ends up lugging most of the *Aleck Scott's* cargo across the stage.

From 2 p.m. to 11 p.m., with a two-hour dinner break, the 19-member cast usually rehearses with the crew. It's exhausting and invigorating at the same time.

When a non-singing scene claims center stage, musical numbers are practiced in the lobby, utilizing almost all of the available space.

As stage manager, Kimberly Kearsley coordinates all the technical aspects of the show, from handling the demands of the director and designers to giving the cues for



Kee Strong portrays Florence Williker, who sparks a romantic interest in the young Samuel Clemens.

lights and sound effects. Kearsley also makes sure that everything involving the actors is ship-shape at work and at the actors' house, where the out-of-towners live. "It's a basic psychology," she said, "As long as somebody knows that somebody else cares and is willing to help."

In addition, Kearsley makes the daily schedule, times the scenes and oversees the prompt book. "Everything is in pencil," she said. "Sometimes it never gets inked in."

Laurie Boyd, while choreographing her first Carolina production, has been concentrating on "roughing in" the movement. She aims for the overall effect, instead of doing one part over and over again before moving in.

*"There's nothing quite like the stage for the immediate relationship between yourself and the audience."*

Ellen Crawford  
portrays two roles

"Even if they're unsure, I can tell if the form is working," she said. After the form is down-pat, then Boyd can concentrate on the details—if the actors' hands are in the right place, if heads are turning at the same time and if they all have their legs raised the right height.

"If you rehearse that much, that thorough, that often, when opening night comes, you don't have junk in the way, and don't have nerves that come from fear," said Strong, a third-year graduate student whose husband Ken is also in the play.

"It's fun and enjoyable, Strong said. "But there's a sense of 'business is business.'"

Simpson and Thompson are grateful for the suggestions that the actors offer as they understand their characters better. "We had Twain saying, 'Yeah,' but he wouldn't have said that," Simpson said, "Harper automatically changed it to 'yes.'"

"It's a good thing they care. These are the people who are going to sell this material, make it work."

The actors had different ways of approaching their roles, ranging from painstaking research to just plain playing themselves.

Ellen Crawford, who has two roles, was a last-minute replacement when the original actress broke her arm, so she hardly had a chance to prepare before rehearsals started. "Mostly I just packed," she said. "Then I ran out and bought a copy of *Life on the Mississippi* and discovered that none of my characters were in it."

One of her characters, a New Orleans voodoo queen named Marie Laveau, was a real person whom Simpson and Thompson inserted to spice up the shenanigans. Crawford researched her and the subject of voodoo, even

learning Louisiana's Cajun dialect with the help of a cast member David Romero.

Crawford, who played the world's oldest living on Broadway's "Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Reflect UP?" also portrays a femme fatale, the woman to treat Sam like a man.

By inspecting costume plates, Crawford gained insight into the chivalry of the hoop-skirt era. "I realize why hold open doors for women and pull out chairs for them," she said. "Back then there was no other way to navigate, no way you could do it yourself."

Carolina faculty member Patricia Barnett, a veteran, remembered Twain's steambotting stories hit a snag with the hoop skirt. "It's a little like wearing a harness," she said.

Playing a proper matron, she's made two discoveries. "If you walk pigeon-toed you can make the hoop sway," she said, "and if they pitched the music a bass-baritone level, I could sing."

And what about a singing Mark Twain? That's as incredible as a singing James Harper, who grabbed the four non-singing roles in the Broadway revival *West Side Story*.

"My agent and casting director said, 'Oh, come in for an audition for Mark Twain. You don't have to sing much. It's just a play with music,'" Harper said. "I find out it's a musical."

Harper read Twain's autobiography in order to characterize a man who is legendary as a character. But Harper said, "Some of that stuff doesn't help when you're doing a musical fantasy version. I just think, 'This is how James Harper would do something. How would Mark Twain do it?'"

Harper doesn't lose himself in the character to the point of thinking that he really is Twain when he's on stage. "It's your own intelligence that brings life to a character," he says. "I am the one listening to the music because I have to sing to it."

Sam Clemens is played by former Carolina graduate student John Daggan, but Daggan didn't expect to move to UNC so quickly. "Usually they cast a student in roles I would play," Daggan said. "I've got one of those faces that is ageless. I'm 28 playing a 16-year-old."

Daggan has never been to the Mississippi, but looking at picture books, he could probably pilot a steamboat down the river. He's not just aimlessly spinning the wheel around. It gives the actor a reality to go onto. If it's real for the actor, it's real for the audience.

For his first play at Lenoir-Rhyne, Daggan came with his lines memorized, which he said, "infinitely displeased the rest of the class and appalled the director." He's not done that since so he will not get a certain rest stuck in his mind.

Author Thompson is tripling as the banjo player for the Red Clay Ramblers and pilot Horace Bixby, but he's never been content to sit in the audience and watch a show.

Yet Bixby was a character that Thompson "loved" after during the writing process. "With a little luck, I was looking out for him enough so that by the time I myself, I'll be Bixby," Thompson said. "I haven't done anything except say my lines the same way I have in every theatrical thing I've ever been in."

Although Mel Johnson, Jr., who plays the roustabout Coe, was in *Eubie!* for a year and a half he was excited to get back to the creativity of regional theatre and the challenge of a new piece.

"You're putting your stamp on it and don't have to conform to anybody's views of how they play a character," Johnson said.

The only problem is the shortness of the two-week run. "After two weeks, you're coming to some kind of a plateau," Johnson said. "You've barely scratched the surface. That last day, something will come to you. You'll say, 'God, I wish I could try that again tomorrow.'"

"There's nothing quite like the stage for the immediate relationship between yourself and the audience," Crawford said. "That's what makes it not as easy as sitting in your basement in your Mom's clothes."

Karen Rosen is a staff writer for *The Daily Tar Heel*.



James Harper as Mark Twain observed the young Samuel Clemens played by John Daggan.

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