Life on the Mississippi

by Mark Twain

Adapted by R. Rex Stephenson

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Life on the Mississippi is a combination of three of Mark Twain's books blended into one story that continues Huck and Tom's great adventures. Huck and Tom are called to Arkansas because something mysterious is happening to Uncle Silas. As only Huck and Tom can, they set about solving the mystery that involves twin brothers, the maniacal Widow Dunlap and her ne're-do-well son. This story is as poignant and humorous as *Huck Finn*, but without any of the racial overtones that in some areas has made Twain a controversial author. As the Franklin News Post said of the play: "Gleaning material from *Life on the Mississippi*, *Tom Sawyer-Detective*, the works of Shakespeare, and bits and pieces from the life of Mark Twain, Stephenson created a delicacy -- juicy, funny, dramatic and immensely entertaining." About 90 minutes.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

Any number of actors, from eighteen to thirty-five, could be cast in *Life on the Mississippi*. The characters Jubiter and Jake are the same actor (unless you have twin boys). Numerous roles can be doubled, or even tripled, if the director desires a smaller cast. For example, Aunt Polly and Aunty Sally could be the same actress. The folks on the steamboat only appear in Act I, and thus could reappear as actors needed later in Act I or in Act II. While at first glance it would appear that there are only ten roles for women, with the right costume and make-up, many of the male roles can be easily played by women. In my production, I used a girl to play Huck, women to play the Loafers, and mostly females and children in the courtroom scene. The play celebrates the adventurous spirits of young men as they take on new challenges, conquer great barriers, and at the end, are the same two mischievous boys that are icons of American literature. Since the style of the piece is presentational rather than realistic, the fight scene on the steamboat should be more comical rather than life-threatening.

CHARACTER LIST

Huck Finn
Tom Sawyer
Aunt Polly
Brace Dunlap
Silas Phelps
Benny Phelps
Wid'r Dunlap
Riverboat Pilot *(George)*
Loafer 1
Loafer 2
Waitress
Jake/Jubiter Dunlap
Bud Dixon
Hal Clayton
Jill Withers
Bill Withers
Aunt Sally Phelps
Mrs. Nickerson
Two Nickerson Children
Children with Aunt Sally
Actor 1 *(Impresario)*
Actor 2 *(Hamlet)*
Actor 3 *(Gertrude)*
Deputy
Prosecutor

*Also, children, passengers, jewelry store clerk, stage mothers, theatre crowd, courtroom crowd, citizens of Hannibal.

Additional production information can be found at the end of the script.

ACT I

(AT RISE: HUCK and TOM are onstage.)

HUCK: You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the title of *Huck Finn*. It was written some time ago, so it really ain't no matter. That book was made by Mark Twain. This gentleman had a way of stretchin' things, but mainly he told the truth. Now the way that book winds up is this: Tom and me … oh, I'm Huck, Huckleberry Finn to be exact. Anyway, me and Tom ended up on Uncle Silas' farm in Arkansas, and old Jim was set free and Tom's Aunt Sally was goin' to civilize us both. Which, Lord knows, she tried, but with God's help she didn't. It weren't long after that, that we were sent back to Hannibal to be raised by Aunt Polly. And we had to go to school, and wear clean clothes and such; but we gotta go ice fishin' in the winter and swimmin' in the summer. I spent lots of my time dreamin'.

TOM: What you doin' out here, Huck?

HUCK: Watchin' the Mississippi goin' by and dreamin'.

TOM: Betcha dreamin' about ridin' a steamboat, like that one comin' around the bend.

(STEAMBOAT WHISTLE sound.)

HUCK: Yep, someday I'm going to be a steamboat man. A riverboat pilot, run a ship from Cairo to New Orleans.

TOM: It's somethin' ridin' a steamboat.

(WHISTLE sound.)

TOM: I've been up and down the river on those boats a couple of times. Once a pilot even let me steer. I's so little he had to find a box so I could see out the winder. You ain't never been on a steamboat, have ya, Huck?

HUCK: Once. I snuck aboard. But this steersman found me and pitched me off nears the Sholes Crossin'. I had to swim a hundred yards and then walk five miles back to

HUCK: *(Cont'd.)* Hannibal. You wouldn't believe, Tom, how much mud's in Sholes Crossin'.

TOM: Let me set my mind to it and I'll figure out a way for both of us to have a steamboat ride this summer. And when we get on that riverboat, I's goin' to walk right up to the pilot and tell him about all your desires to be a riverboat pilot, and I know he'll let you steer that steamboat.

HUCK: *(Narrative.)* Now most folks, if they told you a tale like that, you'd think it was just idle braggin', but when Tom Sawyer says somethin' like that, you know it's goin' to happen. You jest don't know when. Several days after that, when we went to fetch the mail for Aunt Polly…

(LIGHTS up on Tom and Huck; TOM has letter; HUCK has the rest of the mail; POLLY is sitting on a rocking chair.)

TOM: Aunt Polly, Aunt Polly! You got some mail.

POLLY: Did I get my seeds?

TOM: Yep, Huck's got 'em. All those watermelon seeds you ordered. But that ain't the extra special mail.

POLLY: Did I get the buttons to make your niece a new dress?

TOM: Yep, Huck's got 'em; all the buttons you ordered. But that ain't the extra special mail.

POLLY: Well, did we get that money that's owed us for sellin' the corn?

TOM: Yep, Huck's got it. A draft for 25 dollars and 12 cents. But…

POLLY: But that ain't the extra special mail. I'm tired of guessin', Tom Sawyer. Tell me what it is.

TOM: It's a letter. I told ya. A special letter.

POLLY: Well, who's it from, Tom Sawyer? I've done guessed myself dry.

TOM: *(Holds it up to tantalize her.)* You think it might be from your Uncle Bill. The one that went to Californie to be a gold miner?

POLLY: Is it? Is it?

TOM: No, it isn't, but you know, it could be. Now, do you think it might be from your cousin, you know the one whose husband died unexpectedly, and left her with seven children all hungry and pitiful?

POLLY: Oh no. She's goin' to need more money. I don't know what the Judge is goin' to say about us givin' her more money.

TOM: I tell you he'd raise a thunder. Luckily, it ain't from her.

POLLY: Tom Sawyer, I'm goin' to get a switch off a tree if you don't hand me that letter this second.

(SHE chases Tom; TOM secretly hands the letter off to HUCK.)

POLLY: Give me that letter, Tom.

TOM: *(Runs away from POLLY.)* I'd love to give it to ya. 'Cause I know you're too slow to catch me, but Huck's got it.

POLLY: *(Stopping to catch her breath.)* Huck?

(HUCK gives her the letter.)

HUCK: Here 'tis. It's from Aunt Sally.

POLLY: I swear the two of you would drive a sane woman crazy. *(SHE opens the letter.)* Oh my. Oh my.

TOM: Bad news, Aunt Polly?

POLLY: Who would have believed it? *(SHE sits.)* Why, who would believe it?

TOM: The children's all right, ain't they?

POLLY: Oh gracious me, gracious me. To think someone like your Uncle Silas would have troubles like these.

(The BOYS sit at her feet; they are both very sincere.)

HUCK: What kind of troubles, Aunt Polly?

POLLY: Tom, I reckon you got to pack up, get on a steamboat, go down to Arkansas. Your Aunt Sally needs you.

End of Freeview

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