

Huckleberry Finn

US : 1974 : dir. J. Lee-Thompson : United Artists / Apjac / Readers Digest : 118 min
 prod: Arthur P Jacobs : scr: Richard M. & Robert B. Sherman : dir.ph.: Laszlo Kovacs

[Jeff East](#); [Frank Mills](#)
 John Schwartzman; Paul Winfield; Harvey Korman; David Wayne; Gary Merrill; Kim O'Brien;
 Arthur O'Connell; Natalie Trundy; Lucille Benson; Jean Fay; Ruby Leftwich; Joe Boris;
 Odessa Cleveland; Danny Lantrip; Van Bennett; Linda Watkins; Jean Combs;
 Francis Fawcett

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No slave on the run in the deep South would have looked so self-confident as Winfield here (nor would he have worn shoes)

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

"Little of Mark Twain is left in this handsome but empty-headed musical version of his classic story. The score by Richard and Robert Sherman is as forgettable as their script. Shot in Panavision. **"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above (translating "handsome" as "likeable")

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Ambitious but lustreless version of the famous story, with songs."

"It expires in a morass of treacle."

- Tom Milne

"It transforms a great work of fiction into something bland, boring and tasteless."

- **Illustrated London News**

Excerpt from **The Good Film and Video Guide** review of the 1939 version:

"...Other versions were made in 1920, 1931, 1960 and 1974 (twice: to be avoided particularly is the one with music)."

Movies on TV (1987) review:

"Twain's durable classic gets a beating in this lumbering "musical adaptation"¹ - some of the many problems with the picture are that the adaptation is clumsy and the direction poor, and it sags throughout with several of the most forgettable songs that have plopped from the screen in many years. The only note of levity is that provided by Korman posing as a phony king and clergyman. East is a wooden Huck and Winfield is trapped playing his sidekick, Jim. *½ "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Dreadful 1974 attempt by J. Lee Thompson to turn Mark Twain's story into a musical, with terrible songs, boring pictures and lifeless acting. The jokes are particularly awful, and blacks horribly patronised². 777 "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"With the facsimile B & W minstrels crooning "Huckle-berry, Huckle-berry, where you bin?" and Roberta Flack "performing" (so the credits say) the title song, you get the tenor of this *Readers Digest* musical adaptation. The lying and deception that run through Twain's original become incidental rather than thematic, and much of the sense of sheer adventure gets lost. Instead, Huck's

¹ Odd, then, that this is the only film version which the book reviews

² This last point, I feel, is unfair. Blacks are no more patronised here than in earlier Twain films. They are referring perhaps to the single character of Buck - a negro houseservant boy who explains to Huck the functions of bathtubs and nightcaps - looking uncomfortably reminiscent of the comic "piccaninnies" in films of the Twenties and Thirties.

adventures with runaway slave Jim remain amiable and episodic rather than memorable and integrated. Everyone "performs" larger than life, singing their forgettable songs rather badly. Laszlo Kovacs' camerawork, consistently several notches above the rest of the production, remains its only distinctive feature."

The United Artists Story review:

"If the musical version of "**TOM SAWYER**" (1973) tested parents' patience when accompanying their kids to the movie³, the same script-and-song writing team of Robert B and Richard M Sherman's "**HUCKLE-BERRY FINN**" was enough to drive them to the exits. Even indiscriminate children must have found the treacly treatment of Mark Twain's great novel hard to take. Jeff East in the title role, Paul Winfield (Jim), Lucille Benson (the Widder Douglas), Arthur O'Connell, Gary Merrill, Natalie Trundy, Kim O'Brien and Jean Fay were miles from the original characters, and Harvey Korman and David Wayne, as con men The King and The Duke, gave performances as broad as the Mississippi. J Lee Thompson's shallow direction only slowed up Arthur P Jacobs' last production."

[no listing in "Rating the Movies (1990)", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times note:

"Dramatisation of the classic Mark Twain tale of early 19th century America."

TV Times note:

"Classic Mark Twain tale of early 19th-century America."

What's On TV notes:

"Premiere. A musical version of the Mark Twain classic with Jeff East as Huck and Paul Winfield his sidekick, Jim, messin' about on the Mississippi."

³ Or inflicting it on their kids, as the case may be

“Musical version of Mark Twain’s classic story about childhood buddies Huck and Jim messing about on the great Mississippi river.”

“Musical adventure. Childhood buddies Huck and Tom mess about on the Mississippi. Starring Jeff East and Paul Winfield.”

“Tale of boyhood adventures on the Mississippi River in the Deep South of America. Chums Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer journey down the river⁴ on a makeshift raft with a runaway slave. Based on the book by Mark Twain. Starring Jeff East, Harvey Korman and Paul Winfield.”

TV Quick note:

“Musical children’s tale, starring Jeff East and Paul Winfield.”

[**no listing** in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

⁴ *Oh no they don't*

Readers Digest were trying to do to Twain what Lionel Bart had done to Dickens with the 1968 Oscar-winner and box office hit "OLIVER!" - but they forgot to get any decent tunes to mask the screams of emasculation. So it didn't work, you see. Fourth of seven known US adaptations of the book to date. Others were in 1931 (Jackie Coogan), 1939 (Mickey Rooney), 1960 (Eddie Hodges), 1975 (Ron Howard), 1978 (Kurt Ida) and 1993 (Elijah Wood). The character also appears of course in numerous adaptations of "TOM SAWYER" - Jeff East played Huck to Johnnie Whitaker's Tom in the 1973 (musical) version, with Jodie Foster as Becky.

Here going on 17, East was plainly too old for the part, though not ludicrously so (Ron Howard was 21), and his screen personality is just too amiable and diffident for a satisfying Huck, while Winfield is caught in the same dilemma as any modern actor recreating a southern slave without giving offense to black viewers. In the 1993 Elijah Wood remake, Courtney Vance's Jim, though not a bad performance, was a towering anachronism. Winfield is likewise too intelligent and assured to convince as an illiterate slave on the run. Of the versions I have seen, only Archie Moore, with Eddie Hodges in 1960, had something of the fatalism and forlorn hope the role demands.

Charitably leaving aside the intrusive musical numbers, which are uniformly dreadful, this fails even as mild Sunday afternoon adventure. Gary Merrill makes a far from threatening Pap, the drama of the plantation feud is played almost as high farce, the bogus uncles are not tarred and feathered by the townsfolk they have attempted to fleece, and amusing little episodes in the story - such as Huck dressing as a girl to steal provisions for Jim and himself - are left out altogether. The second half is distinctly better than the first (not least because the songs peter out) but still has none of the verve of the 1993 Disney film, for all its faults. Even as a TV movie it would be below par. As a commercial feature it is truly dire. (When broadcast recently on Channel 5 - named for the average IQ of their audience - it was also very clumsily cut, or "edited" as they say today, and the commercial breaks were signalled by a still from the 1960 version.)

Variety said of Jeff East's Huck in the 1973 "TOM SAWYER": "Jeff East is most effective as Huck, making of that character an intriguing and contrasting personality ", but there is little of that to discern here. In 1977 he turned up in the unintriguing "THE CAMPUS CORPSE", and in '78 "STRANGER IN OUR HOUSE". The same year he was cast as the young Clark Kent in "SUPERMAN", but once again was way, way too old for the part. In 1980 he played a young Jack London in "KLONDIKE FEVER". Nothing further is known of Frank Mills, who plays the grinning houseboy Buck.

See subject index under MARK TWAIN for further adaptations and comment, and under HISTORY, MUSICALS, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS and SLAVERY.