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Dramatic Publishing

Huckleberry in Love



Comedy / Drama

by Michael Johnson

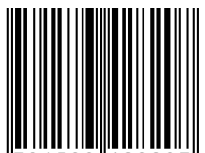
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Huckleberry in Love

Comedy/Drama. By Michael Johnson. Inspired by and borrowed from Mark Twain and William Shakespeare. Cast: 8m., 6w., 2 either gender. A story to prove that love's cosmic lightning can cleave the most ornery of hearts, *Huckleberry in Love* tells of two crazily star-crossed lovers, Huck Finn (the river-rat son of a drowned deadbeat drunk) and Petunia Pringle (the befreckled bookworm daughter of an eminent St. Louis judge). Filled with dialogue peppered with the colloquialisms of Mark Twain and woven with the jewels of Shakespeare, the play follows Huck's odyssey into first love, from his meeting with his "Juliet" at the Sunday-school picnic (his pockets bulging and croaking with bullfrogs) to the balcony scene in a thunderstorm on the thatched roof of a chicken coop to the climactic struggle between the big Ol' Muddy that beckons to his interminable wanderlust and the beautiful young woman on the bank who has given him her heart. Huck, Tom Sawyer, Aunt Polly, Jim, the widow Douglas and the rest are all right here where we left them—in the romantic wilds of our own hearts. *Flexible set. Approximate running time: 2 hours. Code: HF5.*

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“If I had a yaller dog that didn’t know no more than a person’s conscience does, I would pison him.”

—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

—*Hamlet* (1.3.78-80)

For Dad.

*Two tumbledown shacks, alike in shackliness,
In muddy Pete's Burg, where we dredge our scene,
From ol' brutalities wake new orneryness,
Makin' the jolly blood bilin' mean.
Midst devilment, deadbeats and rapsCALLIONS,
Two star-crossed sapheads squirm like crazy rats;
With no more sense than would wad a gun,
And danged near end up drowned like cats!
With the tiresome passage of this Shake-smear'd drool,
With graverobbins, mutilatins, blood, rum, mud,
We'll tackle to show a fool is a fool is a fool,
What tangle-headed hairballs claim as love.
One big ol' sockdolager of a story's plowin' for your stage!
Prepare yer old Harry for some good ol' hark from the grave!*

Huckleberry in Love

CHARACTERS

HUCKLEBERRY FINN: Still untamed and bristling with rascality, backwoods dialect and bravado, this Huckleberry feels the first intimations of a new fiend he must start to come to grips with: *his own ensuing manhood*. Feeling the nagging pulse of his conscience throb louder and louder inside him, our unsuspecting protagonist takes on a heroic, Odyssean stature in his uncouth, unorthodox and, at times, swashbuckling pilgrimage through the play to find *who* and *what* he truly *is*. With the *big ol' muddy* as his *God*, and the stars his angels, we see the conscience of a man awaken and burgeon in him, the same conscience that he would *pison if he was a yaller dog*. The river rat becomes a noble prince, especially in the eyes of that young woman, who, at first sight, completely adores him. "And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay, and follow thee my lord throughout the world." (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.47-48)

TOM SAWYER: The inimitable prankster and the perfect sidekick for Huck. Each is the other's hero, and each is in constant awe of the other's deviltries and outlandish escapades. It is Tom who crams old *Shake-a-smear's* lines into Huckleberry's mutton-headed skull, and it is Tom who dresses Huck's dead cat up in doll clothes and buries it in Hoss William's grave to scare the grave robbers. But more than a genius prankster, it is Tom who exhibits a troubadorean courtship for his Becky and the willingness to die for his lady, a shining example continually hung before Huckleberry's provincial eyes.

PETUNIA PRINGLE: Becky's good friend from St. Louis. She has come to St. Petersburg on her summer vacation to acquire a taste of rural life. She is a bookworm who wears large, oversized spectacles (*gogglers*), and her face is covered with huge freckles (*blotchers*). She is shy and unsocial, but upon seeing Huckleberry, she is smitten with first love, recognizing her unlikely prince as a diamond sparkling in the rough of slang and grime.

BECKY THATCHER: The golden-haired, dizzy-headed, forever-fretting young daughter of Judge Thatcher, and the constant adorer of her *Thomas*. A romantic like Tom, Becky is always dreaming of the perfect place and the perfect situation in life.

AMY LAWRENCE: Becky's best friend who is as crude as Becky is dreamy, one whose skin just *crawls* with Huckleberry's *ickiness*.

ALFRED TEMPLE: A bookworm and a nerd, but one who in the end is inspired to imitate Huckleberry's noble and uncouth example.

JOE HARPER: Huck and Tom's slow, glum companion. The unenthusiastic paramour of Amy Lawrence.

JIM: This is a much mellowed, paternal Jim, one who is treated well by the Widow Douglas, and is happy with his wife and children. He has no reason or ambition to break free and float down the river with Huckleberry as he did several years before. Knowing that Huckleberry has saved his life and knowing the young boy better than anyone else, Jim is forever grateful to him. He dearly loves Huck and tells him that he is the closest thing to a father that he will ever have. Full of lore, lingo and a big heart that is neither *black* nor *white* but only *good*, Jim is the moral pillar around which the play revolves.

WIDOW DOUGLAS: As kind, philanthropic and full of spleen as ever.

MISS WATSON: As shrewish, evangelical and *old maid* as ever.

AUNT POLLY: As pie-making, Thomas-thrashing and tender-hearted as ever.

JUDGE THATCHER: “*Pudgy judgy*” or “*the pudge*” is kind, jolly and ultimately spineless.

INJUN BILL: The “*half-breed big brother*” of the original *Injun Joe*, Injun Bill has come back to claim his inheritance and get his *claws on those yallers* that *pudgy judgy* and those *dern kids* stole from him. Mangy, foul-mouthed and whiskey-drinking, Injun Bill wears a great eye patch and a serape and has grand plans to float down to Mexico and drink tequila with pretty señoritas sitting on his knees.

JAKE TURNER: One of Injun Bill’s mangy, deadbeat “*pards*” with a large mustache. Preferably played by a girl.

SOWBELLY HAGAN: One of the play’s most colorful characters, Sowbelly is corpulent and massively strong but squeaky-voiced and chicken-hearted. He breaks locks with his teeth but is deathly afraid that someone will see him go wee-wee. A bumbling, simpleminded, oafish, Falstaff-sized character.

PREACHER TINDLEY: A con artist preacher man bilking the innocent and the unlettered people in the small river towns. Could be easily played by a girl dressed with fake hair, beard, baggy clothes, etc.

MAN’S VOICE: An offstage presence.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Huckleberry in Love can be performed as a two or three act play. To perform in two acts, eliminate the first intermission, playing straight through the end of Act II.

If any other division would be preferred or for further suggestions regarding your production, the author, Michael Johnson, may be contacted directly by email at: hamletofcabool@yahoo.com.

Huckleberry in Love

ACT I

SCENE 1

(Darkness onstage. A spiritual is heard offstage, preferably "Go Down, Moses," or "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," sung by a small chorus of both men and women. It is sung very softly, in almost a murmur. After it is sung, lights begin to slowly and softly dawn onstage as the play begins.)

At night, in JIM's quarters on WIDOW DOUGLAS' property. The sound of crickets. The dilapidated room is sparsely furnished. An old table with a softly glowing lantern and a jug of whiskey on it. A bunk to one side. A simple, crude wood stove. A basin and a pitcher of water with a towel sit on a barrel. Barrels, casks, firewood. HUCKLEBERRY FINN is lying on the floor, smoking a pipe. He is barefoot, ragged and "comfortable." JIM has his "hairball" cupped in his palms and is talking to it as he moves strangely about the room. The hairball is about the size of a softball. He is speaking in an inaudible whisper to the hairball, as if it is a living thing. Like his shadow, TOM SAWYER is following JIM about the room, absorbed and fascinated with the hairball and the incantations JIM is whispering to it. TOM is also smoking a pipe. From time to time, JIM throws the hairball up into the air, catches it, shakes it and presses his ear to it. At other times, he throws it up and lets it fall to the floor, then kneels down and, with reverence, listens and tries to interpret its fall. TOM follows JIM's every action with wonder. In sharp contrast, HUCKLEBERRY seems com-

pletely unconcerned and uninterested in the ritual. All three are barefoot and dressed in rags. Finally, JIM becomes very frustrated when the hairball will not speak to him.)

JIM. Speak, hairball angel! Speak yo' holy hairy mind, speak o' rot ya!

(JIM throws the hairball high into the air and lets it drop to the floor. Immediately, he kneels down on all fours and presses his ear to the floor next to the hairball, as if trying to hear it speak. TOM does the same on the other side of the hairball.)

JIM (*cont'd*). Dad gummit anyways, dis' hairball's gone and swallowed a canary it has, 'cuz by Moses, it ain't speakin' nuffin' to ol' Jim tonight.

HUCKLEBERRY (*without looking at JIM or the hairball at all*). Take a swig of 'shine, Jim. The hairball always seems to speak better to you when you're a little greased.

JIM. Das true, Huckleberry, why das true honey. Why en de tarnation I not tink of dat? Dog my cats if there ain't a kind of religion in ol' Hank Fooley's jugs. Makes a man see ghosts an' snakes an' all kinds of stuff, his rotgut does.

(JIM has stood up and begun to swig from the jug. He continues to swig, walking back and forth across the room when he speaks. TOM has remained on the floor with the hairball, listening to it, poking it and blowing on it, trying to make it speak to him.)

HUCKLEBERRY. Pap sure always had religion when he had his dose. His cussin' became just prime, turnin' him into a glory of hatefulness and cussfulness. It was a style of religion that seemed to fit Pap just fine.

TOM. Mudcat Bridges pried open a cat's mouth one time, thinkin' it looked a little dried out an' all, an' poured some

of ol' Hank's forty-rod down its throat, and Mudcat said it was just a glory how wild it made that cat, climbin' walls, clawin' at the air and barkin' like it was a dog, then all of a sudden fallin' stiff, spread-eagle to the floor, a kind of board with fur; somethin' to be scraped up with a shovel.

(JIM continues to swig from the jug, becoming more and more animated. He picks up the hairball from the floor and begins to inaudibly mumble to it.)

JIM. Der's a glory in Hank Fooley's shine!

TOM. Why Jim, cracky! Speak now to that hairy ol' thing!

(Much more animated now, JIM picks up the hairball and begins to dance and talk with it.)

JIM. Speak, hairy angel, speak! Speak uv de bright side uv de moon, an' de dark side; de sunny side uv de grave, an' de muddy side! Speak like ol' wise Solermon, o' speak like chuckleheads don't know der heads fum hams. I don't care, but juz speak, yo hairiness, speak! Let every hair on yo hairy head just stand up an' blaze!

(JIM throws the hairball up in the air and lets it fall on the floor. He quickly kneels down to it as he has done before. TOM kneels like JIM, and for the first time, HUCKLEBERRY turns to look, although he does not move from his place of resting. JIM begins to make all sorts of faces, but finally, one of despair and frustration wins out as he sits back up and takes another swig of 'shine.)

JIM (*cont'd*). Well if dis tain't de dadfetchedess an' blim blammest stubborn ol' hairball! Even ol' Hank Fooley's ornery lightnin' won't stir its hairs to talk, an' it's strong nuf to make a dead hoss fart!

TOM. I bet I got somethin' would make that ol' hairball whistle "Dixie," Jim.

JIM. What in de world is dat, chile?

TOM. This, by Jeeminy!

(TOM has pulled out a large coin from his pocket, then holds it up proudly. JIM brightens at once, then takes the coin and bites it.)

JIM. Deedy mars, Tom! Dat sho' might be de trick to make de hairball feel its oats!

TOM. Just slide it under the hairball's belly, Jim, and let her yowl!

(JIM becomes even more animated now. He picks up the hairball, stands and begins to stride and dance about the room, all the time coddling and whispering to the hairball things that no one can hear. TOM sits up on a barrel not far from him. HUCKLEBERRY has remained in the same position, lazily smoking his pipe.)

TOM *(cont'd)*. I'll betcha that ol' hairball angel will be just smokin' now, Huck, I'll betcha marbles!

JIM. Speak, holy hairball, speak! Speak of de fates of dees two sweet chillin', ever been so kind wid chaw and smoke and messes of pokeweed for po' ol' Jim, alwuz hivin' and hookin' heaps of truck for dis po' ol' Jack. Yo marster's no mo askin' y'all, he's out an' out commandin' yo holy hairiness he is! Speak, o' hairball angel, speak yo holy hairy mind!

(Again, JIM throws the hairball up in the air and lets it fall to the floor. Again he goes down on all fours, and TOM jumps off the top of the barrel and does the same. JIM carefully slides the gold piece under the hairball's "belly," then listens most attentively, first on one side, then on the other.)

TOM switches sides with him when he changes. HUCKLEBERRY has remained in the same place but now sits up and looks on with piqued curiosity.)

TOM. Is the hairball ...

JIM. Ssssh, chile, or you'll spook it! De hairball angel's wakin' up. She's getting' juiced!

TOM. By jingo, Jim, I think ...

JIM. Ssssh, honey! It's cogitatin'. I can hear it juz chewin' away on some deep and mighty things. (*Whispers to the hairball.*) Speak, hairy angel, speak to yo lovin' daddy who dun snaked yo fum dat dead ox's guts.

(The hairball begins to speak to JIM, who makes many animated expressions and gestures as he listens to it.)

JIM (*cont'd*). Mars Tom, de hairball sez y'all gonna have some pooty bad times, and den y'all gonna have some pooty good times. Sometimes y'all gonna be sad, an' udder times real happy wid de way de dice be tumblin'. Sometimes y'all gonna be po' an' sleep wid de hogs, an' udder times yer gonna have heaps of gold an' sleep like a lawyer in de starch.

TOM. But I don't wanna sleep like a lawyer in de starch.

JIM. Honey, de hairball's not speakin' uv what ya wanna be, but what ya dadbum gonna and gotta be.

TOM. But tell the hairball I'd rather sleep with hogs than like a starchy lawyer.

JIM. Dadbummit, Tom Sawyer, if de hairball sez y'all gonna be a lawyer an' sleep in de starch, y'all gotta be a lawyer an' sleep in the starch.

TOM. Hang the hairball! This says I won't!

(TOM takes the coin from beneath the hairball and puts it back in his pocket.)

JIM. Mars Tom, by Jayroosalem, y'all poot that shiny yaller jacket right back under dat hairball's hairy belly! Any ignorant bumblehead noz yallers make a hairball just gabble like a tom turkey!

TOM. Hairball angel or no hairball angel, the only fate noble enough for Tom Sawyer is one that will allow him to sack, kill and pillage.

JIM. Yer talkin' outter yo head, chile. No one talks to a hairball taken fum de fourth stomach of an ox in dat way.

TOM. Tom Sawyer does! Now you just go and tell your ornery ol' hairball who's wearin' the pants an' who's wearin' the hair. Tell your hairball to give Tom Sawyer an honorable fate full of guts, grit and glory, or by Jehosophat, I'll burn it!

JIM. Burn it!

TOM. Burn it bald!

JIM. Ding bustit, Tom Sawyer!

TOM. Unless your hairball angel coughs up some things without starch, without frills, without Bibles and Aunt Pollys, and coughs 'em up faster than you can say Jack Robinson, it'll be burnt to baltitude!

JIM *(pausing and thinking, then speaking in a more calm and humble way)*. An' de shiny yaller y'all poot back in yo trousers' right pocket?

TOM. When the hairball angel wants to give Tom Sawyer a fate that allows him to loot, kill and hold his head up high, it'll have its candy back.

(Partly disgruntled with resentment and distrust, JIM leans back down to the hairball and begins to listen to it again.)

JIM. De hairball seems to wanna speak some mo.

TOM. Cracky!

JIM. De hairball apologizes. It sez it wuz confused 'bout de lawyer stuff. It sez it thought yo name wuz Tom Lawyer, and not Tom Sawyer.

TOM. Tell the hairball angel to get it right this time, right or burn.

JIM. De hairball sez y'all gonna bust some jakes' heads, lift sum chickens an' hive a mess of pies an' real nice melons in yo day.

TOM. Jing-o!

JIM. Y'all gonna chew a lotta chaw, drink a lotta shine, an' out-cuss de devil.

TOM. But dern ya, Jim, everybody's that's civilized does those things, common as berries. I want somethin' righteous. I want somethin' cutthroat! I want some good ol' fashion brutralities and bloody ambuscades!

JIM. Y'all gonna put some pooty nasty spiders down de back of some pooty prissy wenches, an' sum pooty lively snakes down de drawers of sum pooty starchy bucks.

TOM. Meaner, hairball. Meaner, bullier, brutralier!

JIM. Y'all gonna beat sum galoots over der heads pooty good wid posts, or whatever just comes handy, whatever de good Lawd puts in yo hands to knock out der brains wid.

TOM. Dandy!

JIM. Y'all's gonna smear sum crosses uv blood on po' widows' doors wid a wicked ax.

TOM. Lovely!

JIM. Udder boys gonna have slingshots an' marbles, but mars Tom, y'all gonna have a geellerteen behind yo belt, hackin' de heads off widders an' preachers an' juz whatever head de good Lawd sez needs to go to grass!

TOM. Whoopjamboreehoo! Hairball, you're the hairiest!

JIM. Y'all's gonna hack houses, schools, churches, hogshids an' Sunday school picnics! hen y'all's gonna go fo' de throats of bigger tings, hackin' apart parloments an' de thrones of kings! Why, mars Tom, de hairball sez y'all gonna hack de hole wuld to flinders till der ain't nuffin mo to hack!

TOM. Cracky! That's a fate a chap can sink his teeth into, somethin' to crow above your ordinary country jake!

(JIM is exhausted. He has fallen backwards on the floor. TOM carefully places the dollar piece beneath the hairball again, then pets it like it was a little dog.)

TOM (*cont'd*). There's your candy back, little feller.

(TOM hands the exhausted JIM the jug again.)

TOM (*cont'd*). And here's yours, Jim.

JIM. Lawdy! Sweet Lawsey! I'd ruther ben drug 'bout by a pack of witches den be tuckered out by dat hairball tootin' 'bout all de murderous doodlebuggin' y'all gonna be doin' en yo days uv glory, mars Tom.

(TOM has lit his pipe and has begun to strut about in a proud way. He stops suddenly and looks anxiously to JIM.)

TOM. But dagnabbit, Jim, the hairball angel gave me a fate but was plum mum about Huck's!

JIM (*warily sits up*). Hucky, I luvs y'all to pieces, chile, but y'all gotta wait fo another time if y'all want de hairball to give ya a lotta blood an' mutilaterin's. Dem fates near bust ol' Jim!

(All of the preceding has occurred while HUCKLEBERRY has been lying lazily on the floor, dreamily smoking his pipe. He remains unchanged, and when he speaks with JIM,

he continues to speak in a lazy drawl as he has done in his previous passages.)

HUCKLEBERRY. Shucks Jim, you and the hairball don't need to get all cranked about my fate. I don't wanna kill nothin' bigger than a rat, and I don't wanna hive nothin' more than maybe a ripe melon or a tired chicken when things get a little sparse.

TOM. Ah, Huck, ya gotta have a fate. Ya know, a good star or an evil star. It's just bully to have one.

JIM. What kind uv fate y'all hanker for, sweetie?

HUCKLEBERRY. Tell the hairball angel that Huckleberry Finn ain't particlar. Don't care hash about good stars or evil ones.

(JIM has struggled back to his hands and knees. He has crawled to the hairball and now is listening to it with a new wonder and earnestness. From time to time, he throws it up in the air and lets it fall.)

HUCKLEBERRY *(cont'd)*. Just no goggle-eyed widders, no pencil-necked spinsters, an' sure as the last Mohican, no spindly-arsed parsons.

(Having seen JIM's new expression of genuine incredulity, TOM kneels down near the hairball as well. HUCKLEBERRY is still smoking and dreamily gazing into space.)

HUCKLEBERRY *(cont'd)*. And no more good books sendin' my soul to hell.

(JIM's tired face suddenly brightens into a big wonder-filled smile.)

HUCKLEBERRY *(cont'd)*. As long as I've got chaw, 'shine and a catfish moseyin' 'bout my hook, I'm just lovely as a summer cloud.

(Suddenly, JIM bursts out with great bellyfuls of laughter. He rolls about the floor, whooping and kicking his legs and sucking at the jug. TOM sits back in complete befuddlement. This has finally stirred HUCKLEBERRY from his stupor.)

HUCKLEBERRY *(cont'd)*. Dern ya, Jim, ya old punkinheaded fool, what's so blamed funny about what that ratty old hairball angel told you, makin' ya whoop like a hooched up injun? Spit it out, or by Leviticus, I'll pungle you.

(HUCKLEBERRY kicks JIM and takes the jug from him, then holds it over him as if threatening to pour it on him. Slowly, JIM gains back his breath and manages to regain some sobriety.)

JIM. Huckleberry Finn, de hairball dun sez y'all's got de ding-busted wildest fate uv dem all! Bloody geelerteens and hacking up Sunday school picnics can't hold a candle to yo fate, no sirree! Prepare yo'self, Hucky, prepare yo'self real good, honey chile, cuz Huckleberry Finn's gonna fall en luv!

(Both TOM and HUCKLEBERRY are frozen with shock. JIM starts laughing hysterically again, rolling on the floor; etc.)