

By Angela Covo

ARTS SA presents Hal Holbrook in "Mark Twain Tonight!"

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San Antonio.- ***This weekend, a delightful and edifying evening is in store for those who attend "Mark Twain Tonight!" at 7:30 p.m., Sunday, Nov. 6 at the Laurie Auditorium. The event is an extraordinary one-night-only presentation from ARTS SA featuring a spectacular award-winning performance from Mr. Hal Holbrook, who has worked on his role as Mark Twain in this one-man show since 1948. Tickets may still be available if you hurry – call ARTS SA at (212) 226-2891 or visit www.artssa.org. And click the headline for the rest of the story – LP's special interview with award-winning actor Hal Holbrook!***

By Angela Covo
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Actor Hal Holbrook, 86 years young, has been performing his one-man show as Mark Twain since 1954, but the work started more than 60 years ago in 1947 as a school project in college, when he started portraying Twain in a two-man show with his first wife Ruby.

"It was a school project at first. My first wife Ruby and I put together a two-person show," Holbrook explained. "I would edit them together, and Mark Twain and the interviewer – it was very funny," Holbrook said.

The first performance they did was in a suicide ward of a veterans' hospital, and Holbrook found it difficult to gauge the audience reaction. But when people laughed out loud at the next performance, he realized they had a winning formula.

He has traveled across the country every year since then.

"In those days, we had to travel two-lane highways to get to the district schools where we first played. We traveled 80 miles an hour in a station wagon across the country, performing," Holbrook remembers. Later they graduated to the next level and found themselves on the college and women's club circuit.

Then the first baby came, and Holbrook needed to make a living. For some time, he couldn't get a job.

"I was desperate to get food on the table," he said. It occurred to him that he could get booked with a solo performance of Mark Twain, and it worked.

"To my total amazement, this was the best set of reviews since "My Fair Lady." They were so extraordinary, they made me nervous. I never dreamed New York critics would rave over my show. But after all that, it was a tremendous feeling to survive," Holbrook said.

The production enjoyed three separate runs on Broadway: in 1966, 1977, and 2005. Yet Holbrook, who won Emmy and Tony Awards for his performances, is the first to say he has not perfected the role.

"That would be a mistake – when you think you've got it—you lose it. There's always something left you've got to find. The material is too rich -- he's talking about us, the human condition, the common man. He came from a dusty little town on the Mississippi River and he always maintained that connection. Even as he found himself in the company of wealthy industrialists like Carnegie, he would still rip them to shreds," Holbrook explained.

The humor, which is more than a century old, is still laugh-out-loud funny today. Holbrook's monologue is rambling, intelligent, and his flawless comedic timing shines through as he culls together Twain commentary. And while Holbrook has been evolving in the role for years, he says he has never needed to update Mark Twain's thoughts or words.

"What Mark Twain had to say 100 years ago is so shockingly true today! History repeats. It's a shock to know we haven't moved an inch," he said.

By 1959, Holbrook was already a big star, except he realized not a soul knew who Hal Holbrook was at all. "It turned out Mark Twain was the star, I still couldn't get a job, except for a role in the soap operas, and in those days, working in soaps was a disgrace for a serious actor," he explained.

He had to reinvent himself to learn who he was, and learn to play himself.

"That took me many years, many mistakes," he said. "I've made so many dreadful mistakes, wasn't a good father then, though that's much better now."

But throughout the learning curve, Holbrook is proud he was always able to keep his respect for his profession.

And *he* is widely respected and celebrated for his body of work, including such films as "Water for Elephants", "All the President's Men", "Wall Street" and "The Firm". He has five prime-time Emmy Awards for his work in television and an Academy Award nomination in 2008 for his role in "Into the Wild".

His ability to deal with adversity is the result of a very difficult childhood and a stubborn streak that simply will not permit him to give up -- which he describes beautifully in his recent book, "[Harold, the Boy who Became Mark Twain](#)."

The instinct, the yen to survive, is what got him through the bad times, Holbrook said.

Holbrook has five children (two are steps, but he loves them like his own), Victoria, David, Eve, Mary Dixie and Ginna, and two grandchildren. His wife, the lovely actress Dixie Carter, passed away April of 2010.

When he married Dixie, he remembers how warmly the Carter family embraced him and welcomed him into their home. Holbrook is very fond of his mother-in-law, Mrs. Carter, who passed away in 1988.

She sent him a letter two weeks before she died suggesting he look up her favorite Bible passage, 1 Corinthians, 13, which ends "without charity, I am nothing." In the letter, she explained she grew up with a translation that used the word "love" instead of charity.

That was one of the greatest lessons, Holbrook said.



"She taught me something about love," he said. "I know when heaven is all around us, they are here."

For more information about "Mark Twain Tonight!" or to learn how you can meet the artist, visit www.artssa.org or call (210) 226-2891.