

Rivard Report

Hal Holbrook Reprises Role in ‘Mark Twain Tonight!’

[Don Mathis](#) on 22 March, 2016 at 01:12 p.m.

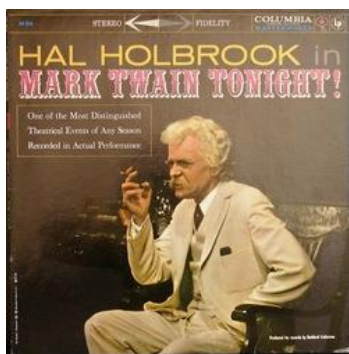


After more than 60 years, actor [Hal Holbrook](#) is still capturing listeners, making people think, and making people laugh. He will bring his highly-acclaimed one-man show, “Mark Twain Tonight!” to the Laurie Auditorium on Thursday, March 24, at 7:30 p.m.

Click [here](#) for ticket details.

Sixty years ago, I was in junior high school, listening to an old man portraying Twain ([Samuel Clemens](#)). Last week, I interviewed Holbrook. During my conversation with this legend, I realized the true finesse and imagination that Holbrook possesses to entice his audiences.

People become actors for a million reasons, Holbrook said.



Students 50 years ago learned philosophy, language, politics, and history from this album. The old man on the record cover, Hal Holbrook, is even older now – but still just as funny. Photo courtesy of Columbia Records.

“I went on stage in my last year in high school. I needed an extra hour of credit. I was desperate.”

But beyond fulfilling his credit requirements, Holbrook discovered something; he really liked theater.

“It was the first time I felt people were listening to me,” he said. “It had a wonderful human effect on me. It was real.”

He continued to act after high school, but times were hard. He often found it difficult to find a job, he said, but between 1948 and 1949 he performed in 200 shows in Texas.

Holbrook first portrayed Twain in a mock interview, which he performed in Seguin, San Antonio, and Kerrville.

“It was like a joke to do these interviews,” he said. “I happened to know the son of Mark Twain’s lecture manager. Bim Pond was a tough man. He asked me, ‘Why don’t you do a solo?’”

It was then that Holbrook knew he had to “get money on the table” and decided to perform in his first solo show at the State Teachers College in Pennsylvania.

“I was a character man. I did the first line and they laughed,” he said. “I learned very early on that Mark Twain could stir people up. Instead of shying away from that, I work it for the stage.”

Ed Sullivan saw the one-man show at Lock Haven State Teachers College and put Holbrook on television in 1956. Since then, Holbrook has appeared as hundreds of characters in various roles on television, movies, and the stage.

“No matter what theater did to me, I could always do Mark Twain,” he said.

Mark Twain’s life spanned many major accomplishments in society. He saw the construction of the trans-continental railroad and the invention of the telegraph, telephone, and the automobile. Twain wrote in his 1904 autobiography that the first typewritten novel was his “Tom Sawyer.” Twain adapted with the technology and the ever-evolving culture.

“The nature of literature changed after the Civil War,” Holbrook said. “Mark Twain chipped away at people’s misuse of God — he showed their hypocrisy.”

Readers in the post-war era changed as well.

“The 1870s was the greatest decade of immigration the country has ever known,” Holbrook said. “They flooded this country and became the workers.”

Twain also was outspoken about his support of Democracy in the U.S., which was a breakthrough in the 1700s. While Holbrook shares that belief, he still thinks our nation has a long way to go.

“(Democracy) inspired the world, but we are the same bunch of idiots that we were a hundred years ago,” he said. “When we elected a young, black man as president in 2008, we achieved a measure of democracy, but the party that lost made it their job to try to get rid of him. They have trashed this country.”

Perhaps it is that sentiment that has kept the 91-year-old motivated to continue touring and performing. His experience of playing leaders like Abraham Lincoln (in the television miniseries “[North and South](#)“ as well as “[Sandburg’s Lincoln](#)“) and John Adams (in the miniseries “[George Washington](#)“), he said, has “helped (him) understand our country.”

“I don’t like to see people trash our country. Abe Lincoln made a moral choice because he realized the country could not survive half-slave and half-free,” Holbrook said. “We have some unfinished business. We have work to do.”

As for playing Twain, something he’s been doing since the mid-1950s, Holbrook relishes his role because of his audiences’ reactions.



Hal Holbrook has won a handful of Emmy Awards as well as a Screen Actors Guild and Golden Globe Award. Fifty years ago, he received a Tony Award for his best-loved character, Mark Twain. Courtesy Photo.

“It’s a great pleasure for me because I let them have it,” he said. “I don’t pull any punches.”

By now, he said, he can read the audience and modify his performance based on their reception.

“I change it a lot,” he said. “I have 20 hours of material. I keep adding stuff all the time.”

In his [2011 appearance](#) at Laurie Auditorium, Holbrook riled theologians with his impiety towards religion, he infuriated the rich with his contempt for Wall Street, and he insulted the health profession with his skepticism of the medical profession. The rest of the audience was entirely enthralled with his amusing and astute observations. Holbrook has derision for those who get upset at Twain.

“My heart just bleeds,” he quipped.

As for the next phase of his career, Holbrook remains open-minded.

“If someone offers me a job, I’ll take it,” he said. “As long as I don’t have to get up at five a.m. I’m working on staying alive, not falling down.”

There are a handful of world-class speakers alive today that should be on everyone’s bucket list. [Jane Goodall](#), [John Glenn](#), and [Lech Wałęsa](#) have captivated audiences at Laurie Auditorium in the past. The world will never see the likes of [Will Rogers](#) or Mark Twain again, but catching a performance of Hal Holbrook in “Mark Twain Tonight!” is an unforgettable and rewarding experience.

**Top image: Mark Twain Tonight! is the longest running show in American theater. Hal Holbrook will appear at the Laurie Auditorium on March 24. Image courtesy of Hal Holbrook.*