HAL HOLBROOK in
MARK TWAIN TONIGHT!

One of the Most Distinguished
Theatrical Events of Any Season
Recorded in Actual Performance
HAL HOLBROOK

in

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In writing anything on a subject bearing any relationship to Mark Twain, one can best serve the reader by quoting that great man—and, indeed, who can resist it?

I certainly cannot, and I should like to quote the following Twain saying: "In all matters of opinion, our adversaries are insane."

Quite so. And in my opinion, this performance by Hal Holbrook is not only a great theatrical work of art, but also a model of real literary distinction. His recreation of Mark Twain is not just a piece of costume and make-up virtuosity. Certainly that is clever enough, but perhaps a dozen vaudevillians in the old days, given time, could do something like it. No, it is that this remarkable physical impersonation is but the husk for the mind and soul of Mark Twain: a living, breathing—and, most striking—a thinking Mr. Twain. There he stands, Mark Twain, in front of our very eyes, tickling us with those grand sayings, as he goes along. Having known Hal Holbrook, it would indeed be difficult for me to resist saying to my future grandchildren, "Of course, I knew Mark Twain!"

Anyway, there is my opinion. And if you do not share it, I refer you once more to the quotation by Mark Twain.

—Goddard Lieberson

"UPBROADLY FUNNY, PUNGENTLY WISE." That is how Time Magazine described "MARK TWAIN TONIGHT!"

This is one of those rare blends in the theatre, a memorable acting performance based on rich literary material which has the added appeal of being a remarkably funny show. As Walter Kerr of the New York Herald Tribune put it: "Mark Twain Tonight! is an extraordinary achievement. That it should be thumpingly funny, too, is just so much gravy."

Mark Twain Tonight! opened at the 41st Street Theatre in New York on April 6, 1959, and the following morning the critics joyfully reported that a new smash hit had "slipped" into New York. Said the Times, "There should be protests up and down town to herald its arrival. It's brilliant! Everything about the evening is perfect."

Richard Watts of the New York Post wrote, "Whatever ecstasies of enthusiasm you have heard over 'Mark Twain Tonight!', I can assure you they have not been exaggerated. Mr. Holbrook is utterly delightful . . . the most fun I've had in the theatre for ages." Brooks Atkinson found the production "brilliant . . . explosively comic . . . uproarious . . . Mr. Holbrook brings us close to Mark Twain and to a roaring period in American life." And when all the reviews were in, the Herald Tribune summed them up: "The most scintillating set of reviews since My Fair Lady."

In truth, Mark Twain Tonight! did not "slip" into town. Hal Holbrook had been planning its production for many years, and two years before the event had believed that the time was ripe. He gave a thirty-minute program at the Lambs Club, where he was spotted by producer John Lotas, who determined to present the production for the public. Veterans in show business told both that they were wasting their time: "An unknown actor, alone on stage, for two hours." Others insisted on production values: other actors, songs, dances, costumes. But Mr. Holbrook and Mr. Lotas took hope from Mark Twain's words: "Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect." And so the efforts continued. An office was rented, a partnership formed, and prospective investors searched out.

In February 1959, another audition was held. One man watched forty minutes of the presentation, then asked for a pen and wrote a check providing half the cost of the production. Soon thereafter the show was fully capitalized, and Mark Twain Tonight! became one of the most stunning successes in recent show business history.

HAL HOLBROOK, the 34-year-old actor who underwent such a remarkable transformation in becoming Mark Twain at seventy, created the characterization twelve years ago as a part of a two-hour show in which he toured with his wife, Ruby. It became a solo effort in 1954 first as a night club act, later expanding to its present length. In addition to his concert tours, Mr. Holbrook has been featured on television by Ed Sullivan, Steve Allen, Jack Paar, and on the Wide World telecast, The Sound of Laughter.

Twelve years of research have made Mr. Holbrook well acquainted with Mark Twain. In his opinion, authenticity has been achieved with a copy of the rare Edison film of Twain, a recording of his voice, studied reviews of his lectures, and talked with people who knew the Missourian personally or saw him on the platform. The authentic material which Mr. Holbrook uses has been adapted by himself and he created the makeup, which requires three hours to apply.

For five and a half years, Hal Holbrook was familiar to daytime television viewers as Grayling Dennis on The Brighter Day.

SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS, known and celebrated as MARK TWAIN, has become a legend since he departed this life with Halleys comet on April 21st, 1910. Few Americans have captured and held the affection of a world-wide audience as this mischievous man from Missouri.

Mark Twain represents the rugged individualist who once roamed widely on the American scene. Prolifically proud of his western frontier days and of those he spent as a river-boat pilot on the Mississippi, he wrote about them in several classic books. He also wrote some great travel books, poking fun at European idols and the American tourist who admires them wholesale. His salty comments about the human race have become a permanent part of American folk lore.

But it was on the platform, as a public entertainer, that he first wooed and won the country. He was our court jester—as Will Rogers was a generation or so later. Twain's "slow nasal drawl," his "habit of loosely lounging about the stage," and his great mastery of the pause—these were some of the tools with which he "gathered that audience up into the palm of his hand and tickled it." He was, in the words of Sir Henry Irving, "a great actor."

As Mark Twain approached seventy, the nation became aware that the man from Hannibal was more than a great humorist. He was a humanitarian. He hated sham . . . hypocrisy . . . prejudice . . . injustice, and he fought against these things with laughter.

"The human race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little, weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand."

—Mark Twain

(The Mysterious Stranger)

1 New York Sun, Nov. 19, 1884
2 Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain's Speeches 1925 ed.
3 William Dean Howells, in a letter to Twain.