

Play overflows with wisdom and humor

By GREG WAXBERG
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You're sitting in a large lecture hall in the early 1900s, and your reactions to the speaker's presentation — plus the reactions of everyone around you — help determine the course of the evening.

For 53 years, American actor Hal Holbrook has been personifying Mark Twain and bringing to life the author's books, stories, essays, letters and speeches in an award-winning one-man play that changes content for every performance.

At 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jack Stevens Productions will bring *Mark Twain Tonight!* to Thalia Mara Hall in Jackson.

"It's going to be wonderful, but you don't really know what it's going to be," Stevens said.

That's because Holbrook, a star of movies, television and the stage who turned 82 last month, has memorized more than 16 hours of Twain's material, any of which you could hear next week based on his impressions of the audience.

Audiences of all ages have seen this inventive play; Holbrook has performed *Mark Twain Tonight!* on Broadway, off-Broadway, at universities and on tours around the world.

The evening is a combination of education, humor and wisdom. "It's Twain talking," Stevens said, and he recommends the production for junior high school students and older, particularly students of history and English.

Speaking of history, "Mark Twain," the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, was taken from his experiences working on riverboats. "Twain" is an old word for "two," and "mark twain" means the water is two fathoms, or 12 feet, deep and called "safe water."

The author sparked Holbrook's interest during another theatrical endeavor earlier in his life. He and his first wife, Ruby, played various literary characters in a half-hour show they created, and the sequence included Twain's 10-minute comedy "Encounter with an Interviewer." After much research and an honors project on Twain at Denison University, *Mark Twain Tonight!* was born.

According to Stevens, the first act is lighter and more upbeat, while the second is more serious. "It's almost like Twain's life unfolding before your eyes. You feel like you've run the course of this man's life from his beginnings to how he looked at it at the end," he said.

Holbrook wants to make you feel like Mark Twain is talking to you and standing in front of you. Wearing make-up, smoking a cigar, walking among oversized period furniture — to make him look shorter and closer to Twain's height — and using props like a stack of real first-edition Twain books, his research comes to life.

He examined how Twain delivered speeches, walked and dressed, and he watched Thomas Edison films, all to try to become an authority about the man he portrays.

"You can't pick up any of the latest biographies on Mark Twain without Hal Holbrook being quoted in there somewhere," Stevens said.

Halbrook brings half century of Twain expertise to stage