



News-Press photo by Bob Ponce

HAL HOLBROOK and his daughter Evie were in town for the Channel City Horse Show. Holbrook will present "Mark Twain Tonight" Wednesday.

## Holbrook reincarnates author Mark Twain

By Hillary Hauser  
News-Press Staff Writer

Mark Twain is coming to town, not by riverboat, horse or jumping frog, but in the body of Hal Holbrook — a man who should be ashamed of himself. Only a varmint would fool people into thinking the dead are alive when they've been planted in the ground for over 70 years.

Holbrook is a serious, Emmy-winning actor known for fine performances other than his one-man portrayal of Mark Twain, but he continues his reincarnation of the classic American author because, actually, audiences love to be fooled.

"Mark Twain Tonight," which will be presented Wednesday at the Arlington Theater, will be just one of more than 1500 Twain re-creations that Holbrook has done in the past 28 years, but this performance promises to be different from any of the others.

That's because every audience is different, and Holbrook gauges his delivery on how people respond to what's being said.

Holbrook talked about his upcoming show during a visit to Santa Barbara in which he watched his daughter Eve, 11, ride in the Channel City horse show at Earl Warren showgrounds. Sitting in the grandstand of an equestrian practice ring, Holbrook the actor also talked about his career, and with daughter Evie at his side there were comments from Holbrook the father, too.

He said that the material he uses in his performances is always word-for-word Twain, memorized and delivered according to audience reaction. What emerges is a gruff, cigar-smoking, satirical grilling of human nature, with no subject off-limits.

One can imagine what happened when Twain/Holbrook attacked racism in Little Rock, Ark., one week after the riots at Central High, and again when he tackled the subject in Oxford, Miss., while there were still machine guns on street corners.

"A lot of people were not at all happy with what was going on," said Holbrook, "but they couldn't talk about it. If you shouted equality, you could

get bombed. That was the situation."

On the subject of racism, Holbrook said Twain was very direct and that the material he used on stage in Mississippi and Arkansas was "very pertinent."

"It was about lying by keeping quiet — the silent lie — all specifically to do with slavery," said Holbrook. "Christ, I mean it was blood-chilling to do. I was scared, but I thought it might work. From Twain they take it. It wasn't like some northerner saying it."

Holbrook said that after his performance in Oxford, Miss., about 200 people came backstage to thank him.

"There were ministers, old ladies. It was beautiful, wonderful," he said.

There is little that escapes the blast of Twain's satirical wit, and Holbrook said that sometimes people in current audiences become offended. He cited a recent performance in Claremont, Ca., where several people walked out.

"They were Moral Majorities, or whatever they call themselves. It was wonderful. I was delighted to hear they had walked out. I'd rather see people get mad instead of sitting there like dunces. I love to stir up prejudiced people, get them mad. I don't care who they are — racists, fanatic Christians — whatever."

He hugged his daughter, who said she had seen her father's performance many times.

"I love it," she said with a laugh. "It's HYSTERICAL."

Holbrook proudly hugged his daughter.

"When she was two," he said, "at the corner of Fairfax and Beverly, she'd ride around and around and around on the horses. The first time she came to Santa Barbara, in 1978, she won 13 ribbons, and we didn't even know what was going on."

Back on the subject of Twain, Holbrook said that how he immersed himself so completely in the character of the beloved, cantankerous American author had to do with the four hours it takes for him to make up prior to each performance.

"You can't spend four hours by

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## Twain's words relevant

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yourself without doing some thinking," he said. "Whether you're building a ladder, fixing the plumbing — whatever — you're alone, and what goes on in your mind when you're alone — that's when you prepare."

Holbrook's appreciation of time alone extends into another of his loves — sailing — and three years ago he sailed his 40-foot boat single-handedly in the Trans-Pac race from San Francisco to the Hawaiian islands.

"I was 24th out of 27," Holbrook mused. "Very slow. But in all fairness to the boat, I had totally loaded it down. I had planned to cruise the South Pacific afterward, had taken four anchors, 500 ft. of chain, fuel and water. I had no concept of racing."

That race "hooked him," however, and Holbrook said he plans to race the Trans-Pac again in two years, this time taking everything off to "give the boat a chance."

In spite of the single-handedness of both the sailing and the Twain presentations, Holbrook said he has no predilection for solo shows when it comes to acting and has avoided doing other one-man performances.

"I like working with other actors," he said. "But when you're doing a solo show, with good material, there is a wonderful freedom. No worries about stepping on other people's toes."

Holbrook's television parts (including that of Commander Bucher in "Pueblo" and the starring role in "Sandburg's Lincoln") have earned him three Emmy Awards, and he has also acted in a long list of motion pictures, including "All the President's Men" and "Julia." "Mark Twain Tonight!" won Holbrook a Tony Award in 1966, and a 90-minute television special of the performance netted him an Emmy nomination.

Currently, Holbrook is working with Michael Douglas in the new movie "Star Chamber," which he describes as a melodrama.

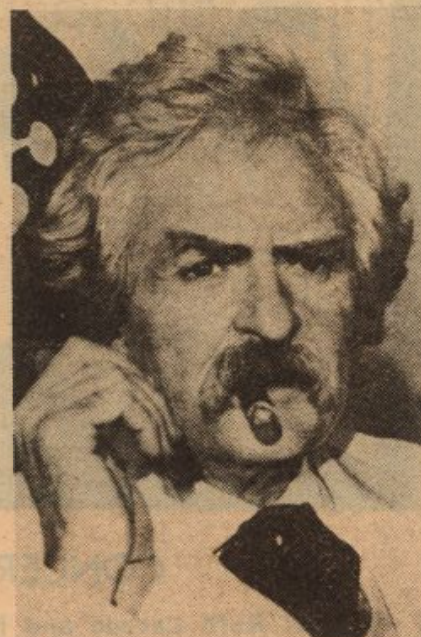
"It has to do with the courts," said Holbrook. "How a criminal who has done some obvious crime thwarts justice by getting off on some technicality..."

He stops mid-sentence because a horse has just bucked in the ring, refusing to jump a fence, and its young rider is having some trouble.

"Hold on, baby, hold on," Holbrook said quietly, watching the young woman work to get the horse under control. Eve joined in by saying that her old horse Stanley did the same thing once in a while, and that her new horse, Wet Paint, got his name from the fact that he looked like he had stepped in paint.

"We just bought the horse," said her father. "Paid more than we intended to, but we're happy. Eve is so dedicated, has worked hard. She's very serious and wants to be on the Olympic team."

With this, Eve ran off to find a photographer to take a picture of Wet Paint, and Holbrook talked about his two children by his first marriage. David, 26, is an actor living in New York who recently worked with his father in the feature film "Final Clue," to be released this summer. His older daughter, Vicky, 30, is earning her doctorate in middle eastern culture from Princeton University and for the



MARK TWAIN comes back to life when reincarnated by Hal Holbrook in "Mark Twain Tonight."

past 2½ years she has lived in Istanbul.

Holbrook admits that his own experience with education was not so lofty, and in fact his entrance into acting was only because he needed another hour of credit in high school and didn't know what else to do.

"It was just an accident," Holbrook recalled. "I had flunked math and every other damned thing, and I was desperate. I was at Culver Military Academy. A friend suggested going into dramatics class. I thought 'No way,' but I did it. It was easy. I had a little part. It was a wonderful feeling to go out there. People laughed at what I did, and there was a magnificent feeling of approval."

Holbrook pursued his accidental find, going into summer theater in Cleveland and majoring in drama at Denison University, Ohio. He served in World War II for three years, and near the close of the war he got into performing while still in the Army.

The Mark Twain act he developed in 1954 simply as a way of "earning a few bucks."

"Then I realized there was some profundity in it," Holbrook said. "I could say things."

He pointed out that Twain's life spanned a "very significant period — from the frontier to post-war manufacturing society," and that Twain became very vocal about social reform. It is the social remarks, said Holbrook, that enable present-day audiences to identify with his show.

He scraped on his boot with a pocket knife.

"The show is very funny until it becomes more than funny," he reflected. "It's not just the jokes. Twain is making humor out of real stuff."

Twain, reincarnated and cantankerous as ever, will smoke his cigar and make humor out of real stuff beginning at 8 p.m. Wednesday night, and by the end of the evening there will be one more audience with consciousnesses either raised, mad, or a little bit fooled.