

Famed for his Mark Twain one-man show, actor Hal Holbrook dies at 95

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In 1985, actor Hal Holbrook told an interviewer in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that American humorist-writer Mark Twain “has become integrated into my whole life ... no matter what the subject, he’s always a tremendously amusing wise old bird.” By that time, Holbrook had been performing his one-man show, “Mark Twain Tonight” for 31 consecutive years—just about the midpoint of its run. The actor went on, “I think it would be a pretty good idea to keep doing this every year until I drop dead.”

Holbrook died at his home in southern California on January 23 (it was not made public until February 2). He was 95. Three years earlier, he had officially retired “Mark Twain Tonight” when he canceled the first performance of a 2017 tour, after having performed the show for 63 years. Significantly, by the time of Samuel Clemens’ death in April 1910, 61 years had passed since he had taken on the pen name Mark Twain in a submission to the *Territorial Enterprise* of Virginia City, Nevada. So, Holbrook, as it turned out, inhabited the persona of Mark Twain longer than Mark Twain himself.

Holbrook gave an extensive interview in July 2017 in which he recounted how he had come to create the one-man show. (An excerpt appears here.) He explained that he started by reading Twain’s books, including *Huckleberry Finn* (1885)—“A hell of a book! About racism in America—our greatest trial by fire. Then and now!”

Holbrook explicated Twain: “We are religious people! CRAP! It’s called hypocrisy! That is the spear that is driven straight through the heart of America. Hypocrisy! And that was the clue that was the theme I could see in Mark Twain’s work that would connect me to today. And it has ever since. And it has carried me forward because ... I don’t know if anybody has been able to identify the lack of courage, the lack of honesty in our society and in our country and our world as well as Mark Twain has.”

Born in Cleveland in 1925, Holbrook started acting in the early 1940s during his senior year at Culver Military Academy in Indiana. The choice to take dramatics because he considered it likely to be an easy credit became one of the pivotal moments of his life. Holbrook had a rough childhood, losing both his mother, a vaudeville dancer who ran away to be a star in Hollywood when he was too young to remember, and his

father, who was committed to an insane asylum during his boyhood. Holbrook later found great solace in an audience listening to him and, when he was lucky or good, bestowing its applause.

His talent was recognized by the head of the drama program at Dennison University east of Columbus, Ohio, which led Holbrook to switch from the University of Michigan, where he had been accepted. The decision also led to paying roles in local productions at \$15 a week.

Holbrook eventually became an acclaimed performer, with a career on stage, in movies and on television that lasted more than 60 years and with roles too numerous to mention. A few highlights include appearances in films such as *The Group* (Sidney Lumet, 1966), *The Great White Hope* (Martin Ritt, 1970), *Magnum Force* (Ted Post, 1973—one of the “Dirty Harry” films with Clint Eastwood), *All the President’s Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976), *Julia* (Fred Zinnemann, 1977), *The Star Chamber* (Peter Hyams, 1983), *Wall Street* (1987, Oliver Stone) and *The Firm* (1993, Sydney Pollack), along with parts in innumerable television series.

Holbrook also excelled as Abraham Lincoln in two mini-series, George Schaefer’s *Lincoln* (based on Carl Sandburg, 1974-76) and Richard Heffron’s *North & South* (1985), as well as John Adams in Buzz Kulik’s *George Washington* (1984). He appeared too in Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012) as journalist Preston Blair, one of the co-founders of the Republican Party. With his distinguished—and, when occasion called for it, sinister—voice and bearing, Holbrook was often cast as presidents, cabinet members, senators, generals, admirals, judges, bishops and the like.

However, Holbrook’s most enduring role was the one he assigned himself in “Mark Twain Tonight,” which he began performing on stage at what was then the State Teachers College in Lock Haven (Pennsylvania) in 1954, when he was less than 30.

There is little question but that Holbrook will be remembered above all for those brilliant portrayals of Twain. In his 62 years of performing “Mark Twain Tonight,” he gave close to 2,500 performances. Holbrook explained early on that if it looked like he was going to go through a year without doing the act, he would hastily set up performances to keep it alive. Each

performance would use Twain's words almost exclusively, including excerpts from around 10 different sources. Holbrook estimated that perhaps 5 percent of the show was written by himself to provide "punch" or to tie the citations together.

An example of Twain's expertise in regard to humanity's tendency to lie can be seen in the YouTube clip "On Lies and Slavery." Twain's words delivered by Holbrook are deeply authentic and profoundly true. Twain was a true American treasure. In Ken Burns' documentary *Mark Twain* (2001), Holbrook spoke about Twain's 1883 decision to resume writing *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain had returned to the Mississippi River and his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, for inspiration: "What do you think he was looking at? He was looking at the horrible failure of the freeing of the slave!"

Holbrook gave his Twain show on many occasions in the South. He described in one interview how he was performing "on the edge of Little Rock [Arkansas] ... right after the riots [prompted by racial desegregation] at Central High School and I had this lynching number from *Huckleberry* and ... I was moved by what was going on there. I decided I would do this number with an intent in my mind to make a comment on mob violence.

"Suddenly I realized that I had some method of expressing myself about things that are going on in the world. ... There's material here where I can make statements.

"I'd been through many situations like this and I'd always been astonished ... surprised ... at the responses of the audiences in the South. It was like they wanted to say something and couldn't. But in responding to what I was bringing out, they were able to approve and express their feelings.

"By George, they were great. Two hundred people came backstage."

Of all the performances that Holbrook did of "Mark Twain Tonight," it was broadcast on television only once. That was in 1967 and it was in prime time. CBS producer David Susskind was determined to put it on the air. But the network almost didn't. In the middle of rehearsals, Susskind approached Holbrook with the demand for cuts from the network bigwigs. They wanted the word "nigger" to be excised and the reference to war be removed, as it would be shown at the height of the Vietnam War.

Holbrook flatly refused: "Listen. Go back to them now and tell them that it's over. I'm leaving. We're going to stop rehearsal. And this show is over. We're not going to do it."

Holbrook found the racial epithet disturbing as well. He had long before determined that Twain's repeated use of the word was to make the reader feel disgusted at the racism in society. Due to Holbrook's determination to present Twain as he was, CBS backed down. The show went on and was viewed by 30 million people. Critics praised it. The *Chicago Tribune* called it "the best 90 minutes ever on television."

This was discussed in a wonderful interview with Holbrook on NPR's Bill Moyers' "NOW" program in 2004. Holbrook

was in his late 70s. During the conversation between Holbrook and Moyers, it emerged that NPR had wanted to broadcast "Mark Twain Tonight," but insisted Twain be edited, so it had never happened.

Holbrook further explained his feelings: "You see, I got a feeling about political correctness. I hate it. You know the 'Silent Lie' that he's [Twain] talking about that you played here earlier on this show? That's what political correctness does. It causes us to lie silently instead of saying what we think.

"We live in a democracy. We have this extraordinary opportunity to use our mind and say what we think, to speak as we think. Sometimes what we say is objectionable to other people. Sometimes words we use are objectionable to other people. But that is part of a free society.

"And in order to communicate with each other, we've got to get mad at each other sometimes."

A documentary, *Holbrook/Twain: An American Odyssey*, was released in 2019 (directed by Scott Teems). In one of the first sequences, Holbrook is driving away after a performance and remarks on how well it had gone. "They were thinking," he said. "You always hope, maybe you can make people think a little bit." This "hope" was why he set himself such a grueling schedule of performances. In the film, Holbrook explains that the best way to hold an audience's attention is to scare them by speaking about something they are afraid to hear about, "like patriotism."

Through all his years of performing him, Holbrook embraced the part of Mark Twain that many would like us to forget—his subversiveness. The Mark Twain who was in his 70s had learned a few things about Americans, and man in general. This was was the person that Holbrook brought to life for 63 years—as a young actor as well as one who was close to two decades older than his subject—the Mark Twain who dissected religion, patriotism and imperialism to reveal the hypocrisy employed to justify monstrous crimes.

In the Burns biography-documentary, Holbrook answers those who claimed that Twain lost his bearings in his later life: "He refused to lie down. ... He was a life force, a forward moving life force, a powerful life force. ... He wasn't a quitter."



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