

A Theatre Success Story And An Actor's Epic Saga

*Many Hardships And Long Training
Before Holbrook Conquers Broadway*

MARK TWAIN TONIGHT! AN ACTOR'S PORTRAIT. Selections from Mark Twain edited, adapted and arranged with a Prologue by Hal Holbrook. *Ives Washburn, Inc.*, 1959. Pp xiii + 272, \$3.95.



HAL (Harold Rowe) HOLBROOK was born in Cleveland in 1925, spent 3 years in the Army and graduated from Denison University in 1948 with a B. A. degree in Theatre Arts. His one-man performance "Mark Twain Tonight" had a long Broadway run.

Judging from the *un*-technically augmented audience reaction, heard on the recording of Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight!*, there was nothing rigged about the enthusiastic reception of this solo theater program when it opened in New York at the 41st Street Theater on April 6, 1959. The critics in one of their rare moments of accord greeted Mr. Holbrook's performance with such words, sweet to the ears of a young actor, as, "an extraordinary achievement," ". . . explosively comic . . . uproarious," "the most fun I've had in the theater for ages . . ." These are words not easily come by in commercial theater, and if we can determine anything from this recording of the work, made during an actual performance, this was, indeed, a skillful and thorough portrait of a larger-than-life-size man by a very competent actor.

Mr. Holbrook has collected the Mark Twain material he used in this production in a book called, *Mark Twain Tonight!*, with the subtitle, *An Actor's Portrait*, and published by Washburn. We must be grateful to Mr. Holbrook for this living encounter with Mark Twain and the immense pains he has taken in selecting and editing pieces from the vast range of Mark Twain's works. He has opened up little known essays and stories and culled from them words that point directly to the man and writer and en-

REVIEWED by David G. Pike, a producer-director of WBNS-TV (Columbus) since 1956. Pike was educated at Harvard and Edinburgh University (Scotland) and moved to Ohio in 1954 "to get away from New York." He wrote and produced for television *The Visitor*, an historical drama of Lincoln and Ohio.

tertainer. The cumulative effect of these excerpts, grouped into three acts in the book, is stunning (there is enough material here for several evenings in the theater, for Holbrook varied his program with each performance, and all the Mark Twain material he used is included). One is somewhat tempted to heave a great sigh of fond relief upon finishing the book, for such a concentrated dose of such a vivid and energetic man can be tiring. And yet here he is, compassionate and loving. He is indulgent when he speaks of our petty, useless and enjoyable minor vices. He is acid and unsparing of humbug. He is outraged and roars his indignation at prejudice and injustice, but most of all, he is enormously and movingly funny as a teller of stories.

Three Hours for Make-up

Slightly more than one third of Mr. Holbrook's book is taken up with a prologue in which he describes the path that led him to *Mark Twain Tonight!* There are several excellent photographs in this section, stressing the amazing likeness he was able to achieve through applying make-up for three hours. He also tells us that it took twelve years of preparation to put together the material and to recreate the character of Mark Twain. Here is surely an ideal opportunity for a thorough actor to shed some light on just how he prepares a difficult role, and here is the place to detail his own growth as an artist, and yet it is here that the book falls short.

Mr. Holbrook and his wife Ruby graduated from Denison University, and from the time they left lovely, tranquil Granville until they reached the fateful opening night in New York, they lived

an actor's epic saga. They made their living by touring their own two-person show through the high-school circuit of the Southwest. It was rugged. They made their own costumes. They drove from one engagement to the next, sometimes giving three performances in as many cities in one day, and the cities could well be hundreds of miles apart. In thirty weeks of such touring, they gave 307 performances and traveled forty thousand miles. They lived in unheated motels, sharing their misery with cockroaches. They were abused by dissatisfied school principals after having torn their passions to tatters before an indifferent audience of babies and teen-agers who had never before encountered a live actor. They suffered the appalling strain of having to make engagements and give fresh performances when times and distances made them just beyond the reach of practicability.

Gradually their tour from Exhaustion to Nerve-strain brought them to New York and here Holbrook's solo effort with Mark Twain was auditioned with dispiriting results. While Mrs. Holbrook retired to raise a family, Hal waded through the draining grind of a daily television soap opera, and all the time he continued work on his Mark Twain program. He performed it in nightclubs, he tried it out on hospital inmates, he cut and rewrote and rehearsed until the final audition when one man, having listened to him for forty minutes, reached for his pen and wrote out a check for one half of the production cost of bringing Holbrook-Twain to Broadway.

He Does Not Tell All

These are the things on which great theater histories are built, and yet Mr.

Holbrook seems not to have grown through all the struggle. He looks back on the many incidents which were often bizarre and tells us that some of them affected him profoundly, but at no time in the prologue does he indicate how these things affected him and his family. What is worse, he does not show us that he grew as an artist. From his recent success, we must assume that he is an ac-

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tor of considerable ability, but did he start out as capable as he is today?

We are left with the feeling that he has treated Mark Twain with respect and imagination and care, but that he has rather sold himself short by telling his own story so superficially and awkwardly. There are ample notes at the end of the book and a welcome list of the pieces from which Mr. Holbrook selected his material.