

Hal Holbrook: An Interview



Hal Holbrook has gained certain stature in the theatre, on television, and in the movies. A native of Lakewood, Ohio, perhaps his greatest achievement is his one-man show, *Mark Twain Tonight*, for which he received a Tony Award for his portrayal of that literary genius. Recently I was privileged to view the Holbrook classic at the Edwin J. Thomas Performing Arts Auditorium in Akron. I was treated not only to a fine performance and an enjoyable show but a brief interview afterward. I found that he was a class person as well as a class performer.

He entered the Green Room, greeting the twenty or so applauding autograph seekers, still clad in his white suit and gray wig. His voice was quietly gentle as he spoke, replacing the loud, Southern dialect that he had assumed on stage. The admirers stood in no formal, rigid lines, but lingered about casually as though at a cocktail party. And Mr. Holbrook, as the host of the party, upon finishing one signature, did not wait on another to come toward him, but went and greeted them, shaking each hand with equal pleasure and genuine gratitude.

I waited until the crowd had dispersed, introduced myself, and with a certain awe and anxiety, I began my questioning.

Question: *You have performed in your one-man show, Mark Twain Tonight, as well as in works involving a cast of players like Our Town. Of the two, which do you prefer? And is there any pressure taken away by being able to possibly rely on other players?*

Answer: *I prefer working with other actors, but really it depends on the material. Our Town was one of the finest parts I've ever played, and though during the play I was apart from the other actors, I enjoyed working with them during rehearsals. I really don't think about relying on others, so there's really no preference in that aspect. Basically, I just look for good material.*

Question: *Do you actually become Mark Twain when you are on stage?*

Answer: *As much as I can. Some nights it's harder than others.*

Question: *Why Mark Twain?*

Answer: *No special reason. It was accidental, really. I started doing it in college, and it became popular, so I expanded it. I suppose he has always been one of my more favorite writers, but no more than any others. I really knew very little about him before I began my research.*

Question: *Did you write the entire act?*

Answer: *I edited it. Just about everything said is taken from Twain's essays, stories, and quotes.*

A reporter from the local newspaper interjected: *Do you get a sense of history while you are on stage doing the act?*

Answer: *Yes, I do. Especially during the description of the sunrise [One of Mr. Holbrook's excerpts from Twain's Life on the Mississippi]. As I describe the light of the river and the sky, the sun as it comes up over the trees, I can't help getting caught up in . . . feeling as though I'm actually there.*

Question: *You have done your show, Mark Twain Tonight, not only for the general public, but for dignitaries as well, across the United States and abroad. Is there any one show that sticks out most in your mind?*

Answer: *Well, when I opened the show in New York for the first time, that is very memorable. Another would be during the mid-sixties at Oxford, Mississippi, at the University of Mississippi, right after the riots there. I remember that I was the first performer allowed on campus after the riots. They had shut everything down, canceled football games, all other public shows and lectures, and when they lifted the ban, mine was the first show that opened.*

His face twitched with discomfort. Apparently, the make-up was beginning to bother him.

Question: *Of the screen, television, and the stage, which is preferred by you?*

Answer: *I like the stage the best. It's all right there, right then, with the people, and you're able to see if you've been a success or not, and it all comes down to that show, not the night before or the one the next night.*

Question: *It is easier to do a fictitious character as opposed to a character that actually existed? Is there any preference between the two?*

Answer: *Offhand, fictitious. You're better able to blend your own characteristics into the character, but again it all depends on the material. Good material is so hard to come by that you can't really be particular. I really don't take into consideration if the character is fictitious or not; I just look for a good part that has some meaning to it. Mark Twain is a good role. Whether it's a character that existed, or even if it were a fictional character, it's a good part.*

Question: *Is there any advice that you could give to aspiring writers, actors, or anyone interested in getting into the theater?*

Answer: *Oh, I don't know. I'm not one to give advice . . . There's nothing I could say . . . Just be happy with what you do.*

With that he bade farewell and disappeared through the stage door. It was nearing midnight and he would have to spend another hour and a half removing the make-up, make-up that took nearly four hours to apply. It was obvious that he was very tired, very uncomfortable, yet he seemed highly satisfied. □

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