Holbrooke keeps Twain alive for generations

My doorbell rang, and it was not the Publishers' Clearing House with two dozen roses and a check for $1 million. (Do any of you know anyone who has actually won this annual whatever it is?)

It was Holyoke's Bruce Mitchell, who delivered a photograph of me taken with actor Hal Holbrook in the hallway of Holyoke High School last November when he was here to perform his outstanding "Mark Twain Tonight" as a fundraiser for the Victory Theater under the auspices of Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts.

The refurbishing of this theater, one of the most exquisite buildings in the city of Holyoke and one which holds lovely memories for thousands of people, is now under way. It's a slow process, and although it will indeed be a reality one day, there will be many more events like the Holbrook performance to show Western Massachusettsthe quality entertainment which will some day return to its stage. Keep your eyes open for notices of many interesting upcoming events.

In the picture, there are some tears in both Hal's and my eyes. We were talking about the old days before he captured the world with his original performance of "Mark Twain," which he opened right here in Holyoke at the Valley Players in Mountain Park.

Hal and his first wife, Ruby Holbrook, were the young actor and actress who won the hearts of thegaters with their talents each summer for the Valley Players. Back then, I was part of it all with television interviews and being a neighbor to them while they stayed in Holyoke. In fact, during Ruby's pregnancy with their daughter, Victoria, I loaned her some of my maternity clothes.

My husband and I were in the audience when Hal did the first performance of "Mark Twain." We were spellbound, just as were the hundreds who saw the updated performance at Holyoke High. Hal, now in his 80s, was as spectacular this second time around in the city which launched his career. Those of us who are in his age bracket marveled that he could stand for over two hours and not miss a beat, forget a line, or let any of us believe it was anyone but Twain himself on that stage.

The original performance encouraged many of us to reread Twain's books and reacquaint ourselves with Tom Sawyer, Becky Thatcher and Huckleberry Finn. I did some additional reading, too, including reviewing some of his famous quotations. Twain was definitely no fan of government: "No man's life, liberty or property is safe while the legislature is in session."

Hal's original production took some humorous digs at the government which were appropriate at the time, and this time around, even with new faces in Washington and new issues, he managed to write about them just as Twain would have addressed them. There were sardonic notes, touches of sarcasm, semblances of truth and, always, tongue-in-cheek humor.

Twain — Samuel Langhorne Clemens — was born in Florida, Missouri in 1835, and, at the age of 1, moved to Hannibal, Missouri. There are two explanations about his pen name; one is that he took it from a Mississippi River pilot named Isaiah Sellers who called himself Mark Twain when he wrote articles for a New Orleans newspaper, and the other is that he learned the phrase "mark twain" (which refers to water two fathoms deep) as an apprentice river pilot.

Twain's books and stories touch wide emotions, from great humor to sad despair. The rough frontier humor of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is far from the bitterness of "What Is Man?" He could tell wild tales in such a way that he expected everyone to believe them. He used satire which he knew only sharp-witted people would understand. He is still regarded as a writer who gave a maturity to American literature.

Hal Holbrook, known now as Mark Twain for his stage portrayal, brought sheer joy to his audience here in Western Massachusetts. I think it behooves us to get to our libraries to encourage more people to read some of the Mark Twain books.

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