

LEISURE & LIFESTYLE

Sunday Republican

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SECTION G

'Mark Twain Tonight'

Hal Holbrook brings his show home to Holyoke

By KEITH J. O'CONNOR

On Saturday, Hal Holbrook brings his legendary one-man show "Mark Twain Tonight!" back to Holyoke - the city where the Emmy- and Tony-award winning actor says his professional career began.

From 1941 to 1962, Holbrook was a member of the Valley Players, a summer stock theater company at the Mountain Park Casino Playhouse. It was there that "Mark Twain Tonight!" won prominent critical attention.

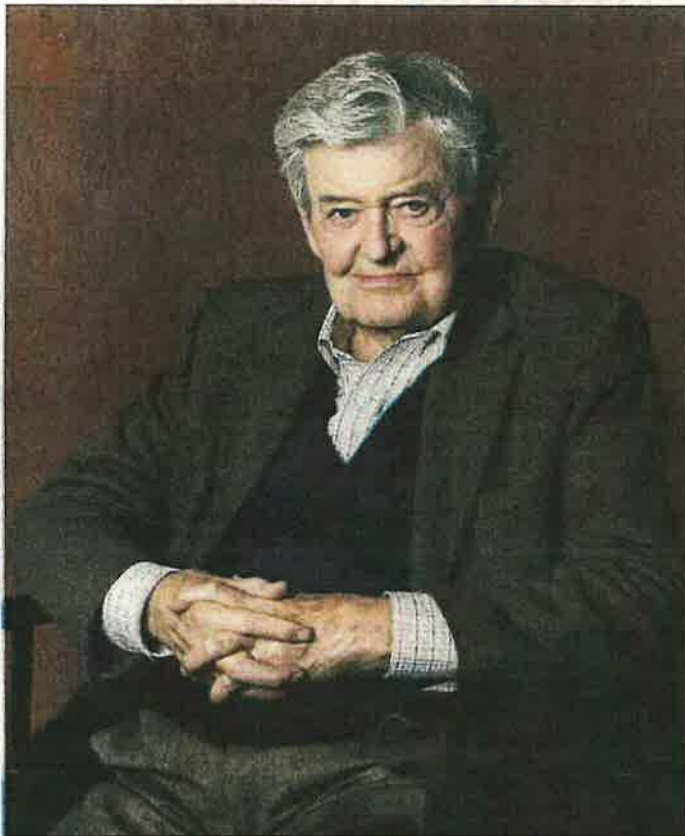
"My professional acting career actually got its start in Holyoke because that is where I got my Actor's Equity Card while performing with the Valley Players," Holbrook, 86, recalled in a recent telephone interview.

He added, "This was our first foray into the professional theater where actors were the age they were supposed to be. I think my best memories about Holyoke and its Valley Players was this wonderful

Please see Show, Page G12



BACK HOME



Actor Hal Holbrook returns to Holyoke where his career began to perform "Mark Twain Tonight!" on Saturday at Holyoke High School's Sears Auditorium.

Show: Holbrook plays Mark Twain

Continued from Page G1

group of actors, many of them from New York, who took us in, just a couple of kids from the Midwest, and who were so kind to us."

One of Holbrook's earliest performances of "Mark Twain Tonight!" was the 1957 season opener at the Mountain Park, which he credits to the support of Valley Players founders Carlton and Jean Guild.

"I wanted to bring my 'Mark Twain Tonight!' show to New York someday, but first I knew that I would have to find out whether I could make it work in front of a theater kind of audience. So I wrote to Jean and asked her if it would be possible to use my Mark Twain show to open the first week of their summer theater. I got a letter back from Carlton within a week telling me 'the light is green.' And, that was my big moment in my development of 'Mark Twain Tonight!'

IF YOU GO

Event: "Mark Twain Tonight!" with Hal Holbrook

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.

Where: Holyoke High School's Sears Auditorium

Cost: \$60 and \$35; gala tickets available at \$125

For more info: Call (800) 224-MIFA or online at www.mifa-festival.org

He added, "I knew that (Springfield Morning Union critic) Louise Mace would cover me and her remarks would be important to me and that I would get an intelligent review from her . . . She was one of the better critics of the day in newspapers outside of New York. Louise was a very intelligent critic, and we always paid great respect to her reviews."

And review it Mace did.

"I did the show at the theater for a week and it worked well, indeed. Louise wrote me a wonderful review, which is quoted in my book, 'Harold: The Boy Who Became Mark Twain,'" said Holbrook.

In 1959, after five years of researching Mark Twain and honing his material in front of countless audiences in small towns all over America, Holbrook opened at a tiny off-Broadway theater, where it was a major overnight success.

His performance of "Mark Twain Tonight!" on Saturday will benefit yet another Holyoke theater – the Victory Theatre, which was acquired by the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts in 2009. The group plans on returning the 1,600-seat, Broadway-style theater, which opened in Holyoke in 1920, to its role as a major live theater. MIFA programming – including opera, theater, dance, music, film, visual arts and literature – has been presented at various area sites until the Victory's renovation is completed.

The performance comes at a busy time in the actor's career.

He had a role as a shadowy businessman in NBC's "The Event" and portrayed a retired circus veterinarian in the film "Water for Elephants." He is currently at work on Steven Spielberg's upcoming film "Lincoln," based on the Doris Kearns Goodwin book "Team of Rivals."

"('Water for Elephants' offered) a good role which, for me, had the possibility of being very, very effective. I did it a few months after my wife Dixie (Carter) died. Emotionally, I was still very vulnerable and I knew at the time this was all I could do in as a "small role in a very significant film by Steven Spielberg."

"I really can't say much about the film, Steven doesn't like us to," he added.

Holbrook was born in Cleveland in 1925, but was raised mostly in South Weymouth, where he said "his people" had settled in 1635 and were, according to his grandfather, "some kind of criminals from England." His mother disappeared when he was 2 years old and his father followed suit. Young Holbrook and his two sisters were raised by their grandfather. It was only later he found out that his mother had gone into show business.

Despite his successful stage, film and television career – which has earned him Emmy and Tony Awards, as well as an Academy Award nomination – Holbrook has never been able to quit Mark Twain, and probably never will. He has toured the show in some part of every year since 1954.

Holbrook adds to his Twain material every year, editing and changing it to fit the times. But Holbrook never changes a word of Twain's original

dialog, which he said is as relevant today as it was back then.

And, Holbrook can be just as cantankerous as his longtime stage persona of Twain.

"Yes, I do change the material around every year to speak to what is going on in the country. It's a god-damn mess . . . a dangerous mess. Nobody is willing to compromise on anything, and another name for democracy is compromise, otherwise you have a dictatorship or aristocracy. We have arrived at a point in our history where our two major political parties cannot compromise, and one of them put us in the economic toilet a few years ago, adding to that a couple of wars which we should never have gotten into. Meanwhile, corporations decided they don't want to pay much to union laborers and sent jobs overseas. You don't have to go to Harvard and study economics to come up with the answer . . . they've taken all the jobs away and there is no money left. So for corporations to wonder why the economy refuses to kick start, it's because they are living in a dream world, not in our world," Holbrook said.