

*presents*

# Mark Twain Tonight!

*featuring*

**Richard Thomas as Mark Twain**

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# Introduction

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Dear Teachers,

**Mark Twain Tonight!** brings the iconic persona of one of the greatest American writers to life in a one-man show. Originally portrayed by playwright Hal Holbrook over 2,000 times, this new production is led by Emmy Award®-winning actor Richard Thomas, who has stepped into the role for the performance your students will experience.

Mark Twain, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, created a legacy of written works and continues to influence American literature to this day. By the time he died in 1910, he had published more than thirty books and pamphlets, along with thousands of newspaper and magazine articles. The first three decades of Twain's life directly contributed to the stories he would later write. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* resides on the American Library Association's list of most frequently banned and censored books. The novel invites conversations surrounding language, depictions of race, satire, and portrayals of the era.

You are invited to review the materials provided in this study guide and encouraged to utilize the resources listed. We hope this piece will spark engaging discussions and offer a path to deepen student thinking around the issues presented in Twain's works.

Sincerely,

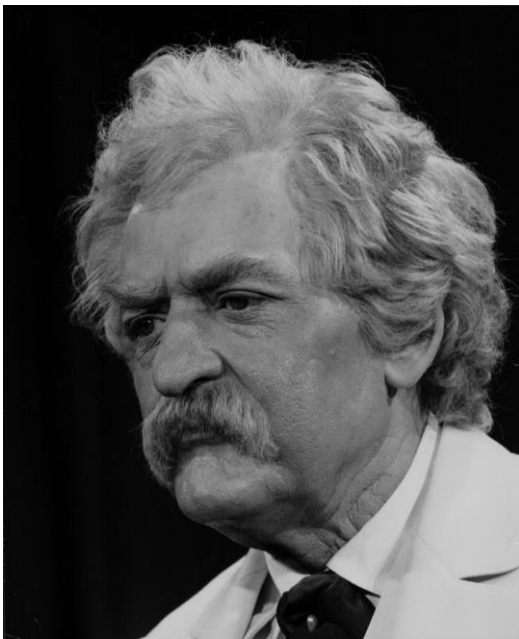
Taylor Woods  
Director of Education & Community Engagement  
Performing Arts Fort Worth

# About the Show

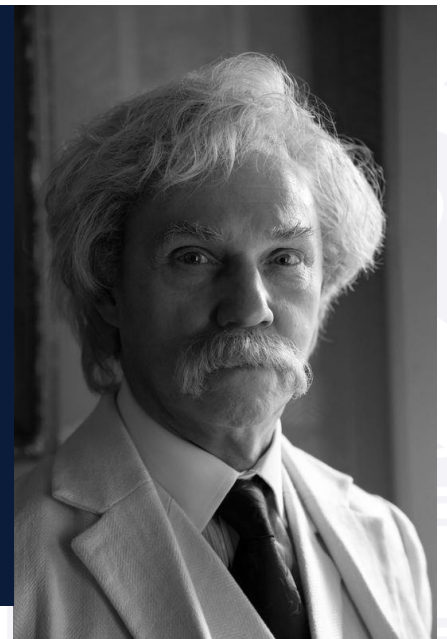
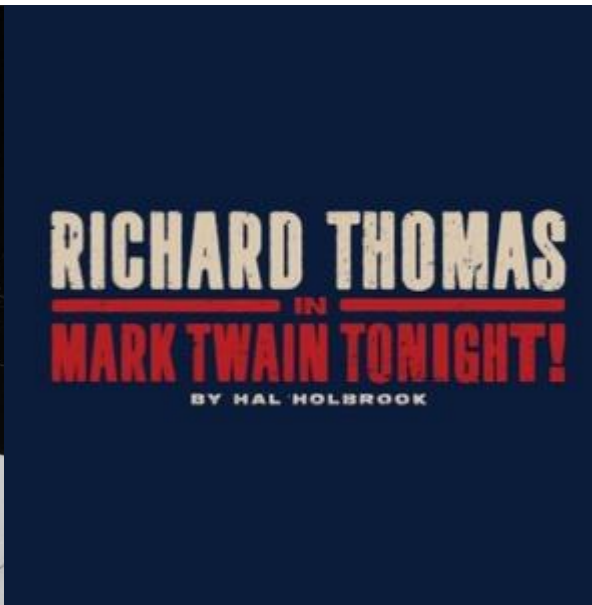
**Mark Twain Tonight!** is a legendary one-man show that brings the wit, humor, and wisdom of Mark Twain to life on stage. Originally created and performed by Hal Holbrook, the play features Twain's sharp observations on politics, society, and human nature-remarkably relevant today.

It could be said that Hal Holbrook came as close to the early American touring actor as anyone on the modern-day stage, after 63 consecutive years and over 2,300 performances. **Mark Twain Tonight!** was developed in a Greenwich Village nightclub in 1956 before landing itself on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Holbrook then took his Mark Twain to off-Broadway, across Europe via the State Department and eventually opened on Broadway in 1966, earning a Tony Award®. The following year, CBS aired a 90-minute special on the show, which was seen by 30 million viewers. Holbrook officially retired **Mark Twain Tonight!** in 2017. Richard Thomas is the first and only actor authorized to perform the play since Holbrook's passing in 2021.

***Please be advised:*** This production contains racially explicit language.



*Hal Holbrook as Mark Twain*



*Richard Thomas as Mark Twain*

# Richard Thomas

At just 8 years old, Richard Thomas made his Broadway debut in *Sunrise at Campobello* and began a decades-long acting career. His performances on the stage have earned him numerous accolades and awards, including nominations for a Tony Award® and a Drama Desk Award. Before stepping into the role of Mark Twain, Thomas completed a 3-year tour as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



Actor Richard Thomas



Richard Thomas in the Mark Twain house

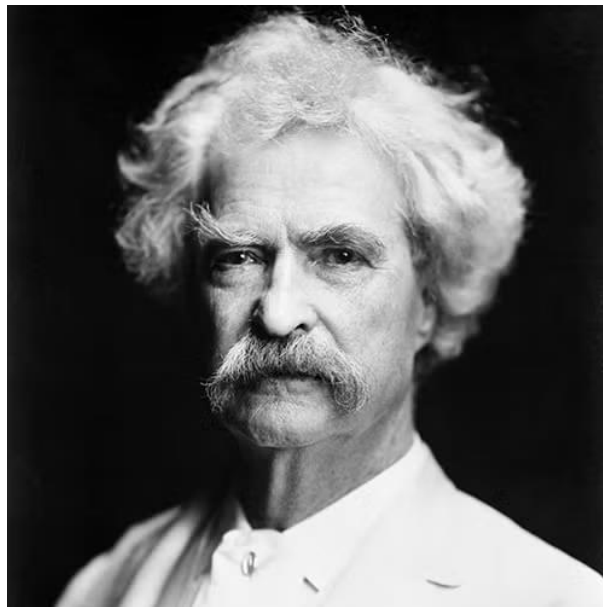
On screen, Thomas became a household name as John-Boy Walton in the television series *The Waltons*. Over the course of six seasons on the CBS drama, Thomas earned an Emmy Award® and multiple Golden Globe Award® nominations. Contemporary audiences may recognize him as a series regular in shows such as *Ozark* and *The Americans*, or in feature films like *The Unforgivable* and *Taking Woodstock*.

On November 17, 2025, Richard Thomas was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame.



# Mark Twain

Born in November 1835, Samuel Langhorne Clemens was raised on the banks of the Mississippi River in Hannibal, Missouri. As a young man, Clemens was no stranger to adventure and failure. After losing his position as a riverboat pilot, quitting the Confederate army, and coming up broke at silver prospecting, Clemens finally found his calling as a writer. In 1865, Samuel Langhorne Clemens had a new job at the Territorial Enterprise and a new name: Mark Twain. Twain's employment as a journalist sent him traveling across the globe for the next six years, inspiring his novel *The Innocents Abroad* and bringing him to his wife, Olivia Langdon. In 1871, the Clemenses settled down in Hartford, Connecticut, where over the next 20 years, they built a home, raised three daughters, and Twain wrote his most famous novels.



Drawing from his childhood (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), travels across the American frontier (*Roughing It*), and observations of society (*The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*), Twain used his wry humor to express his criticisms on the evolution of America. This amusing yet unflinching honesty is what established Mark Twain's legacy in American literature.

# Activities

*Created by Young Minds Inspired*

## Activity 1: A Writer's Inspiration

In this first activity, students will be asked to consider Mark Twain as “the enormous noticer”, and to think about the humor he found in ordinary, everyday details.

**Part A:** challenge students to find the humor in the details they will be recording in their journals.

**Part B:** review the different types of humor listed. Help students analyze the similarities between Twain's and contemporary comics' styles of humor and their observations about their times.

As an introduction to Twain's wit, share some of his more notable quotations below with your students:

“Classic.’ A book which people praise and don’t read.”

“Always do right. This will gratify some people & astonish the rest.”

“One of the most striking differences between a cat and a lie is that a cat has only nine lives.”

What do your students think Twain was saying when he made each of these statements? Challenge students to think about how truly contemporary Twain was when compared with today's comics, and how universal his themes were. Have them consider how, although times might have changed, examples of the human condition have not.

Discuss how this helps make Twain timeless and relevant today.

# Activities

*Created by Young Minds Inspired*

## Activity 2: A Report from 21st Century America

In this activity, students will be asked to look at Twain, the humorist considered America's favorite storyteller and the funniest man in the world—along with Twain, the newspaper reporter—or, as we hear in the show, one of “a bunch of talented, wild men improvising a whole new newspaper art form with tall tales and lies and hoaxes and great writing.”

**Part A:** students will imitate Twain's ability to embellish his newspaper “reports” by “stretching” the truth of one of their own experiences. In preparation for this activity, you may want to share examples of Twain's writings with your students.

**Part B:** students will consider how delivery affects impact, comparing Twain's deadpan style of lecturing to today's stand-up comedians and then crafting their own humorous sketches using current events or personalities.

**Extended Activity:** Use the Internet writing exercise in Part A as a springboard to a debate about the reliability of information found on the Internet and elsewhere in mass communication today. Are there any places at all on the Internet where one can be assured of finding the truth? Discuss advancements in AI which impact the way information is disseminated. In Twain's day, newspapers provided the only mass means of sharing information. In today's era of communications, how much more discerning must a person be—when there are multiple sources of information and few, if any, ways to verify their accuracy—in evaluating what he or she reads hears or sees?



# Activities

*Created by Young Minds Inspired*

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## Activity 3: Tall Tales and Dark Sides

In this activity your students will meet Samuel Clemens, the man with two identities who, as Mark Twain, was considered to be a master storyteller. Twain frequently read drafts of his work aloud to his family, judging its effectiveness by their reactions to it.

**Part A:** students will match their skill in weaving a tall tale with that of the master. After they have completed the first draft of their tale, divide students into small teams so they can polish each story and its delivery style—just as comedy writers do for a TV show. Then have students present their stories to their classmates to see how the same objects used in telling their tales can be turned into very different fanciful stories.

**Part B:** they will learn about Twain's private side—the dark side—of the person known to the public as the funniest man on earth, the man who once wrote: "The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no laughter in heaven."

**Extended Activity:** In the show, your students learned how the tragedies and disappointments Twain experienced affected his outlook and his work. Ask your students to research and write about one period of Twain's career compared to his private life at that time. Can they see a connection through his writings? Many comics also started life under difficult circumstances and endured career setbacks. Ask students to select a comic or humorist they admire and do some research to see if they can find a similar comparison.

# Notable Works by Mark Twain

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In 1867, Mark Twain's short story *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* became the first of many published works by the author. Twain's writings varied in length from essays to novel series; the titles listed below are widely regarded as his most famous books.

## **Travelogues and Non-Fiction:**

The Innocents Abroad (1869)

Roughing It (1872)

A Tramp Abroad (1880)

Life on the Mississippi (1883)

Following the Equator (1897)

## **Novels:**

The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today (1873)

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876)

The Prince and the Pauper (1881)

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889)

The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894)

Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc (1896)

The Mysterious Stranger (1916)

## **Short Stories:**

Extracts from Adam's Diary (1893)

Eve's Diary (1905)

# Additional Materials

## Catching Up with the Clemenses:

- Virtual tours of the Mark Twain house, additional information about their family life, and classroom discussion prompts.
- <https://marktwainhouse.org/edu/catching-up-with-the-clemenses/>

## Mark Twain House:

- High School Lesson Plans and Discussion Prompts
- <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1kSxQTJuFICUIhWhA62hDS1MoyVrtbly4>

## Books:

- Chernow, Ron. *Mark Twain*. Penguin Press, 2025.
- Clemens, Susan [ed. Charles Neider]. *Papa: An Intimate Biography of Mark Twain by His Thirteen-Year-Old Daughter Susy*. New York. Doubleday, 1985.
- Powers, Ron. *Mark Twain: A Life*. New York. Free Press, 2005.
- Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Charles L. Webster and Company, 1884.
- Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Chatto and Windus, 1876.
- Twain, Mark. *The Portable Mark Twain, edited with introduction by Tom Quirk*. Penguin Books, 2004.



# Resources

# Sources

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## **Mark Twain Tonight!**

- <https://twainplay.com/>

## **Mark Twain House**

- <https://marktwainhouse.org/>

## **Library of Congress**

- <https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2013/11/mark-twains-huckleberry-finn-controversy-at-the-heart-of-a-classic/>

## **Mark Twain Project**

- <https://www.marktwainproject.org/history.html>

## **PBS American Experience**

- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/grant-clemens/>

## **Mark Twain Papers and Project, UC Berkeley**

- <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/visit/bancroft/mark-twain-papers>

## **Young Minds Inspired Classroom**

- <https://ymiclassroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/marktwainhighschool.pdf>





# Angels In The Wings

# Angels In The Wings

Angels in the Wings support the Children's Education Program of Performing Arts Fort Worth at the Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Performance Hall with gifts of \$1,000 and above. The Children's Education Program is an integral part of Bass Performance Hall but maintains its own support independent of Performing Arts Fort Worth. Each year, 70,000 students from Fort Worth ISD and North Texas experience high-quality curriculum-related performing arts programs at Bass Performance Hall that are free of charge to all participants because of the generosity of our Angels in the Wings. Visit [www.basshall.com](http://www.basshall.com) or call (817) 212-4311 for more information.

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