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When Mark Twain was born in 1835, the second industrial revolution that resulted in nearly every innovation we use today had not yet taken place. Smoke signals were still the fastest way to communicate over long distances; a river with a swift current was the fastest way to travel – but it only worked efficiently one-way; and people could be held as property. Corporations were not yet legal entities. Members of Congress were paid per diem; and if they did not answer when attendance was taken, they did not get paid that day. The microchip notwithstanding, by the time of his death in 1910, virtually all of the discoveries that were needed to fuel and fund the third industrial revolution (the Information Age) had been made.

Twain influenced, or at least made a humorous observation about, nearly every event that shaped the modern world. I believe my own views were shaped as much by Twain's writing and philosophy as by anything else, because he expressed his views in a way that was easiest to digest - through humor.

## **Why Twain?**

The first novel I ever read was *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Tom and Huck showed me that a boy who was willing to risk it could invent a better world, and then get to live in it. I ran away from home within the first week after reading that book. I was eight years old, and didn't get past the front porch; but I was trying to make the point that things had to get better around there or I wouldn't be staying.

I didn't like the system -- quietly bucking authority while avoiding confrontation because I figured I had to live within its boundaries until I figured out how to survive doing only what I wanted to do. But the only thing I ever felt a passion for was acting, and a half million other young actors were auditioning for the same ten jobs I was perfect for.

So I resolved to outlast the competition, if necessary, doing whatever was necessary until they quit or died off. As a result, there were few monetary rewards. So I spent the years honing my craft whenever I could create a break from more financially rewarding pursuits in any venue I could find, savoring compliments received from a respected director, a fellow actor, a critic, or an appreciative audience.

I found my voice in Mark Twain for the first time about thirty years ago. I knew Hal Holbrook had been doing Twain for years; and had seen Frederic March's Biopic fiction years earlier as well. I respected their work and wanted to do something different. Since I frequently played the character role, and loved comedy, I felt my interpretation could be enhanced by these natural preferences. I read everything I could find that was written or

read by, about and because of Twain; I also reviewed the history of the times to immerse myself a historical perspective. I studied Missouri dialects, combining them with mannerisms gathered from my own experiences living in various states, as Twain must have done.

Then I started to write. I used Twain's own writing as well, and ended up with what amounts to an evening of original, political humor, in Twain's style, that resonates loudly with modern audiences. When asked to compare it with Holbrook's work, Director Charles Messina ("Cirque Jacqueline," "Mercury") called it "Bolder."

My writing applies Twain's political sensibilities to the present century. The views are decidedly un-Republican, but to subject it to what I thought would be the most critical audiences, I presented it to the Woman's National Republican Club in New York. I was pleased with the response, although most audiences have laughed more conspicuously. It reminded me of an experience Twain himself had speaking to a Maine audience.

During the entire speech, he heard no laughter of any kind. Not a sound. He might as well have been speaking to an empty hall. When he came out front to hear some of the audience comments, to learn what went wrong, he overheard one woman saying to another, "I laughed so hard, I almost split my corset."

I started writing the current show in January, 2006. It began touring in November, 2007. The work resulted from a series of political discussion during which friends and acquaintances were becoming increasingly agitated with the Bush administration's domestic and foreign policy.

I started asking them what, besides complaining, they were doing about it. But I held back until I could answer the question myself. Few Americans take any responsibility as citizens beyond casting a vote when a candidate jumps up and down in front of their face enough times to capture their attention. Knowledge of the issues is secondary to the process. The language used to present the issues is often unclear in ballots, or reduced to a sound-byte by the media. The typical voter response to any given issue: "as long as it doesn't hurt ME, I don't have time to care." If the voter has children in school, if they own their home, and they have a job to pay the related taxes for both, some may read candidate positions, provided those statements are made in twenty-four words or less. Who has the time to be more involved? In our Capitalist, post-industrial society, we are still judged by our productivity – although the definition of productivity may have morphed into a battle for power and positioning with the company executives -- and worrying about this external political stuff just threatens to dilute our focus.

A new productivity study is commissioned every eight minutes somewhere in this country by some executive who is looking to squeeze more productivity from his systems – human and otherwise - so that he can report good statistics to an analyst at the end of the quarter. But when Mark Twain said, "there are three types of lies. Lies, damn lies, and statistics" he was pointing out the folly of relying on facts that can be manipulated in such a way that insures inflated stock prices, astronomical bonuses – in short,

maintaining a level of greed and cronyism that only economic catastrophe seems to be able to stop.

Granted, the catastrophe takes place only once or twice every couple of generations. It is the same with earthquakes. Tremors occur with regularity. But the really big life-quenchers are relatively rare, and Quakes are not preventable. Is the same true of human-generated catastrophe?

The show is a political humorist's statement about the human condition. Twain said that man's nature can't be changed; therefore things we experience repeatedly can't change. At the same time, he challenges us to change our values so that we can achieve a greater control over our fate.

Holbrook once said that Twain's voice was a way to say things he could not say. I wrote this show as a contribution to the political discussion, as a way of doing more than complaining. It challenges every audience member to think about their own contribution to change or the status quo. I could not think of a better way to state that challenge than through the mask used by Sam Clemens himself.

### **Becoming the character**

I share some physical similarities with Twain that have made the transition a bit easier. We are about the same height. His walk, exhibited in the Edison clip shot at Stormfield, Twain's Redding, Connecticut home, was easy to emulate, because it was how I walked as a child. My parents trained me to walk differently, but it was easy and comfortable to slip back into that familiar gait. I reconstructed Twain's voice from reports referring to his slow Missouri drawl, and his smoking and drinking habits (he liked scotch, and smoked up to 20 Cigars a day before a heart condition was diagnosed). Like Twain, I also lived in many states, Northern and Southern, and have come to the conclusion by direct experience that a person's speech patterns and dialects must be affected by such experiences. I considered Twain's interest and facility with language and dialect when molding the dialects I use in performance. I speak as myself until the moustache and eyebrows are glued on. Then remain in character until they come off.

The makeup and costume choices used in "Mark Twain's Last Stand" place my character in his later years. I wear the white suit for which he is well-known, but only began wearing regularly in 1906. I think Twain used the white suit as a symbol to express moral purity and to emphasize the inherent correctness of his position. I create the face of Twain in his mid- to late 60s. These incongruities may be forgiven because my Twain is a spirit; and in my view, if the deceased could appear at all, they would do so at any age and in any suit that pleases them to wear.

The prosthetics are designed for theatrical presentation. I use a nose appliance that was originally designed by Bob O'Bradovitch, who won seven Academy Awards for prosthetic make-up effects. Other appliances and especially the hair pieces were designed by the extraordinary Swedish film fx designer, Lars Carlsson. The make-up application used to take about three hours, but I simplified the design to allow me to do it in about 35

minutes. However, because venues vary widely, I have to adapt it to a variety of lighting conditions that are sometimes out of my control, and therefore, best guess.

### **Show Development**

The purpose of our initial tour, which we just completed, was to develop material that would appeal to the widest possible demographic. The show has already been presented to around 4,500 people of all ages. The results so far suggest a hit in the making. We couldn't be happier with the results to date. And so far, audiences share our enthusiasm. We've had numerous invitations for return engagements, and we look forward to the next set of opportunities.

We are set to play some larger houses – up to 1,400 seats for special events – but are perfectly happy in smaller theatres as well. We will make the show available to senior communities as long as we are playing larger venues within easy travel distance. This makes the show accessible to those who can not easily get to a theatre or library performance.

“Last Stand” is currently scheduled to play libraries in New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, with late summer/early fall performances planned in locales as far off as Chicago, Louisville, and Cincinnati. Finally, a New York opening is scheduled for late fall or early spring (several Off-Broadway houses being considered). With the present economic crisis in full swing, a history-making election that brought the results of social change that began in Twain's lifetime into sharp focus, and the 100th anniversary of Twain's death nearly here (2010), the timing could not be better to bring Twain back into the forefront of the nation's consciousness. And who couldn't use a few laughs.