

About MARK TWAIN

How does an actor bring Mark Twain to life? The total “live” record is a brief Thomas Edison silent film of Twain at home in Connecticut. That’s it. There is no known recorded sound. Newspaper reviews and stories and comments from magazines, letters and other sources about his lectures and speeches differ widely from adulation to outright dismissal.

Mark Twain was a creation himself, of course. Samuel Langhorne Clemens began using the nom de plume when writing in Nevada during the Silver Rush days of the Comstock Lode and brought his moniker with him to the stage in San Francisco a few years later. By the time he began his professional speaking career, he was a well known (notorious, he said) writer and a good audience was assured.

The spoken word became Sam Clemens’ meal ticket. His writing was very popular in magazines and newspapers when he took to the stage. Later, he made a profit from his books, and he went on to worldwide fame as an author, but when he needed to raise a lot of money, he hit the road. He recovered from two (at least) financial disasters by traveling around the country and then around the world on extensive speaking tours.

We know some things about his stage personae, although it clearly evolved over the span of 40 years of “lecturing.” He had a drawl. His grew up in a rural, southern environment. He did not attempt to emulate the pompous, stentorian manner of the great orators of or his day but reveled in the use of pauses and timing. He was always

prepared to appear UNprepared, creating the illusion of an “off the cuff” speaker. He mixed his programs with an assortment of tall tales and personal history, with little regard for accuracy. Apparently, he did not smoke on stage.

He adapted his material for the stage. He found that written stories often needed editing and he had no reluctance to do so.

He loved music. His daughter was a respected operatic singer (genes, he said) and he wrote several pieces about the banjo and the accordion. His sister taught piano and he bought a guitar in 1861 and kept one by his bed for most of his life.

Mark Twain is a “retired” lecturer.

He is 74. He has suffered personal losses but his health is still reasonably good. He has retired from lecturing but is still an entertainer at heart and loves to speak. He revels in telling his old stories in new ways. And he continues to be a contradiction. He has become cynical about Mankind, religion, and America yet his best friend is a minister, he speaks at patriotic events, and defends his country vigorously.

Who wrote this play? Barrie Howard’s MARK TWAIN is drawn directly from Twain’s speeches, short stories, and books. The characterization is as accurate as the artist can make it.

But much of any performance comes from the direct interaction with the audience. The actor seldom does two shows exactly the same.

But, then again, neither did Mr. Twain.