

# On the Road with Mark Twain

By: David Barbour



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## Devising a portable, roadworthy audio solution for a tour of *Mark Twain Tonight!*

The solo show *Mark Twain Tonight!*, which provided actor Hal Holbrook with decades of employment, has returned. Richard Thomas has taken up the property and is currently on tour through the end of February. The time is surely ripe for a revival; one imagines that Twain's observations about the rough-and-ready American character, the stain of racism, and corrupt and/or inept politicians still have plenty of life left in them. The show has already been the most durable of vehicles. Holbrook first performed it in a nightclub in 1956, and returned to it many times, in New York, on tour, and on television. His final Broadway engagement with it was in 2005.

Like Charles Dickens, Twain was an inveterate performer and a frustrated actor. Touring on the lecture circuit, which he did fairly constantly, was both lucrative and a source of personal gratification. Looking to create a reliable vehicle for himself, Holbrook stitched together a collection of Twain writings, including jokes, essays, and excerpts from the novels. To keep things fresh, he swapped out material from time to time. The project was a success beyond his wildest dreams, launching his professional career and remaining his signature role forever after.

This is the first time the property has been revived by anyone other than

Holbrook, and, notes Shannon Slaton, the production's sound designer, Holbrook's estate is very much involved: "They have specific needs, to make sure it didn't drift from what Hal had created." They needn't have worried, based on the glowing reviews: "Smashingly successful," says the website *Talkin' Broadway*. "Thomas' acting skills underpin all 90 minutes of the show," notes *Broadway World*.

Slaton, who has extensive musical theatre credits, including the Broadway solo show, *My Window: Melissa Etheridge*; national tours of *Elf*, *Shrek*, and *Once on This Island* (among many others) and Broadway mixing gigs that include *Springsteen on Broadway*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Cabaret*, faced a different set of challenges on this project, which is playing

a series of one- and two-night stands around the country, including such well-known Twain haunts as Hartford, Connecticut and Elmira, New York. Because of the relative simplicity of the production, Slaton says, "It needed to be designed in a way that it could travel without an audio team."

It's an unusual request, to be sure, but the designer notes, "When Hal did it, it was just him and his wife. She carried a suitcase with the costume and wig; she was also the stage manager and called the show. That was it." For the current tour, he adds, the *Mark Twain Tonight!* Trust "wanted it to be similar, also from a budgetary standpoint. The first issue to tackle was how to do something that doesn't need a sound person to pull it off."

As usual, creativity emerged from such limitations. "It guided me on equipment," Slaton notes, adding, "I wrote up a how-to manual, explaining how to do the show. Erin Albrecht, the stage manager, travels with a couple of suitcases and a Pelican. She has the costume and wig. She's the stage manager/production manager/tour manager, basically kind of everything. I worked with her about going into a theatre, planning to use the house sound system, explaining how we normally spend time EQ-ing the room and tuning the speakers. But she's the stage manager, and she doesn't know how to do that; it's not her wheelhouse."

Therefore, he adds, "I worked with her on what to say to the house sound person, telling her what I would do. For example, we have a pre-recorded announcement, in Richard's voice, saying, 'Turn off your cell phones.' I told her, 'Ask them to play the pre-show announcement; you'll hear Richard's voice, and you'll know what the system sounds like. Have it played a few times, walk around the room, and say, 'I can't hear it well over here,' or 'It sounds weird here.' I gave her some jargon, like, 'It sounds muddy.' Then I said, 'Once you get the pre-show announcement sounding good,

have someone put on the wireless mic and stand onstage and have them read something. It should be on the same level as the pre-show announcement, and you should hear it everywhere. That's pretty much what she's doing. Then the house sound staff is tasked with plugging in everything."

Keeping it simple is the key, Slaton adds. "Initially, Michael [Wilson, the director] wanted some sound cues, perhaps some environmental sounds. So, Erin was going to travel with a laptop, but that made it harder, what with everything she has to carry. It was an interesting challenge: How do we package this so it really can travel with just three people?"

Ultimately, the decision was taken not to complicate matters. "Michael had lots of ideas and I did, too," Slaton says. "But this was one of those odd jobs where what I had to say most often was, 'That's not going to work. We should cut that.' I pulled a bunch of music for the preshow, but we all realized it didn't work. We tried environmental sounds, but they didn't make any sense either. The beauty of the show is its simplicity: Richard walks out onstage with no fanfare. They don't even take down the house lights before he enters. The intention is that you feel like you're watching him give a speech 150 years ago. We cut everything else until we ended up with a preshow announcement. Then we realized the stage manager didn't need a laptop; we just gave her the file; any venue can play it."

To maintain the illusion of a 19th-century lecture, Slaton opted to use Lectrosonics' DSSM digital micro transmitter. One of the product's big selling points is its size. "It's fantastic, but a big reason I went with it is that the receiver is so tiny," he says. "It's one rack space tall and about a third of a rack space wide. I'm a big fan of Lectrosonics, anyway; I've got two packs on Richard. Again, it fits in half of a tiny Pelican case. I worked with the hair and wardrobe people." (The production features a costume design

by Sam Fleming and wigs by Luc Verschueren, of Campbell Young Associates). "I wrote up instructions about putting the mic under the wig, and where it needs to live. I took pictures of it to help guide them."

The mics are Point Source Audio's SERIES9 models. "I've started using them on most shows," Slaton says. "Point Source does two mics and one cable. Instead of needing an A2 who can sleeve some mics together, tape them, and all that stuff, we can take the two packs, plug them in, and throw them on the actor's head." (Both the DSSM and SERIES9 are reviewed in the May 2025 issue of *LSA*.)

"Most actors deal with this themselves, once they know how to do it," Slaton says. "They have my instructions on placement, and the wig designer also wrote up instructions. Richard knows how it works. This normally happens without sound people. We drop the mics off, they put their packs on and get their mics in, and the hair department deals with it. Erin makes sure that the sound person checks the mics, batteries them up, and drops them off at the right time."

The goal, of course, is to make it feel as unamplified as possible. "That's where we're dependent on the house sound system," Slaton says. If it sounds good, it will be fine because the mics and packs sound natural, and we have really good placement on Richard. It sounds very natural if you don't overamplify it. It's just going to sound like him but louder, which is always the goal.

"It was an odd gig," Slaton reflects. "The challenges were keeping it simple, and that can be a challenge. Not gilding the lily. You sit there feeling like you're doing that much, and your wheels start turning: What if I did this? What if I added a little of that?" The key, he adds, was to "calm down. Service the show." The production, which also features scenery by Brian Prather and lighting by Anthony Pearson, is currently scheduled to end on February 22 in Findlay, Ohio. 📶