

# Samuel and the Bard

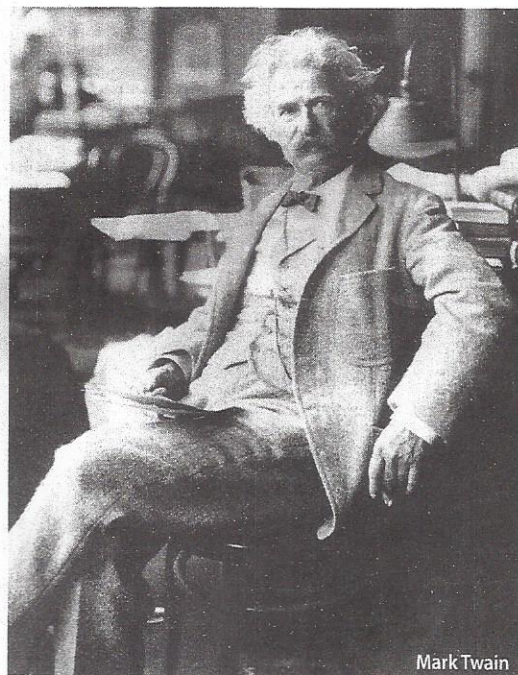
*Ever the Twain*

AS an academic and scholar, Lois Rudnick knows Mark Twain and his views on Shakespeare. As an actor and writer, Jonathan Richards knows Shakespeare and his tremendous influence on Western theater. Put the pair together in collaboration and what do you get? *Ever The Twain: William Shakespeare in Mark Twain's America* — a reader's theater piece that explores how the Bard influenced (and annoyed) Twain, American's own 19th- and early 20th-century master of letters, plays at 7 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 31, at the Lensic Performing Arts Center. The performance is a precursor to the Feb. 6 unveiling of a copy of Shakespeare's First Folio at the New Mexico Museum of Art. That exhibit, titled *First Folio! The Book That Gave Us Shakespeare*, runs through Feb. 28. It is on tour from the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., in association with the Cincinnati Museum Center and the American Library Association.

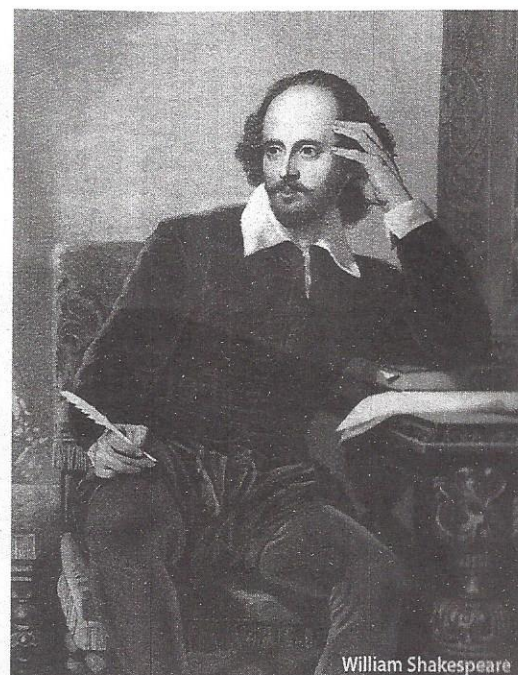
*Ever the Twain* came out of a class on Twain that Rudnick taught a few years ago for the adult continuing education organization Renesan. "I was not teaching anything about Shakespeare in this course," Rudnick said. "I was dealing with Twain's late writings on race and American imperialism. Somewhere along the line I recalled and brought to class the story of Twain's rivalry with Shakespeare — he was a Shakespeare investigator and completely convinced that Will didn't write a single word!"

To buttress his thesis, Twain wrote a pamphlet titled "Is Shakespeare Dead?" Published in 1909, it discusses the controversy over whether Shakespeare actually wrote his plays and other works or whether someone else, such as his contemporary Sir Francis Bacon, actually did so. Around the same time, Rudnick said, Twain wrote "a somewhat scatological play" set in Elizabethan England. He read it to a men's group he was associated with, but never published it during his lifetime. Rudnick said that the play "was too full of the Anglo-Saxon 'F-word,'" to be publishable or even acknowledged by Twain. (Excerpts from this play in *Ever the Twain* will replace the questionable F-word with an equally earthy one, "fart.")

As discussions in the Renesan class progressed, Rudnick asked the students if they thought a play about Shakespeare in Mark Twain's America might be an interesting project. Their response, she recalled, was enthusiastic. As a follow-up, Rudnick



Mark Twain



William Shakespeare

mentioned the idea to Shakespeare scholar John Andrews, who sits on the board of Santa Fe's nonprofit KSFR radio with her. Taken by the idea, Andrews introduced Rudnick to Richards, and the pair began a collaboration. Rudnick knew about the themes Twain and Shakespeare shared even centuries apart. Richards had experience in mounting and acting in Shakespearean productions over decades, as well as practical experience in writing, journalism, and what makes drama effective. The combination proved fruitful. "I would say from the first hour we spent together, it was clear that we had incredibly simpatico ideas and interests, and we just kind of both figured out how to do this," Rudnick said.

Over the year and a half or so that the project took, Rudnick and Richards found their interests and knowledge bases dovetailing neatly. As noted, Richards is an experienced author, actor, journalist, and cartoonist. Rudnick was chair of the American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts-Boston for 26 years, and is a specialist on American culture and literature — notably the artist and writing communities of Santa Fe and Taos, especially arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan. "Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer in the English language, and Mark Twain was the most beloved American writer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries," Rudnick said. The two began with Rudnick's original conception of readings from both men's works, and then "Jon dramatized it in the most wonderful way and added all kind of speakers, and divided up the dialogue among various characters. It became a much more theatrical production. We refined it and refined it and refined it. There are something like 10 scenes, organized thematically, though there's some chronology within the themes. There are going to be revelations about both these writers, particularly Mark Twain, and particularly about Shakespeare's popularity in the United States, that I would say 99 percent of Americans don't know about — but they're fascinating," said Rudnick.

For the Sunday performance, Valerie Plame is master of ceremonies. Shakespeare will be played by Richards, and Mark Twain by Bob Martin. Other participants include Nicholas Ballas, Leslie Harrell Dillen, Geoffrey Pomeroy, Tallis Rose, and Bryson Hatfield. Live music will be provided by Tom Collins, and each scene will be highlighted by the projection of an apt historical photograph or painting. The event is a fundraiser for KSFR and will be followed by a panel discussion.

Though Shakespeare and Twain are both literary pillars, Rudnick the scholar does not believe that they shared the same range of creativity. "Shakespeare was well beyond Mark Twain in his ability to create women who were believable and three-dimensional," she said. "Twain was really not able to deal with women in any genuine kind of way; he could not deal with sexuality at all openly in his society. His wife and children used to read aloud to the family, and they would censor certain passages that to us would seem so unbelievably benign that they're laughable." In part because of this repression, she said, Twain was fascinated with Elizabethan England and its "openness in language and speech about the human body, human passions, human sexuality, in a way that was absolutely verboten among upper middle-class white people in Victorian America — unless they were looking at pornography in secret."

"Shakespeare, like Twain — each are products of their time," Rudnick said. "They share some of the unthinking racism of their time. But both of them, because they're great artists and humanitarians, they're able to transcend those stereotypes that nobody of their ilk, of their time, was able to do." ◀

## details

- ▼ *Ever The Twain: William Shakespeare in Mark Twain's America*
- ▼ 7 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 31
- ▼ Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.
- ▼ \$10 & \$15; 505-988-1234, [www.ticketssantafe.org](http://www.ticketssantafe.org)