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## **University of Missouri Actors Take Mark Twain Back to California**

One hundred thirty-four years after he departed California and sailed back East to transform American literature, Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) is returning to the Pacific Slope, where he gained his first national fame—thanks to a troupe of young actors from the University of Missouri, his native state.

The setting will be Calaveras, California, in the northern mountains where Mark Twain gathered the material for his comic tall-tale classic, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” On October 15 and 16, the Mizzou players, directed by Brett D. Johnson with assistance from Mary Barile, will present SAM AND LAURA, a two-act play by Missourian Ron Powers. The play highlights a little-known romantic encounter in the life of young Sam Clemens—an encounter that shaped his dream-life and inspired one of his best-loved literary creations.

Published in New York in November 1865, “The Jumping Frog” yarn caught fire in newspapers throughout post-Civil War America, gave the exhausted nation its first great peals of unifying laughter, and catapulted the young vagabond journalist to celebrity-hood as “the Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope.” On that ballast, Mark Twain built his legend as America’s greatest writer.

The story behind the Mizzou players’ upcoming California trek is an unusual and inspiring one: a story of home-state devotion on the part of the author and months of creative collaboration among playwright, director, cast and a pro-active University administration. All this effort was buttressed by an enthusiastic welcome from the city fathers of Calaveras, “The Home of the Jumping Frog” and one of the nation’s premier Mark Twain destination sites. The timing for this unique venture could not be more apt: 2010 is a rare triple-anniversary year in Mark Twain’s legacy. He was born 175 years ago on November 30 in Florida, MO (his family moved to nearby Hannibal when he was 4). He died 100 years ago this past April in Redding, Connecticut. And it was 125 years ago that America’s greatest novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was published in



America. [EDITORS, NOTE: THERE IS NO “THE” IN THE HUCK FINN TITLE]

SAM AND LAURA, based on fact, unfolds from the perspective of LAURA WRIGHT, whom Sam Clemens encountered on a steamboat deck in the New Orleans Mississippi river docks in 1858, when he was a 22-year-old apprentice pilot. LAURA tells the tale as an aging woman celebrating her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in a Hollywood nightclub in 1925, spinning the story to her mesmerized younger escort, C.O. BYRD, a friend of the Wright family from earlier days in Warsaw, MO. LAURA’s memories, and their significance to Mark Twain’s life and her own, are enacted on the larger stage, giving the audience the illusion of watching a powerful dream play itself out. The final scene of SAM AND LAURA unveils a bittersweet revelation, uniting dreams, memory and reality in a way that Mark Twain, a passionate believer in dreams, would doubtless have understood and applauded.

Powers wrote SAM AND LAURA out of a lifetime’s fascination for Mark Twain and the insights gained from his own Missouri roots. Powers was born in Hannibal, MO, the town Mark Twain enshrined as “Petersburg” (Heaven) in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Powers graduated in 1963 from the University of Missouri, which in 1902 presented Mark Twain with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree on the author’s final visit to his native state from his residence in the East. In 2005 Powers, by then a winner of the Pulitzer Prize in criticism, published *Mark Twain: a Life*, which became a finalist for that year’s National Book Critics Circle award.

“I had been vaguely aware of the romance between Sam Clemens and Laura Wright,” says Powers. “Mark Twain alludes to it in his autobiographical writings, with great feeling but without many details. He does stipulate that it was entirely chaste, given that Laura was quite young. In fact, Laura had mystical overtones for him. He wrote about her effect on his dream-life, without naming her, in ‘My Platonic Sweetheart,’ published only in 1912, two years after his death.”

Powers believes that Laura Wright’s appeal to Sam Clemens was complex but profound—especially considering that the two were together in New Orleans only for parts of three days. Three weeks after the encounter, Sam’s beloved younger brother Henry was fatally scalded in a steamboat explosion on the Mississippi, an event for which Clemens severely blamed himself. (He later claimed to have experienced a prophetic dream of Henry’s death.)

“The two events happened so closely in time and were so radically at odds—a hint of Heaven followed by a blast from Hell—that I believe Laura became, in his dreams, a kind of purifying angel,” Powers says. “It’s almost as if he willed her into his dreams to purge all the torments of bereavement that he suffered throughout his life. And she certainly had an effect on his creativity.” Indeed, scholars such as Howard Baetzhold believe, based on striking similarities of description, that it was Laura Wright and not the Hannibal native Laura Hawkins, as many suppose, who became the model for Becky Thatcher.

Powers' interest in the Sam and Laura relationship sharpened during his research for the Mark Twain biography. When he casually asked Robert Hirst, the editor-in-chief at the Mark Twain Project at Berkeley, what he knew about the romance, Hirst produced a remarkable letter written in 1964. Signed by C. O. Byrd, the letter recounted Byrd's conversation with Laura at the Hollywood jazz club in 1925, when she told the younger man of the encounter. Byrd's letter, Powers says, also reveals the startling promise that Laura extracted from Byrd—a promise that figures in the play's revelatory ending.

Powers says that when he decided to write a play based on the incident, he was bolstered by the support and critical commentary of Mary Barile at the University of Missouri. A published playwright who herself has drawn on Mark Twain's characters as thematic material (*LEAVING HANNIBAL, JANE*), Barile immediately grasped the possibilities of *SAM AND LAURA*, and encouraged Powers through several drafts of the play. "If it weren't for Mary," Powers says, I would not be strutting around today, at age 68, calling myself 'The Boy Playwright'!

*SAM AND LAURA* received its first performances, two dramatic readings, by the acclaimed Vermont Artists' Repertory Theatre, in Rutland, Vermont, last February. (Powers currently lives in nearby Castleton, Vermont, with his wife Honoree Fleming, Dean of Education at Castleton State College.) But at the same time, the Missouri U. cast was already in rehearsal for the long creative commitment that would culminate at Calaveras.

Barile had drawn in the next key partner in the Mizzou enterprise: Brett D. Johnson, the young director, actor and Tennessee Williams specialist then completing his requirements for a Ph.D. in theatre at the University. Barile notes, "Brett is that rare director who creates such a strong sense of the past that cast and audience enter a new time and place with enthusiasm. Because so many people have a personal sense of Mark Twain, he's a tough subject to take on as a director. But Brett has brought a fresh vision to the man and the time."

Johnson and Barile assembled a cast that included MU students, staff, and alumni. Sally Foster, who holds an MFA in Contemporary Performance from Naropa University, portrayed the older *LAURA WRIGHT*, and sophomore Elizabeth Trovall depicted *LAURA*'s younger self. Juniors Grant Watkins and Andrew Rea played *C.O. BYRD* and *SAM CLEMENS*, respectively. Rounding out the cast were freshman Alyson Germinder, sophomore Peter Smith, junior Erik Haugsby, alumnus Jason Wayne Christian, and staff members Ben Friesen and Tyece Little. Graduate student Gloria Dossett narrated the performance, and Jane Accurso and Dierik Leonhard of Ironweed Bluegrass Band provided live musical accompaniment. A "concert reading" of *SAM AND LAURA* was performed at MU on the evening of March 18 with Powers in attendance. The "Boy Playwright," electrified by the performance, immediately had what he calls his "Mickey Rooney moment."

"I said to myself, 'We've got to get these kids to California!'" Powers recalls. "One of the Mark Twain historical leaders out there, Ralph Alldredge, had already contacted me

with an invitation to speak about Sam at Calaveras in the fall. When I saw what these actors could do, I emailed my script to Ralph and urged him to consider bringing the cast out there along with me.”

Allredge comments, “Our festival celebrates much that is ‘new’ about a famous author who died a century ago--a new autobiography with material that has never been published, a new Mark Twain award created by the California Press Association, and a new play based upon information discovered and insights gained in the course of Ron Powers’s research for his recent Mark Twain biography. Those who attend will be informed and entertained while gaining a new perspective on Mark Twain and his place in American literature.”

The next step was enlisting the support of the University of Missouri’s administration. To their delight, Barile and Johnson discovered that their unusual request was met with understanding and enthusiasm. Director of Libraries at the University of Missouri Jim Cogswell immediately embraced the project. “Sam Clemens was not only a son of Missouri but also a citizen of the world. His works are infused with both passion and elegance in the descriptions of culture, geography, history, and above all, people. Ron Powers’s play is in the same spirit as Sam’s writings – funny, touching and honest.”

Chancellor Emeritus Dr. Richard Wallace commented, “My initial interest in the play was focused on the fact that it was written by Ron Powers, who is surely one of the foremost Twain scholars in the world. And, to add a very thick layer of icing to the cake, Ron is one of ours--a fact that makes me very proud for the University of Missouri. Hearing the reading of the play while Ron was here this spring confirmed what I expected. Though different compared to what he had previously written, his magic touch with words and story telling were obvious. I left the reading convinced that the play will be a huge success that will last. Ron, Mark Twain and Mizzou--how could it miss!!”

And so, in mid-October, and in the midst of his “triple anniversary” year, Mark Twain will return to the scene of his first great national celebrityhood—borne by a cavalcade of talented young Missourians who believe that one of his most famous utterances is still true more than a century after he made it, and in fact will always be true:

“Reports of my death are an exaggeration.”