

Spotlight on Learning

Is He Dead?



Pioneer Theatre Company's Student Matinee Program is made possible, in part, through the support of Salt Lake County's Zoo, Arts and Parks Program, The Simmons Family Foundation, The Meldrum Foundation Endowment Fund, and R. Harold Burton Foundation.

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Approximate running time: Two hours. This show has one fifteen-minute intermission.

Student Talk-Back: There will be a Student Talk-Back directly after the performance.

SPOTLIGHT ON LEARNING OCTOBER 2009

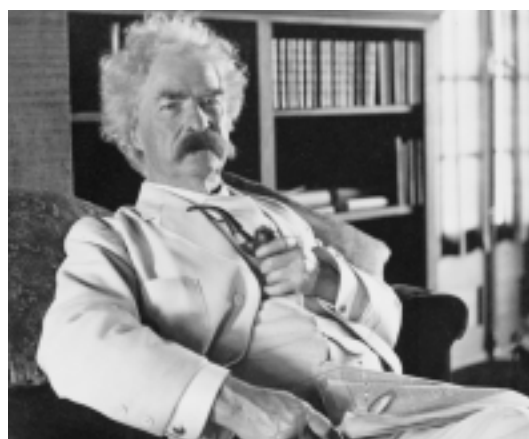
A Pioneer Theatre
Company Classroom
Companion

Directed by
Charles Morey

Is He Dead?

Oct. 30 thru Nov. 14, 2009

A "New" Comedy
by MARK TWAIN
Adapted by David Ives



Mark Twain, pseudonym of Samuel Langhorne Clemens

The Play's Long Journey to Production

In 1898 Mark Twain was going through one of the hardest periods in his life. He was bankrupt after making unfortunate investments, and his youngest daughter had died two years earlier, of meningitis. He and his family had moved to Vienna in 1897, so that his daughter Clara could study music there, and Twain was drawn into the theatrical world which, at that point, was at the heart of Viennese society.

Twain had written several previous plays, but only one had done well in performance. *Colonel Sellers*, the adaptation of Twain's first novel, had been a great success of a sort very like Twain's personal success on the lecture circuit, it centered on one very funny character, who could hold the house the entire evening. As Arthur Miller has written, Twain's early lecture circuits, on which he built his career, were pure performance on his part. None of his attempts at stage plays, after *Colonel Sellers*, however, had been at all successful.

As he was looking for work that would pull him out of the financial hole he was in in the late 1890s, Twain may well have thought of Jean-François Millet, a fellow artist who was known for having lived in extreme poverty all his life, and whose paintings had sold for enormous sums once he was no longer alive to profit from them. Millet was extremely popular in America in the late 19th Century – Bostonians were among the first to realize his importance and collect him. Several young Boston painters studied with him long before he was much celebrated in France, and on their return to Boston they told collectors about him, so that a visit to Millet's studio became a necessary part of any Bostonian's visit to Paris. Interestingly, Millet was celebrated early on by the members of the Saturday Club, an illustrious circle of Boston's arbiters of taste and a group that Twain was desperate to be recognized by in his early career.

Millet's work, which had been seen in France as potentially revolutionary in its celebration of the worker, and even seemed very brutal to Parisian eyes unused to seeing farm laborers at work, was understood in America as beautifully pastoral. He was adopted with fervor first by Boston, and then by the entire country, so that by the 1890s his paintings were almost as oft-reproduced and hung in as many drawing rooms as Monet's *Water Lilies* are now. The story (greatly exaggerated) of his poverty and indebtedness was widely known in America, through accounts written by his former students after his death in 1875. After his death, his work sold at fantastic prices. His *Angelus* became one of the most famous paintings in the world when, years after Millet's death, it was the

subject of an unprecedented bidding war between American and French collectors, and was bought by an American for the amazing sum of \$111,000, though it was bought back from America by the French government in 1890. A painting Millet had sold for a very modest 1800 francs (approximately \$360 dollars at the time) was, 15 years after his death, seen to be an invaluable national treasure.



Millet's *The Angelus*

In 1893 Twain had written a short story called *Is He Living or Is He Dead?* in which he had laid out the basic premise which he developed five years later into the play: Jean-François Millet, France's greatest painter, is starving, deeply in debt and cannot sell a painting to save his life. One of his students suggests that if he were only dead he would instantly be acknowledged a great master, and his work would be worth a fortune – so why not fake his death, and make the money they so desperately need? Excited by the Viennese theatre world, Twain decided to try his hand at a new play, using this story as his starting point. His *Is He Dead?* was written in a month, and was soon announced for production simultaneously in New York and London. However, the productions never materialized. Bram Stoker, of *Dracula* fame, had agreed to represent it in London, but Twain was disappointed by Stoker's lukewarm response after reading the play. Stoker encouraged him that it might do better with an American audience, and the play did raise some interest in New York, but not enough to lead to an American premiere either.

Perhaps the plot, which treats Millet lightly, as the center of a mad farce, took too many liberties with the Great Man for the public's approval. Perhaps the large cast (originally well over twenty) gave producers pause. But its similarity to the great hit farce of the early 1890s, *Charley's Aunt*, which is dependent on the same major plot device, may well have been its greatest problem; *Is He Dead?* may have been too close in plot to be a success with audiences over-familiar with its forbearer, which had played for years in London and New York, and run extensive tours as well. Twain himself felt the play could use improvement, that although there was something good in it, it could use re-dramatizing. In 1899 he wrote as much, concluding, "I know, quite well, that the play will never play until it is reconstructed." Happily, a little over a century after Twain abandoned hopes of getting *Is He Dead?* produced, it got that chance. Twain scholar Shirley Fisher Fishkin (of Stanford University) was going through the Twain archives at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, and came upon the manuscript. She felt that, unlike the other of Twain's plays she had read, *Is He Dead?* was eminently worthy of production, but that Twain was right, and it could use some re-working. She then sent it to Broadway producer Bob Boyett, who sent it to David Ives, best known for his farce *All In the Timing*, to ask if he would consider adapting it for production on Broadway. Ives jumped at the chance.

By an odd coincidence, when I took Bob's call I had just returned from a week beside an Adirondack lake during which my reading material was none other than...Mark Twain. Indeed, it was *The Portable Twain*, a veritable two-pound brickload of Twain. By yet another coincidence, I had for years carried my keys on a Mark Twain keychain given me by Henry Gibson on the opening night of *A Connecticut Yankee*, a musical I adapted for City Center's *Encores!* series. So Bob's phone call looked like more than fate. It looked as if the twain, contrary to popular belief, might actually meet.

My Broadway Collaboration with Mark Twain

By David Ives, January 8, 2008
www.broadway.com

Mark Twain would have loved the irony. For now we have *Is He Dead?*, a new play by the very dead (but, is he dead?) Mark Twain, making its world premiere on Broadway 97 years after the eminent writer's reported demise. The handwritten manuscript of this madcap comedy sat in a filing cabinet for a hundred-odd years until a Twain scholar named Shelley Fisher Fishkin fished it out. Twain would have loved the irony of premiering at the Lyceum Theatre long after he'd famously said that the reports of his death were greatly exaggerated. Twain would have loved the irony of having failed as a playwright during his lifetime, only to make it in the theatrical big time while playing the cloud circuit. Maybe he planted the manuscript in that filing cabinet for one final joke and a posthumous annuity. My own involvement with this project started a couple of years ago, when a producer by the name of Bob Boyett called me up. Yet it does not do Bob Boyett full justice to call him "a producer." The great goodhearted patron, the Maecenas of contemporary American theater is more like it. Bob told me about this recently unearthed Twain play called *Is He Dead?* He said the play was funny but needed some help. Would I read it and think about providing that help? Was he kidding? How many times does one get the chance to collaborate with Mark Twain?

Bob sent me the play. I read it. I laughed. I accepted the task of adapting the piece. And so, with Mark (I call him Mark) looking over my shoulder and me looking over Mark's shoulder, like some bizarre Escher drawing, I sat down to work.

First by conflating some characters and cutting some others I reduced the cast to a more manageable—i.e., more producible—size. Twain's original play has 35-odd people onstage; I brought that down to eleven. I changed the play from three acts to two. Keeping as much of Twain's text as I could, I interleaved a number of new scenes that developed some of his characters and I slipped in a subplot or two or three. I wrapped the play up differently than the original, as Twain let all of his characters dwindle rather than scramble toward the necessary farcical denouement. Through all this, I saw my job as doing what Twain himself would have done to the play had he lived another 97 years.

The skeptical might say: So what? Why a Mark Twain play at this late date? Who cares? The funny thing about Mark Twain is that, if you're an American, you're a creature of Twain whether you've read a word of him or not. That's because Twain helped make the modern American world. Which is to say, he helped make us. Come to know Twain, and you approach knowing something about yourself.

Twain not only "created American humor," as literary types like to say. He created a couple of kinds of American humor that are still with us: on the one hand, the chatty, anecdotal, folksy kind that got carried up through Will Rogers to Garrison Keillor; on the other hand, the more savage, satirical, sometimes downright cynical humor of Twain's later years, which can still be heard any night of the week out of the mouths of our late-night talk-show hosts. You'll find both kinds of humor in full bloom in *Is He Dead?*

Mark Twain also told us—no, he showed us—how we Americans talk. David Mamet continues this mission and tradition today. Twain gave us a model of how to write prose that is as direct and fresh as, well, *Fresh Direct*.

Mark Twain, in short, gave us a point of view from which we're still looking at things. It's a POV that's wary of title or public place, positively acid about politics and politicians, and warmly appreciative if sometimes coolly apprehensive about the so-called common man. Twain is a man whose eyes you can't pull any wool over. He'll see straight through any 10 layers of your thickest wool, and tell you what he's seeing in words you won't forget. This is, after all, a man who made eternal gold out of a kid on a raft.

If you don't believe me, or even if you do believe me, amble on down to 45th Street and see and hear for yourself. Sometime during the performance, take a moment to glance around to the back of the theater. You might spot a man in a white suit and a bushy moustache, and it won't be me.



Millet's Man with a Hoe

I've heard for years that the Lyceum Theatre was haunted. Now I know by whom.

MARK TWAIN (orig. Samuel Langhorne Clemens) was born Nov. 30, 1835, in Florida, Mo., and died April 21, 1910, in Redding, Conn. He grew up in Hannibal, Mo., on the Mississippi River and was apprenticed in 1848 to a local printer. He received a riverboat pilot's license in 1859 and later moved on to Nevada and California. In 1863 he took his pseudonym, the riverman's term for water two fathoms (12 feet) deep. In a California mining camp he heard the story that he first published in 1865 and made famous as the title story of his first book, *The Celebrated*

Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches (1867). He traveled widely, using his travels as subject matter for lectures and books, from the humorous narratives *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) and *Roughing It* (1872) to *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), his reflections on being a riverboat captain. He won a worldwide audience for his adventure stories of boyhood, especially *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), one of the masterpieces of American fiction. The satirical *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and increasingly grim works including *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) and *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1899) followed. In the 1890s financial speculations bankrupted him. His eldest daughter died in 1896, his wife in 1904, and another daughter in 1909. He expressed his pessimism about human character in such late works as the posthumously published *Letters from the Earth* (1962).



Millet's The Gleaners

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Though not known for his plays, many of Mark Twain's novels (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example) have been dramatized. What about Twain's work makes it so adaptable?
2. Several of Jean-François Millet's paintings are included in this study guide. Discuss the artwork. What are the people doing in these paintings? What is the artist's attitude towards the working people he depicts? Why do you think Mark Twain and many other Americans admired Millet's paintings as much as they did? What makes a work of art great? What determines the value people place on it? Why might the price of a work of art rise after the artist's death?
3. Millet is widely recognized as a prolific artist, and Twain is considered to be one of the greatest American authors. What legacy would you want to leave for future generations? Why do you think Mark Twain was attracted to the idea of an artist's work being valued after his or her lifetime?

Director and Cast for *IS HE DEAD?*

CHARLES MOREY (Director) has been the Artistic Director for PTC since 1984 and has directed over 70 productions. He is pleased to present the regional premiere of the newest play by one of his favorite American authors, Mark Twain.

JESSIE AUSTRIAN* (Cecile Leroux) New York credits include *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* at the Roundabout Theatre Company, and most recently Fiasco Theater's acclaimed production of *Cymbeline*. Regional credits include *Jane Eyre* at the Guthrie Theater, *My Fair Lady* at Virginia Stage Company, Actors Theatre of Louisville and Cleveland Playhouse, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* at Trinity Repertory Company, and *Cabaret & Main* at the Williamstown Theatre Festival.

CHERYL GAYSUNAS* (Madame Caron/Sultan of Turkey) was last seen as Poppy in *Noises Off* at Pioneer. Other PTC shows include *The Heiress*, *Communicating Doors*, and *The Ladies Man*. On Broadway, Cheryl appeared in *La Bête*, *The Molière Comedies*, and as Mabel in *An Ideal Husband*, directed by Sir Peter Hall.

CARIANNE H. JONES (Marie Leroux) is thrilled to make this her Pioneer Theatre Company debut! A Utah native, Carianne graduated from Weber State University with a bachelor's degree in Musical Theatre. Favorite credits include Marion (*The Music Man*), Philia (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*), Sariah (*The Ark*), a Kit Kat Girl (*Cabaret*), Sally (*You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*), and most recently Felicity Buttendown in the Desert Star's *James Blonde*.

DAVID GRAHAM JONES* (Phelim O'Shaughnessy) returns to PTC after having appeared last year as Mercutio in *Romeo & Juliet*. New York Theatre credits include *A Free Man of Color* (Lincoln Center Theater workshop), *King Lear* (New York Classical Theatre), and *The Merchant of Venice* (Dramatic Interests).

MICHAEL KEYLOUN* (Jean-François Millet) is returning to Salt Lake City after making his Pioneer Theatre debut as Leo Bloom in *The Producers*. Regional credits include *The Ladies Man* (Indiana Repertory and Geva Theatre Center), *Noises Off* and *Jesus Hates Me* (Denver Center-Ovation Award Nomination for Best Supporting Actor), *The Underpants* (Actors Theatre of Louisville), *Taming of the Shrew* (Capital Repertory), *Lend Me a Tenor* and *Born Yesterday* (Cape Playhouse), and *Tartuffe* (La Jolla Playhouse).

PAUL KIERNAN* (Hans von Bismarck, or "Dutchy") appeared at PTC in *Romeo & Juliet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Amadeus*, *Ten Little Indians*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, among others. At SLAC, Paul has been seen in *Freedomland*, *The Memory of Water*, *The Beard of Avon*, *Cowboys and Cabbies*, and others. Other credits include: *Julius Caesar* (Brutus) with Salt Lake Shakespeare; *Cyrano* (Hangar Theatre, Ithaca); *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest* (St. Louis Shakespeare); and *Henry IV*. TV/film credits include: *Go Figure* for Disney Channel, *Luck of the Irish*, *The Maldonado Miracle*, and the HBO series *From the Earth to the Moon*.

ANNE STEWART MARK* (Madame Bathilde/Emperor of Russia) returns after appearing in *The Light in the Piazza*, *My Fair Lady* and *Noises Off* at PTC last season. She also appeared in *Paint Your Wagon*, *Les Misérables*, *Macbeth*, *Peter Pan*, *Tartuffe*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Laughing Stock*, *Misalliance*, *Arcadia*, *Private Lives*, and *Blithe Spirit*.

ANDERSON MATTHEWS* (Papa Leroux) most recently appeared as Selsdon in *Noises Off*. Other PTC appearances include *As You Like It*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Laughing Stock*, and *You Can't Take It With You*. Broadway credits include *The Robber Bridegroom*, Peter Ustinov's *Beethoven's 10th*, and *Arcadia* at Lincoln Center. Off-Broadway credits include *Driving Miss Daisy* and *10 By Tennessee*. Television credits include *Law & Order* and *The Equalizer*.

KEVIN ORTON* (Basil Thorpe/Charlie/Claude Rivière/King of France) is back after having been last seen at Pioneer in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. New York credits include Sir Peter Hall's Broadway revival of *Amadeus*, Public/NYSF's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Moni Yakim's *The Workroom* (MTS), and Peter Dinklage's *Uncle Vanya* (Fisher Center). Regional theatre appearances include those in St. Louis (most recently the Bastard in Shaw's *Saint Joan*), Cincinnati, Cleveland, Buffalo, Phoenix, and L.A. Film/TV/voiceover credits include: *One Take*, *Dakota*, *Law & Order*, and numerous commercials and recorded books.

GRAHAM ROWAT* (Agamemnon Buckner, or "Chicago") Broadway credits include *Guys and Dolls* (2009), *LoveMusik* (directed by Harold Prince), *Dracula* (directed by Des McAnuff), and *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* (also in Toronto). His regional credits include Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* (San Francisco, Detroit, and Toronto). He also appeared in the national tour of *Les Misérables*. Graham has been a soloist with the National Symphony and Portland Symphony Orchestras, and appeared on TV in *Law & Order*, *Six Degrees*, and *As the World Turns*.

GREG THORNTON* (Bastien André) last appeared at PTC as Salieri in *Amadeus*. He appeared in the Off-Broadway production of *John Ferguson* at the Mint Theater and received the Best Actor Award for the role of David in *The Conjugal Test* at MITF in New York. He has been a resident actor with the McCarter Theatre, Geva Theatre, and Alabama Shakespeare Festival. His film and television credits include *Marathon Man*, *Law & Order*, *Tales from the Darkside*, *Another World*, and *One Life to Live*.

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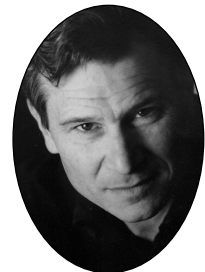
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