

Making a living out of being Mark Twain

By Malia Wollan, New York Times

INCLINE VILLAGE – McAvoy Layne climbed the stage chomping on an unlighted cigar, his shock of spray-painted white hair bright in the spotlights. “You can’t beat an audience that’s been waiting 100 years,” he said to the crowd.

Mr. Layne, 67, is a Mark Twain impersonator, and for men in his business this is something of a golden age. Long consigned to the dustbin of historical-society meetings and elementary school classrooms, Twain impersonators are now selling out shows, entertaining at fancy parties, presenting at conferences, making real money and adding new members to their ranks.

They attribute much of this to spinoff attention that came with 2010’s surprise best seller, the 736-page “Autobiography of Mark Twain,” edited by Harriet Elinor Smith and published by the University of California Press on the centennial of Twain’s death. While some of the reviews have been withering, so far some 500,000 copies are in print.

Most in the audience at this tiny storefront theater in a snowy shopping center on the shore of Lake Tahoe had not ventured to buy, let alone read, the hefty hardback. But many had nonetheless been inspired by the book’s promotion to come out to hear Mr. Layne tell Twain’s stories, which they said left them nostalgic for simpler, more adventurous times.

“Mark Twain just makes you feel good,” said Jim Giancola, 62, a retired banker.

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