

# The New Criterion

## Theater

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### Never the Twain

by [Brooke Allen](#)

On the revival of Mark Twain's *Is He Dead?*, the Steppenwolf production of *August: Osage County*, and the return to Broadway of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* forty years after its debut.

One of the most potentially exciting events of the theatrical season was the premiere of Mark Twain's lost comedy *Is He Dead?* After all, how often does a full-length work by an artist of Twain's caliber come to light after more than a century? The manuscript of this unproduced piece was discovered in 2002 among the Mark Twain papers at U.C. Berkeley by a literary scholar, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, who arranged for the manuscript to be published and suggested to the producer Bob Boyett that the play, a lightweight cross-dressing farce, would do well on Broadway. Doctored up by the successful commercial playwright David Ives, it opened on December 9, 108 years after it was written, to all but rapturous reviews.

I set off to the theater convinced that it was going to be a perfect evening. How could the great Twain, the adroit Ives, and the brilliant director Michael Blakemore go wrong? ...

**Brooke Allen's** latest book is *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Ivan R Dee).

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