

5 questions with Nan Colton, this year's Harriet Beecher Stowe at the High Plains Chautauqua



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Harriet Beecher Stowe, portrayed by Nan Colton, talks to the crowd about her life story Friday night at Aims Community College in Greeley.

WHAT'S NEXT?

High Plains Chautauqua ends today with various events throughout Greeley.

Nan Colton, featured under the big tent Friday night, will be available for coffee and conversation from 8-9:15 a.m. today at the Kress Cinema & Lounge, 817 8th Ave., along with George Frein, who portrayed Herman Melville.

The last evening performance will be from 7-9 p.m., with Sally Ann Drucker portraying Betty Friedan and Marvin Jefferson as Martin Luther King Jr. under the big tent.

Nan Colton, of St. Petersburg, Fla., takes on the role of 35 different characters as a performing literary and teaching artist. She gives each of her characters an individualistic flair, with carefully constructed outfits and shoes for each one — she makes sure no two characters share the same pair of shoes.

"Each story has its own life and you follow as diligently and as carefully as you can," she said. "You go where the storyline is taking you and it's filled with wonderful adventures and surprises."

On Friday night as part of the High Plains Chautauqua series at Aims Community College, 5401 20th St., Colton put on her shoes for Harriet Beecher Stowe and portrayed the abolitionist best known for her novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," before a crowd of 570.

Colton has pursued her passion of solo performance since 1994, and is headquartered in the Museum of Fine Arts in downtown St. Petersburg. She also is a curriculum designer at the Quak Center for Lifelong Learning in Florida.

Stowe has been one of Colton's characters for about 16 years. It was Colton's second time performing for High Plains, before as Georgia O'Keeffe.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) is best known for depicting the harsh life for African-Americans under slavery in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which is still read today. Stowe had a passion for writing, which allowed her to express her thoughts and beliefs to the public during an era where women could not speak publicly.

We asked Colton five questions about her character and about how she prepares:

QUESTION — What makes your character stand out in history?

ANSWER — Her written word changed the world.

She put together four or five articles for a local newspaper against slavery that were published, and a year later, she ended up with a published book ("Uncle Tom's Cabin"). It became like hot potatoes — everybody wanted one. The first edition sold out almost immediately. It was published in 60 different languages and read all over the world. It was like a flame suddenly became this wildfire.

Q — What's the hardest part about answering questions at the end of your performance?

A — The challenge is that you hear the question, and you have to listen very carefully to what it is that (the person) wants to know. They're either asking you, the playwright, you, the person, who is different than the playwright, or the character, because those are three different perspectives to the same question. But the intent behind the question and answer period is to always get a conversation going — a two-way flow.

Q — How do you relate to your character?

A — I look for moments in her life that I can identify with, and that I feel other women in the audience will identify with, and moments in her story that everybody can identify with. Usually, it's an emotion.

For example, a turning point in her life was coming to terms with the end of her career. She thought, "Have I written everything I want to say? Is there anything more that I want to say? Is there anything more anyone wants to hear from me? Is this the end of my creative juices?" You can talk to anybody who is getting ready to retire and they will all be asking themselves the same exact question: What's next? Or somebody just out of college: What's next? Or a kid going from middle school to high school: What's next? Going into the unknown. Crossing this territory and going somewhere that they're not so sure what they're supposed to be doing.

Q — What's the hardest part about acting out your character?

A — Getting to the location and shifting gears. You have to be on. You can't have the sniffles. You can't have a hangover. You can't have any of your own personal worries. You have to set it all aside and be there for the character, be there for the idea, and be there for the audience.

Q — Name one amazing thing about your character.

A — She persevered. And she didn't turn bitter, angry or resentful. She just kept doing what she knew she was supposed to be doing.