

She was considered one of the most devious, and love-to-hate brats on prime-time television. And she is coming to Hartford. Alison Arngrim, the actress who played Nellie Oleson on the 1970s hit television show "Little House On the Prairie" will be the guest of the Mark Twain House & Museum on June 11 at 7:30 p.m. Arngrim will talk about the show that starred the late Michael Landon and Melissa Gilbert, her 2010 book, "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch," her advocacy work and her career these days that includes stand-up comedy. Home in California, the sassy actress was matter-of-fact and funny by phone as she explained what it was like to play one of TV's most well-known child villains, and where life has taken her since, as she Spilled the Beans with Java.

Q: Why do you think Nellie was so unforgettable and do you ever feel the role stereotyped you?

A: Typecasting exists. Once, toward the end of the show my agent tried to submit me for a part and they wouldn't consider me, because I was associated with a pioneer show and they were casting a part in present day. It wasn't like they saw me as "Pioneer Barbie" but seemed to think I could only perform in a show that took place in the 1800s. People are out of their minds in L.A. that way. And there is some typecasting even in this century. But the good thing about being Nellie for so long is that villains and bitchy roles have become more popular than ever and that has made me as Nellie more popular than ever. And how nice is that as "Little House" celebrates its 40th anniversary.

Q: Do you remember how you felt about being cast as Nellie at the time?

A: What career did I have before that? I was 12. That was my big job. At the time, no one anticipated the show would have the impact it did. I was OK with being Nellie, even if I was being typecast. It's not like I was an awful character on some cheesy, awful show. That would have been a huge drag. I still watch "Little House" and it still has a following. People might laugh about it but they can't stop watching it. I get fan mail from all over the world. And Nellie did have her good side.

Q: How were you and Nellie alike and different?

A: I can cook and Nellie couldn't. I have people over and they think I can't cook because Nellie couldn't cook. I am a very good cook. My husband says, however, that Nellie Oleson lives in me for five minutes before I have my coffee in the morning. I have this expression, one from the show that Nellie used and if you see it you should probably run.

Q: In your book, "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated," you wrote about being abused as a child. You also wrote that playing the nasty Nellie allowed you to work out some anger. Explain.

A: When you are a child you are powerless and have nowhere to go. But you have all this rage. You see people go to suicide etc. because they are trying to deal with anger that is inward. I had this bizarre fluke of an opportunity playing this character at the worst time for me as an adolescent. I was a character who screams and rages and throws things and it became my way of venting over the abuse at home. I had somewhere to go with it. I was very shy and I was playing a character who was very bold. I had this creative outlet to dump all the rage.

Q: Do you ever feel like the girl and eventually young woman you portrayed somehow diminished the role of women during a time when their rights were compromised?

A: Despite popular opinion, women then were not some prissy little things back then. You were going to be shot at, lived in conditions that were as challenging as they could be, and dealing with starvation and disease. I hear stories about my great-grandmother.

Q: It's been 40 years since "Little House." What are some of your best memories and not-so-best memories?

A: As far as the best memories, the people and the chemistry between the actors and actresses. We are all still in touch and there are anniversary reunions all over the country this year that will be just great. There is even one in France. The French love "La Petite Maison" and they are mad for the show and love Nellie. The not-so-great memories? You were in those, heavy, hot costumes all day. We were shooting in a pretty isolated location and while there was radio and TV, it never worked. The electricity was usually off and generators were too loud. And we had to use porta-potties on location, the 20th century version of an outhouse at the time. Essentially we were living "Little House" a little bit.

Q: What do you think the biggest misperception about Nellie is?

A: I think people saying she was just a bitch. I think the truth was Nellie was jealous. The French get that. She had this awful mother and a father who let this woman run everything. Laura had nothing materially but she had great parents. Nellie was just jealous.

Q: Will this be your first time in Hartford?

A: It will. Actually the whole story about coming to Hartford is Jacques Lamarre from Mark Twain House arbitrarily messaged me on Facebook. He said Hartford was a big fan and since I was going to be in New York at that time, would I want to come to Hartford. I love Mark Twain so totally and so want to come to Hartford to see his home and do the program. So when I got his message, I wrote back and said "I am in."

Q: What kind of projects do you have coming up?

A: What am I now doing? I have a bunch of things going on including a multiple website series next year, a stand up tour, and anniversary stuff.

Q: You are 52 years old now. Do you consider yourself lucky when you consider all you have accomplished so far?

A: I can't believe I am this old but apparently I look pretty good. I moisturize heavily. I am an insanely lucky woman. I was extremely lucky and hear horror stories about the way kids turned out on other shows. The show turned out to be a freakish hit. It's ridiculous. Never imagined it but I scored. We thought it was funny but it turned out to be a cool show. Michael Landon had a lot to do with that. He knew how popular the books were even though the network couldn't believe it.

Q: Something no one knows about you?

A: In this day and age of the Internet I don't think there is much. But I am actually better at stuff than people think I am. I am a pretty good swimmer, I can cook really, really well. Most child stars can't read and write but I can. I have the Mark Twain biography and I want to finish it before I come to Hartford. I am a voracious reader. I am fascinated by historical nonfiction. And I didn't get to keep any of my costumes or wigs from the show. in fact, I think one of my wigs was recycled on some other actor's head.

Tickets are \$20 for the general public and \$15 for museum members. Call 860-280-3130 or go to marktwainhouse.org.