

Alison Arngrim, once known as devilish teen Nellie Oleson on "Little House on the Prairie," has a favorite saying: "Prevent blackmail - confess to everything."

And she's busy doing just that.

After answering fans' questions about her nine years on the frontier TV drama in the 1970s and '80s, Arngrim created "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch," a solo comedy show that peeks behind the scenes of the family classic. She'll be performing it Wednesday night at the Cutting Room.

Based on the books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, "Little House" followed the members of the pioneering Ingalls family as they lived, loved and performed grueling chores on their 1800s Midwestern spread. School-aged protagonist Laura (played by Melissa Gilbert) was often terrorized by Nellie, the comparatively well-to-do daughter of the owner of the town's general store.

It didn't take many episodes of the show, says Arngrim, before she was associated with her character, and her life as Head Prairie Bitch in Charge began.

"It was sort of cool because I actually grew up shy by nature," she says, "and having people think I was this big, bad, imposing, terrible person was sort of like camouflage for a small animal in the wild. It gave me time to acclimate myself to the room at a party because people were terrified to approach me."

The reputation did, of course, have its pitfalls. Part of Arngrim's act recalls a Hollywood Christmas parade in which she was the target for a lobbed 20-ounce cup of orange soda.

"I looked up and thought, 'I don't believe this. My God, I freaked someone out to the extent that they had to throw a drink at me,'" she says. "I must be doing something right."

Arngrim, 46, started work on the show at age 12, just in time for the typecasting that would complicate years of dating.

"There are two kinds of men on Earth," she says. "The ones who wouldn't want to date Nellie Oleson on a dare, and those who want to date Nellie Oleson a little too much - and wanted me to wear the wig. So I could only have sex with people who had never seen the show."

One upside of "Little House," she says, was the learning experience. Arngrim can churn her own butter ("I don't recommend it") and mine a mental catalogue of 19th-century diseases and disasters.

"There was a lot of creepy stuff," she says of the show's subject matter. "People would say, 'Oh, it's such a sweet children's show,' and you'd be like, 'Yeah, except for the babies in burning buildings and the rape episode. Much like the 1800s, people died all the time. We had typhus, we had children dying ... did you know we had an anthrax episode? I swear!'"

That story, in which a desperately poor rancher sold bacteria-ridden cuts of lamb, infecting the locals with the gastrointestinal form of the disease, made for useful -trivia.

"When the anthrax outbreak occurred in 2001, I was the only person in town who knew everything about anthrax," says Arngrim. "People were calling me!"

In the end, she says, the show was a positive experience, worth the sweat and tears. She's even been to Minneapolis to see her old castmate Gilbert perform in "Prairie," the Guthrie Theatre musical based on the Ingalls clan. What does Arngrim think of the latest Prairie Bitch?

"The new Nellie, Sarah Jean Ford, is a cross between me and Jack from 'Will & Grace,'" she says with a laugh.

"Absolutely out there. People in the audience are elbowing each other in the ribs and going, 'She's back!' every time this girl walks onstage. So it's really satisfying."

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