

# Arts

## See Emily Play One-woman show about the life of Emily Dickinson focuses on the inner magic of the poet's private world

### THE BELLE OF AMHERST

Friday, Dec. 10 and Saturday, Dec. 11 at 8 p.m.  
Amelia Community Theatre Studio Stage, 209  
Cedar St., Fernandina Beach  
Tickets are \$15  
261-6749  
belleofamherst.org

When Emily Dickinson died at the age of 55 on May 15, 1886, she left behind nearly 1,800 poems. Yet in her lifetime she saw fewer than a dozen published. Born into a successful and respected (yet emotionally distant) Massachusetts family, Dickinson was considered a highly intelligent and thoughtful girl. That same genius and deep insight remained with her as she grew into a melancholy, reclusive young woman who seemed obsessed with death even while marveling at the infinite grace of life. Drawing inspiration from muses as diverse as the Bible, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Browning and the Brontë sisters, Dickinson's writing traversed an interior world bordered by both mind and spirit, what she described as the "undiscovered continent." Hers was a mystical land where flowers, God and Christ lived in an eerie harmony with death, endless prisons and a self-imposed banishment to a world of reflective shadows. Her poetry and life influenced everyone from Sylvia Plath to Richard Brautigan, who is rumored to have kept a book of Dickinson's poems at his side when he was committed to a state-run Oregon mental hospital as a young man.

Dickinson's life is the subject of William Luce's "The Belle of Amherst," a one-woman show being staged by The Amelia Community Theatre Guild. The play premiered on Broadway in April 1976, and star Julie Harris won the 1977 Tony Award for Best Actress for her imaginative portrayal. The local production stars Sinda Nichols and is directed by Ron Kurtz, who share a passion for both the stage as well as this monodrama that celebrates Dickinson's life and legacy.

"The concept of the play evolves as guests — the audience — arrive at the homestead for a tea with the reclusive Dickinson," explains Kurtz. As the monologue develops, other "characters" appear out of the poet's reverie. "When Emily first arrives on stage, she is surprised by the appearance of the audience," continues Kurtz. "She judges how much — or how little — information she will share." As the poet warms to her visitors, she illuminates her history and life, her desires and beliefs with her

dazzling use of words.

Nichols spent much time of her time preparing for the role researching the secretive wordsmith. After reading Dickinson's poems and letters as well as two biographies about Dickinson, Nichols walked away with a better sense of the poet as a woman — and literary phenomenon. "I think part of the reason Emily Dickinson still captivates so many people to this day is because of all the unanswered questions about her life. Why did she stop leaving the house? Why did she interact with so few people?" In this time of media overload, Nichols found the mystery and vision of this cerebral "anti-celebrity" as compelling as the poems themselves. "How wonderful in this day and age to have to dig deep and study thousands of letters to try and find out who someone was. Many of her poems require us to slow down and ponder; there are no quick answers."

Nichols acknowledges that we shouldn't look at Emily Dickinson as some sort of literary freakshow, but rather appreciate the poet's "astounding ability to find ecstasy in everyday life."

"Even though she spent most of her life in one home in one small village," she adds, "she has inspired people from around the world." □

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What We Do Is  
Secret: Sinda  
Nichols portrays  
Emily Dickinson in  
"The Belle  
of Amherst."



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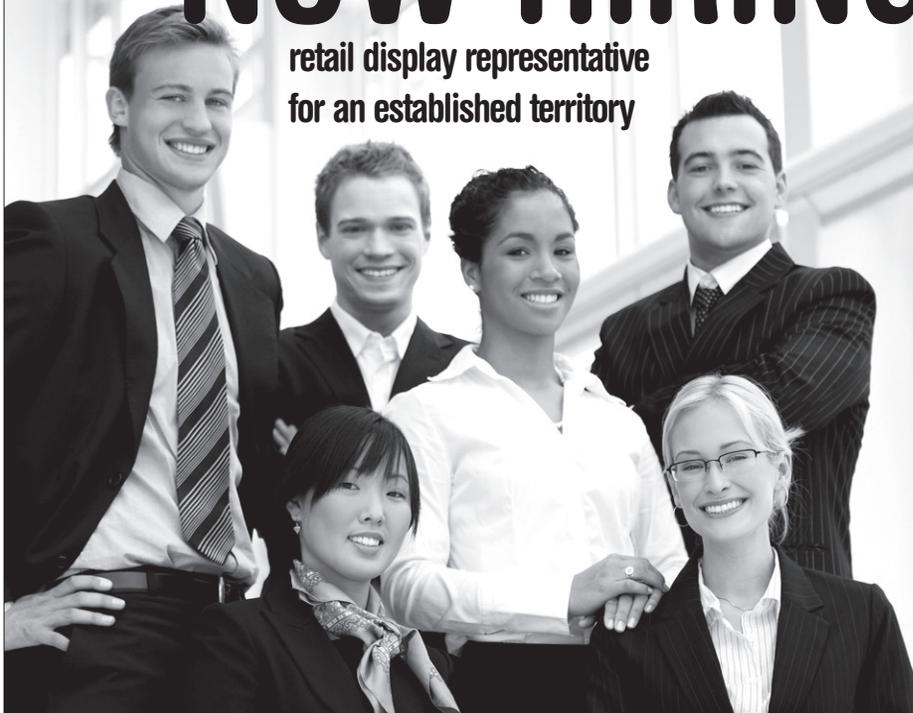
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