

# Performance Artist Janina Birtolo

*Wowing audiences with her one-woman shows*

by Libby Boren McMillan

**Y**ou've read her byline in regional publications for years. But writer-actress Janina Birtolo leads a whole other life...several, in fact.

With one-woman performances of her own creation, Birtolo has entertained thousands of Southwest Floridians via portrayals of Amelia Earhart, Sarah Bernhardt, Galileo's daughter, and Gertrude Bell. Each historically accurate performance focuses on one woman and lasts about an hour. Audience members leave feeling entertained, educated, and inspired. (We'd love to see these shows at BIG Arts!)

A graduate of Boston College and Boston University, Birtolo has been a freelance writer for over 20 years, including in national magazines. Chosen as "Writer of the Year" by the Florida Magazine Association, she additionally produces an art magazine show for WGCU-TV. But our area has also benefited from Birtolo's second love, that of acting. She has appeared in over 20 roles with the Naples Players, Misfit Productions, and the J. Howard Wood Children's Theatre, and directed several shows as well. Now, with the advent of her one-woman shows, this talented creative force has come full circle, incorporating all her skills into one medium.

Birtolo's first work, *Most Affectionate Daughter*, recounts the life of cloistered nun Suor Maria Celeste, who happened



**Naples resident Janina Birtolo brings to life such famous women as Amelia Earhart (above) and Galileo's daughter (left) in one-woman performances of her own creation.**

to be the ultra-intelligent elder daughter and confidant of famed scientist Galileo. Inspired by Dava Sobel's book *Galileo's Daughter*, Birtolo's one-woman play explores the challenge of pushing scientific boundaries while struggling to remain a devout Catholic.

Reading biographies spawned the idea of developing one-woman shows. "I just felt that there were so many great women who had fascinating stories," says Birtolo, "and I thought 'wouldn't that be neat?'" Now the idea is a full-fledged reality. "It's really a dream come true," says Birtolo, "something I've wanted to do for a long time. In 2003 I

got a grant from the United Arts Council that allowed me to do five performances of *Most Affectionate Daughter*."

Great reviews and word of mouth helped bring Birtolo's project to the attention of the Naples Zonta Club, which commissioned her to write and perform a second show focused on Amelia Earhart. She so enjoyed learning about Earhart that a fire was lit that burst forth with each performance as the world's most famous female aviator. Birtolo soared in her portrayal. (A note of interest: Zonta was an organization to which Earhart belonged; the club now has a fellowship program in her name and has sponsored over a thousand young women in their quest to become

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engineers, astronomers, and astronauts.)

The Earhart shows were popular with local audiences, and Birtolo was able to share her vivid portrayal repeatedly. Then the quest was on for a third subject.

“I was looking through the biography shelves,” she explains, “and I came across a book called *Desert Queen*, by Janet Wallach. I thought it looked fascinating, and it was.” Thus, Birtolo’s third play focuses on the legendary Gertrude Bell, a British maverick who failed to notice that her peers were becoming wives and mothers. Instead she studied history at Oxford, climbed mountains, and learned the Arabic and Persian languages.

Bell’s travels led to a lifelong love of the Arabic culture and mysteries of the Middle East. Bell, who died in 1926, spent her adult life exploring and mapping Arabic lands, traveling with an entourage, camels, and tents to visit Sheiks and tribal leaders. This extraordinary turn-of-the-century woman from England developed extremely close ties with Middle Eastern powers, was hired by the British forces to safely navigate the Middle East, advised Winston Churchill, and was instrumental in helping the King of Iraq gain the throne, after which she became his advisor. During World War I, Bell was a force behind the Arab revolt for which Lawrence of Arabia got all the credit.

Birtolo chooses her subjects well. She premiered her next piece, about “original diva” Sarah Bernhardt, at a fundraiser for the Gulfshore Playhouse, to be built in Estero. Then she read Cokie Roberts’s book *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*, and decided that Abigail Adams would make a perfect subject. That work debuted in April of this year.

Naples-based Birtolo promotes her shows as ideal for groups of up to 100



**Above: Birtolo as British maverick and Middle East explorer Gertrude Bell. Left: Portraying original diva Sarah Bernhardt to help raise funds for the Gulfshore Playhouse.**

people. She has performed at the Collier County Library, Atelier Lizio in Naples, Unity of Naples church, Cambier Park, Pelican Marsh, and for the Marco Island Foundation for the Arts, among others. All give rave reviews of her performance.

While Birtolo is still open to the idea of commissions, as of this writing she was about to pore through more biographies, deciding which would translate into the most interesting performance. “I’m getting the question again, ‘what’s next?’ It’s a lot of fun and there are so many great women,” she says. “One of the ideas I’ve been playing with is doing a two-person show. I’m thinking of combining Madame Curie and Rosalind Franklin, who helped discover DNA but never got any credit for it until she was dead. She’s on my list.”

Birtolo’s love of research and writing is perfectly combined with a theatricality that forges a spellbinding show for every woman whose life she chronicles. Even students are enthralled with Birtolo’s enlightening but educational performances, no small feat in today’s world. We hope to see her on a stage near us soon.

To contact Janina Birtolo, call 239-592-1137. 📞

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