



Singer-actress Freelon thrives on variety



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Amid several other high-profile projects, singer-actress Nnenna Freelon has returned to the Quad-Cities for two weeks of education and performing. The six-time Grammy Award nominee is back for the Quad-City Arts' visiting artist series after last being on tour here in 2003.

"I do a lot of educational work," the 60-year-old said this week. "It's rare that I get the opportunity to be embedded in a community for two weeks, but in this case it's a pleasure. They're well-organized and I've had some great experiences. ... It's been quite a round-robin of experiences, but they've all been very cool."

Freelon, halfway through her Quad-City tour, is fresh off a tour of "The Clothesline Muse," a hybrid of dance, music, spoken word and visual art that she created and in which she stars.

"It's been a three-year journey," she said of the play, which premiered in March 2014 and was on a national tour that concluded last week. "It's my passion project, and it's been a labor of love."

In it, Freelon plays an 80-year-old grandmother experiencing a disconnect with her teenage granddaughter, until their differences are reconciled at a backyard clothesline.

"It's really an inter-generational conversation. If you can imagine the granddaughter is online, but it's not the same line grandma's on," she explained. "Those conversations that used to take place at the clothesline — the stories, the sharing, the culture around women's work — is disappearing. Where do we find a place for rest? For conversation? For communing with each other and nature? It's really disappearing."

Aside from an appearance in August at the National Black Theatre Festival, the play will be on hiatus until next year, she said. "Clothesline" was well-received, with advice on shaping the play given at post-show talkback sessions.

"Any new work is kind of a work in progress until it settles," she said. "We learned a lot in those three months about what's working, what's not working so well, where the holes are. We got a lot of really great response."

Several audience members said they were surprised at the give-and-take between the two characters, Freelon said. "It's not just a one-way conversation of the elder speaking to the young," she said. "Grandma learns a little something about being online in that *other way*."

Prior to the "Clothesline" tour, Freelon was featured with Kirk Whalum, Take 6 and Clint Holmes in "Georgia on My Mind: Celebrating the Music of Ray Charles" at the Venetian Las Vegas hotel. Freelon said there are discussions about a tour of performing arts centers with the Ray Charles show, but "a lot of human beings have to be available at the same time."

She also has plans to record music from "Clothesline," and for an a capella project to which she hopes to recruit Take 6, Manhattan Transfer and other performers.

At the conclusion of her Quad-City tour next weekend, Freelon will perform with her trio for the first time this year.

"It's just a delight to move from that production, which I love, to this other world, which I also love. I get the best of both worlds," she said. "I'm thrilled, very excited. I miss those guys."

Freelon said she has thrived on the variety of her career.

"You have to be true to yourself and what really you feel you want to do at any given moment," she said. "There are very precious few people who are able to do the same thing for a very long career."