Retired science educator continues to teach as thespian

By ERICA GOFF
For the News-Miner

Floyd Sanford has long been fascinated with history and science, and the retired biology teacher considers Charles Darwin to be one of the most interesting, respectable and intelligent men to have lived. That interest and these feelings led him to create his own one-man show, "Darwin Remembers: Recollections of a Life's Journey," which he will perform in Fairbanks Sunday.

I know when I retired from teaching I would miss being around students and the process of education, and I've always been interested in theater as a vehicle for entertainment and education. Charles Darwin has always been my favorite scientist so I thought this was something I could do to keep my hand in education," Sanford said of writing and performing the show.

A grant from Iowa Humanities to research and write the play and eventually perform it around the country. His first performance was a Coe College in Iowa, where he taught biology prior to retirement. He's since done about 30 performances, and the one at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Davis Concert Hall will be the eighth show he's done this year.

"This has been a busy year because of the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth," he explained. "It's been such a wonderful opportunity for me because I love to travel and I've been able to travel all over the country Alaska is the farthest I've traveled so far and I'm excited. It is my first trip to Alaska."

Sanford said the play reveals "an elderly Darwin," who greets a group of guests — the audience — and shares stories of "the high points" of his life. It is set in 1881, the last year of his life, in Darwin's home, and Sanford spends about 70 minutes portraying Darwin. He recalls such things as the voyage he took around the world early in life that influenced much of his career. Darwin also realizes while speaking that his life was a voyage itself.

"He is remembering for the benefit of the audience the high points of his own personal life. It touches on important aspects of his science and the revolution it caused. It also touches on the hysteria it caused that exists even today," Sanford said.

"But I do hope to enlighten people about the man and his work," he added.

While Sanford's presentation is free and open to the public, it is one of the final events for the American Society of Mammologists annual meeting, in Fairbanks June 24-28. It is co-hosted by the UA Museum of the North and the Institute of Arctic Biology.

Not only is Sanford performing his Darwin show during the anniversary of Darwin's birth, he is also performing during the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's landmark work, "The Origin of Species," which explains the findings of Darwin's research into evolution. Sanford said he hopes to express "the significance of his work as a scientist" and reveal Darwin is "one of the hardest working and most prolific scientists the world has ever known." He also wants to present Darwin the person.

"He was also a fine and decent man. He was kind, he never said a hateful word about anyone even though his critics were throwing fire and brimstone at him," Sanford said. "He devoted himself to the science and didn't respond to that hatred. He was also a wonderful husband and a loving father. I want to let people know about that as well."

Sanford taught biology for 35 years and despite his retirement he is still doing research as a marine biologist — "I know it sounds weird, a marine biologist in Iowa," he joked. He travels around the Caribbean researching sponges and shrimp. He said portraying Darwin, who had such an eye-opening voyage as a young man and a respect of the journey of his life, has created a profound appreciation for his own travels.

For more information, contact UA Museum of the North Communications Coordinator Kerynn Fisher at 474-6941.

IF YOU GO

What: "Darwin Remembers: Recollections of a Life's Journey," a one-man show about Charles Darwin's life

When: 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: UAF Davis Concert Hall

Admission: Free