“There are many legends about me, very many!” – A Journey with Swiss-Argentinian writer Alfonsina Storni

By Maria Fink

Was Alfonsina Storni born at sea during a stormy night? Would she have preferred to be a man in a time and place where women were usually not regarded as independent and equal? Is it true that she killed herself by walking out into the ocean until she drowned? For varying reasons, all these questions have been negated by scholars who have studied Alfonsina Storni’s life and her writing. Yet, there are still many myths surrounding Alfonsina’s life. One of the ways to shed light on these legends is to come to an exciting event that celebrates this expressive and energetic woman and her life’s work here in Bloomington. Alfonsina deserves to be remembered, not just in Argentina – the country where she lived most of her life – but all around the world.

Born in Ticino, Switzerland in 1892, Alfonsina Storni, whom many people in Buenos Aires today simply remember as Alfonsina, emigrated to Argentina with her parents when she was four years old. In 1912 she moved to the capital Buenos Aires and soon made a living as a journalist writing for several newspapers. But that’s not all. Alfonsina wrote a myriad of haunting poems, plays for children and adults, and short stories. Moreover, she was a teacher and an acting coach. She raised a son by herself and was engaged with the feminist movement, fighting for gender equality in Buenos Aires in the early 1920s.

courageous, ingenious, and full of irony and wit, Alfonsina thought of herself as a “woman of the 20th century,” as she says in one of her poems. Her œuvre is regarded as a significant contribution to the Latin American avant-garde of the early 20th century. Together with women like Frida Kahlo and Virginia Woolf, Alfonsina is indisputably one of the most important female voices of her generation.

Alfonsina was critical of conventional ideas of marriage and a woman’s role in society and spoke up for tolerance in the 1930s when many other intellectuals refrained from taking a stance. Alfonsina was different, an anomaly of her time. Neither shy to speak her mind nor afraid to tackle the big questions of modernity, Alfonsina was critical of life in the metropolis and a society that was overwhelmed by questions of migration and identity.

In 1938, faced with the diagnosis of breast cancer, Alfonsina ended her life by jumping into the ocean from a breakwater. She was 46 years old. Her last poem “Voy a dormir” (“I’ll go to sleep”), which she had sent to her publisher before committing suicide, inspired poet Félix Luna to write the lyrics for the iconic song “Alfonsina y el Mar.” The song has been performed by Mercedes Sosa and Nana Mouskouri among others. Francisco Cortés-Álvarez, director of the Latin American ensemble at IU Jacobs School of Music, regards “Alfonsina y el Mar” as one of Latin America’s most important songs. Consequently, it will be given room during the performance at the Buskirk-Chumley.

Now, as important as this song was in keeping Alfonsina’s memory and the legend of her life alive, IU professor and filmmaker Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, who has been doing extensive work on Alfonsina, views this with a critical eye. She points out that as much as “Alfonsina y el
Mar” has aided Alfonsina’s “survival” throughout the years, the song ultimately robbed the poet of her poetic farewell. After Alfonsina’s death the city of Mar del Plata erected a monument in her honor and named a school and a library after her. A street in Buenos Aires, as well as numerous feminist magazines carry her name. There are biographies, documentaries and films based on her life and her face has even been featured on a postage stamp. Nevertheless, except for a memorial plaque attached to the wall of the house where she was born, Alfonsina has never received much attention in her home country of Switzerland.

Led by Keller and Cortés-Álvarez, a group of performers and musicians will pay tribute to Alfonsina by reviving her life and her profound writing from the ocean of lost memory. A special part of the evening will be the world premiere of Alfonsina’s new song, composed by Cortés-Álvarez himself. This time Alfonsina will be honored with a song that uses the words from her final poem “Voy a dormir,” allowing us to remember this extraordinary woman with an entirely new melody for a long time after the event.

During the multimedia event the audience will embark on a journey to Switzerland, Argentina, and Spain and discover Alfonsina’s trailblazing thoughts and tales in an evening of original compositions written by Cortés-Álvarez, bilingual readings in English and Spanish, and video installations. The video clips were produced by Keller and IU alumni Carter Ross who created an impressive montage of Alfonsina’s most inspiring texts, visuals and sound elements. Emily Mange, also an IU graduate, lent her voice to these unique videos.

Today, because of Keller’s work, Alfonsina’s poems, columns, autobiographical texts, interviews, essays and short stories are available in German. Alfonsina’s forthcoming biography will be published in May of this year. Unfortunately, up until now, her work is largely unavailable to an English-speaking audience, which is another reason why the event at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater is a unique opportunity to get acquainted with this prolific writer and fascinating person. As Alfonsina put it herself: “Vivo, viviré siempre y he vivido” (“I’m living, I will always live and I have lived”).

Un viaje con Alfonsina - A Journey with Alfonsina

Presented by:
Hildegard E. Keller & Francisco Cortés-Álvarez

When:
Thursday, March 31st, 8:00 p.m.

Where:
Buskirk-Chumley Theater

Tickets:
Available at bctboxoffice.com
Advance Student/Seniors: $4
Advance General Admission: $8
People from different stages of their careers and a variety of departments at IU come together to create this surely unforgettable event that is hoping to attract an audience from the IU community, the city of Bloomington and beyond. Support comes from the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, the Latin American Music Center at the Jacobs School of Music, the College Arts and Humanities Institute, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Vice President of International Affairs, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and the Department of Germanic Studies.