

# I, NAT LOVE:

## *The Story of Deadwood Dick*

**Art Form: Theatre**

**Style: Contemporary**

**Culture: African American**

### MEET THE ARTIST:

**Rochel Garner Coleman** is an actor, singer and storyteller whose career began at the age of nine. Singing professionally with the Berkshire Boys' Choir, he distinguished himself as a soloist performing with Pablo Casals and the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, MA. His first theatre experience was as a cast member in Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, a production which opened the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. and later traveled to Lincoln Center in New York City. At Indiana University and Colorado College, Rochel studied music and theatre, continuing professional studies at Trinity Repertory Conservatory in Providence, R.I. A talented and charismatic performer, Rochel created the historical portrait of black cowboy Nat Love, as well as other theatre pieces portraying the African American cadets known as the Tuskegee Airmen and the slain civil rights champion, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

*I, Nat Love: The Story of Deadwood Dick* is a one-man show which brings to life the story of a slave born in Tennessee who went West at the age of 15 to seek freedom and opportunity. Dressed in cowboy attire of the period, Rochel Coleman recreates this historical character in a series of stories based on Love's autobiography. Nat Love was one of the most prominent and trusted cowboys of his era. His stories of roping, riding, bronco-busting and cattle-driving illuminate the history of the western United States from a unique perspective. Throughout the performance, the audience has the opportunity to ask questions and converse with a man who became one of the legends of the old West.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Thousands of black men and women explored and settled the West as cowboys, hunters, trappers, mountain men, pony express riders, horse wranglers, cooks and trailblazers. Most were ex-slaves who had been freed after the Civil War and joined wagon trains, herded cattle or just headed west for adventure.

Nat Love was one such cowboy. He earned the name "Deadwood Dick" on July 4, 1876 by being the best cowboy in a competition which included roping, riding and shooting. The contest took place in Deadwood, S.D. and the crowd there gave him his nickname. Nat was a bronco buster, sharpshooter and chief brand reader, a distinguished position for a cowboy. In his day, Nat was friends with the likes of Billy the Kid, Bat Masterson and the James Brothers. He was also adopted by more than one Indian tribe. When the railroad expanded across the western ranges, long cattle drives became unnecessary. Nat Love left the range for the railroad and became a Pullman porter, a good job for black men at the time. In 1907 he wrote his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Nat Love, Better Known in Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick."*

Due to the hardships endured under slavery, men like Nat Love were ready for the rough life taming the West. His accomplishments helped pave the way for cowboys like himself to rise to distinction.

Another famous black cowboy of the time was Bill Pickett. Pickett was born in Texas and rode the ranges in South America, as well as in the United States. He became known as "The Dusky Demon." He could catch a steer by its horn and make it fall to the ground by twisting its neck and biting into its upper lip. This is called *bulldogging*. Pickett is credited with inventing the technique which is still used in rodeo events today, but without the biting. In 1907, he signed a contract with the famous 101 Ranch Wild West Show of Oklahoma and became internationally renowned for his rodeo performances. He appeared across the United States, Canada, Mexico and Argentina and in 1914 performed for King George and Queen Mary of England. He retired from the rodeo in 1916 and bought a ranch in Oklahoma where he lived until his death in 1932. In 1971 Bill Pickett became the first black cowboy admitted to the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Prior to the performance, did you know that black cowboys played an important part in the old West?
- Discuss some of the challenges Nat Love faced during his lifetime. What hardships did he endure? What dangers did he encounter?
- Do you think working as a cowboy was a good job for Nat Love? Why? Were black cowboys treated the same as white cowboys?
- If you had lived in the same time period as Nat Love, would you have wanted to be a cowboy or cowgirl? What aspects of a cowboy/cowgirl's life appeal to you? Describe them.
- How did the building of the railroads change life in the West? Are there still real cowboys working today?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - MATHEMATICS:

- Nat Love began his travels on foot. When he left the plantation, Nat walked 12 miles to Nashville. From Nashville, he walked to Dodge City, Kansas. Use a map to calculate how many miles Nat walked between those two cities. (Answer: 1,300 miles) How many miles total did he cover on foot? (Answer: 1,312 miles)
- Cowboy Nat drove a herd of cattle from near Phoenix, Arizona to Deadwood, South Dakota on a journey totaling 1,400 miles. The cattle drive took 60 days. How many miles per day did the cattle average? (Answer: between 23 - 24 miles per day)
- On a drive, the cowboys rode their horses from the front of the line to the back, herding the cows along for a total of 80 miles per day. How many miles did the cowboys' horses travel on the drive from near Phoenix, Arizona, to Deadwood, South Dakota? (Answer: 4,800 miles)

- Legend:
- ⦿ Artistic perception
  - ❖ Creative expression
  - ▶ Historical & cultural context
  - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
  - \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ▶ Review vocabulary terms related to cowboys, cattle drives and life in the old West:

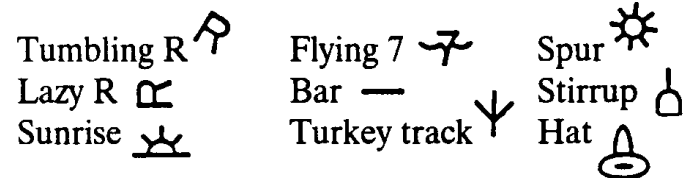
brand	cowpoke	rustler
bushwhacking	horn	spurs
chaps	lariat	tenderfoot
chuck wagon	prairie schooner	wrangler

- ▶ Study the role that buffalo soldiers played in the shaping of the American frontier. Buffalo soldiers belonged to black army units that served in the West and were commanded by white officers. They got their nickname from the Indians they fought who thought the soldiers' bravery and curly hair reminded them of the mighty buffalo.

- ⦿ Music was an important part of a cowboy's life on the trail. Singing helped pass the time in the saddle during the day and helped calm the cattle in the herd at night. Cowboy songs are a special genre of American folk music. Listen to and learn some classic songs:

"Whoopi Ti Yi Yo, Git Along Little Doggies"  
 "The Strawberry Roan"  
 "Red River Valley"  
 "Cielito Lindo"  
 "The Old Chisolm Trail"

- ❖ The Cowboy's Cryptic Alphabet was made up of letters, numbers and symbols used as brands for cattle. A brand identified cattle ownership, sometimes using a rancher's name or alluding to an aspect of life on the range. Have students design their own brands, using authentic brands as inspiration.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Love, Nat. *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*. Black Classic Press, Baltimore MD: 1988.

Pelz, Ruth. *Black Heroes of the Wild West*. Open Hand Publishing, Seattle, WA: 1990.

Cowboys on a drive advance in formation. While the trail boss rode ahead to scout for water and pasture, the cowhands rotated among the other positions.

