

Every week more than 2,000 people fill the Plymouth Playhouse in the Twin Cities' suburb for an afternoon or evening of laughter, sharing the lives of four women and their pastor in the church basement of the East Cornucopia Lutheran Church.

The play, *Church Basement Ladies*, pays homage to the stalwart women who cooked for and served every church congregation. And it strikes a chord with anyone who grew up in the 1950s and '60s across the Midwest, whether they be Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian—it was all part of their own experience.

Church Basement Ladies is based on the Scandinavian humor books of Janet Letnes Martin and Suzann (Johnson) Nelson, both 1968 Augsburg graduates. On stage the role of the church's matriarch, Mrs. Lars Snustad, is played by Janet Paone '83. For all three of them, their Augsburg experiences play big.

Martin and Nelson came to Augsburg in 1964 as freshmen, each attracted to

the big city and driven by the desire to escape a future as a farm wife. When they arrived, Augsburg was in the midst of great change, reflecting new college direction and leadership—the College had just merged into the American Lutheran Church after the demise of the Lutheran Free Church, and Oscar Anderson had just become president. Students were pushed to explore and understand the social and racial issues of the city around them, forever changing their worldviews.

Nelson aspired to be a home economics teacher, but by the end of her

“God knew that if there were going to be growing, self-sustaining, active Lutheran Churches in America, he would have to create a special species of people, so He created the Lutheran Church Basement Women.”

—*Growing Up Lutheran*,
Janet Letnes Martin and
Suzann (Johnson) Nelson, 1997

first semester had switched to political science, and then in her sophomore year to Scandinavian studies when the new major was announced. She studied Norwegian and was active in the Norwegian Club, which led to many opportunities, such as meeting the visiting King Olav V of Norway.

Both Martin and Nelson felt comfortable at Augsburg. They loved the big city around them, but appreciated the small-town comfort of the campus.

What they discovered was that small-town Scandinavian Lutheran life was the same everywhere. Nelson recalls the many nights she and classmates from small towns across the Upper Midwest sat around in Gerda Mortensen Hall and talked about their common backgrounds. “We all grew up the same way,” Martin confirms.

Students not from rural small towns were commuter students, and Nelson remembers stunning her city roommates by talking about eating cream on bread. So much so that she and others went shopping and demonstrated how it was made and eaten.

Paone arrived at Augsburg 15 years later. By then Augsburg was less

THOSE Lutheran ladies

BY BETSEY NORGARD



Top: Janet Letnes Martin '68 began writing down her experiences growing up in rural North Dakota and calls herself a "Norwegian-Lutheran farm girl humorist."

Bottom: From *The Augsburgian*, 1968.



Suzann (Johnson) Nelson '68 used her Scandinavian studies to inspire the characters of rural Norwegian Minnesota in her books.

Bottom: From *The Augsburgian*, 1968.



Janet Paone '83 has made a career in acting and voiceover work, and brings her Augsburg experience to the stage in *Church Basement Ladies*

Bottom: From *The Augsburgian*, 1981.

obviously Norwegian Lutheran and far more diverse, but it was because of the Lutheran church that Paone chose it. Her mother was Lutheran and her father was Catholic. She was raised in Abiding Savior Lutheran Church, but within her family she felt the stigma of being the child of a parent who "turned," i.e., married outside the Lutheran faith. She feels her father's family never really accepted her Lutheran mother.

After applying to music schools in New York, she decided to stay home for college and chose Augsburg because she had always respected and enjoyed the Augsburg students who were counselors at Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Bible Camp. She had also considered the ministry, but she ended up in the theatre program.

"There was definitely a Norwegian Lutheran influence at Augsburg," Paone says. "There was a Scandinavian studies major, and most people's names ended in -son, -sen, -gard, or -dal." She also remembers the aesthetic influence of the "good" dinnerware with Scandinavian design used for special dinners.

Martin and Nelson graduated in 1968, but neither returned to her small town. On a Norwegian Club trip to Decorah, Iowa, Nelson had met Ronald E. Nelson '67; in March 1967 they were married in Mindekirken, the Norwegian Lutheran Memorial Church in Minneapolis. She studied Scandinavian literature in graduate school and for 10 summers directed Skogfjorden, the Norwegian Language Village.

Martin married shortly after college and began raising a family. More than a decade later, in 1983, while helping her mother-in-law research family history, she became frustrated at not finding much information about life in rural communities and decided to begin writing down what it was like growing up. Together with Allen Todnem '64, also an Augsburg graduate, she co-authored *Cream and Bread*, and then *Second Helpings of Cream and Bread*.

Martin and Nelson remained close friends. In 1994, on a whim, Martin suggested that Nelson should write a book with her, and Nelson quit her job the same day.

Sitting around the kitchen table in their flannel nightgowns enjoying

REMEMBERING those Lutheran ladies

BY DAVE WOOD



Dave Wood is a past vice-president of the National Book Critics Circle and former book review editor of the Minneapolis Star Tribune. He taught English and journalism at Augsburg from 1969 to 1981.

IT WAS THE MID-1980S. I had recently been appointed book review editor of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* after a lengthy stint as English teacher at Augsburg and feature writer for the old *Tribune*.

"Dave," said the receptionist, "There's an author out here in the lobby who wants to see you."

Wow. My first author. Who would it be? I trotted down to the lobby to discover a woman who looked like a pert middle-aged housewife from Hastings, Minn., which, in fact, she was.

"Hi," she said, thrusting an enormous layer cake into my paws. "I'm Janet Martin. I went to Augsburg back in the '60s. I've written a book and if you'll review it the cake is yours."

Looking back, I sincerely hope I wasn't too condescending when I explained to Janet Letnes Martin that *Star Tribune* policy prohibited my taking gifts, blah blah blah.

"OK," she said, unflappable. "I'll take back the cake. You take the book."

So there I was with Janet Letnes Martin's first literary effort, *Cream on Bread*. I gave it a whirl. It was wonderful. As a minor ethnician of the times, I had read lots of this stuff, like Howard Mohr's work, and I think I knew what was good. Janet Martin's was excellent. No cheap shots. There were no big yuks in *Cream on Bread*, just lots of little ones. That's because Janet Martin was smart enough to know that there aren't a lot of big yuks in Lutherandom, but lots and lots of little ones. That's why she became one of Lutheran humor's most honest purveyors.

Was I surprised? Yes. But I shouldn't have been. I had taught for 10 years at Augsburg, not too many years after she had graduated. I had taught at four other schools before my arrival there and was continually surprised at the little college's vitality and intellectuality. Sure, there was a streak of inferiority feeling running through the student body. The University of Minnesota students across Riverside Ave. called Augsburg "God's Little Acre." We had great music, science, art, and poetry, but the steam heat system in Old Main on a cold day sounded like the last 15 minutes before the H.M.S. Titanic went down. Nevertheless we had great

poetry readings, students went off to good graduate schools.

Best, we all had lots of fun, parked right in the middle of a seedy old section of Minneapolis.

But back to Janet Letnes Martin. Her first book was a success followed by many more, including one of my favorites, which involved Hastings housewife/detective

Shirley Holmquist, a direct steal from Arthur Conan Doyle. In 1994, her Auggie classmate, Suzann Nelson of Grand Rapids, Minn., joined her and their books tumbled out, books like their monumental theological tract about Lutherans and Roman Catholics entitled *They Glorified Mary ... We Glorified Rice*. They also performed two-woman shows, filling church basements across the Midwest.

Ever since the Martin/Nelson success, I've been a bit jealous. I've tried my hand with ethnic humor. Like Martin and Nelson I grew up in a little Norwegian Lutheran town. But my stuff never lit any fires. Why did theirs?

I've come to think that Augsburg College had a lot to do with it. Augsburg was traditionally on the outer fringe of the Lutheran establishment. Its supporting synod, the Lutheran Free Church, was always suspicious of clericalism, authority, big shots. An immigrant church, it had to survive by its wits. (Janet Letnes Martin, you see, didn't actually think her layer cake would persuade me to review her book. It was just a way of tweaking my self-satisfaction, cutting me and the *Star Tribune* down to size.) And so the two pious girls from small farm towns came to God's Little Acre in the heart of the Sinful City and found out one could love one's church and have some fun with it, too.

I look back more than a quarter century at the students like Martin and Nelson and wonder at their successes, many of which have just a bit of orneriness in common. It's a wonderful tradition and the women who made church basements famous are definitely part of it.

And so now the girls are moving out onto the national scene. Martin and Nelson are no longer girls, but I can't help thinking of them in that way, for their girlish glee and for poking a little fun at the basements where they both spent hundreds of hours learning that certain concepts were "most certainly true."

I have only one bit of advice and that's for Janet Letnes Martin. If and when you get to New York City, don't bring a layer cake to the offices of the *New York Times Book Review*.

The editor won't get it.

copious amounts of both coffee and laughter, the two women began to capture recollections and memories as they spilled out. Nelson has said that it's her job to jog people's memories and their job to laugh. Their intention is never to make fun of anyone or anything. "There's a fine line between making fun of something and having fun with it," Martin told an interviewer. "Hopefully we'll never cross it."

Three books came within the first six months. So far, they've written nine books together, the most popular being *Growing Up Lutheran: What Does This Mean?*, which won a Minnesota Book Award for humor.

Requests for speaking engagements also started coming, and for several years Martin and Nelson crisscrossed each others' paths as they spoke to church groups, women's groups, and local organizations. Then they devised a comedy routine and began appearing together as "Those Lutheran Ladies"—nothing more than sharing their own backgrounds.

An idea for a play came about when TroupeAmerica's president and executive producer-director, Curt Wollan, hired Those Lutheran Ladies to perform for three weeks at the Medora Musical in North Dakota. Wollan invited a playwright-couple, Jim Stowell and Jessica Zuehlke, to pen the script.

Wollan, who had grown up as

"Lutherans attending a Lutheran college in the '50s and '60s did not have to prepare themselves for any big culture shock. Some of them even shared the same last name—but were not related."

—*Growing Up Lutheran*,
Janet Letnes Martin and
Suzann (Johnson) Nelson, 1997

president of his Luther League and the son of a dedicated church basement lady, encouraged Paone to take the part of matronly Vivian Snustad, the unequivocal and uncompromising queen of the church basement ladies in his fictional East Cornucopia Lutheran Church.

Paone, a veteran character actress seen in *Tony 'n Tina's Wedding*, pushed for revisions to the script through a workshop process in order to engage Mrs. Snustad more with the audience. This character is a curmudgeon, but works through her issues and begins to understand why things must eventually change—beginning with her consternation over the hymnals changing from black to red.

Church Basement Ladies previewed at several locations before settling into its long run at the Plymouth Playhouse. Paone recalls opening in Fargo, where

the cast was extremely nervous about how it would go over. Once the audience started laughing and didn't stop, Paone remembers the "neat moment" between acts when the cast suddenly realized that "this thing is going to be huge."

Audiences react differently to the play, Paone says, and she can tell by what they laugh at whether the crowd (often comprised of large church groups) is Lutheran or Catholic. And, if they react most vividly to the physical comedy aspect, they probably aren't church-connected at all.

Even if someone is not well versed in the ways of Martin Luther, she says, the play is still very accessible. "It's about a [small] country church ... it's the social center, with many different layers."

Paone would love to pull more material from Martin and Nelson's books for the stage, and Martin and Nelson would love to have the current actors stay involved with the East Cornucopia Lutheran Church.

What's next for Those Lutheran Ladies? When asked about it, Martin quickly replies, "Oh, ya, there's lots more in it." When they get together and start laughing, she says, "We just run with it ... and sometimes we just blurt out the same thing."

And, to quote Martin Luther and the church basement ladies, "This is most certainly true." ■

"If Scandinavian Lutherans could add one more feast day to the church calendar, it would be the feast of fish and flatbread ... Unlike the Catholics who had to eat fish every Friday, Scandinavian Lutherans were only morally obligated to eat it once a year, and that was at the annual *Lutefisk* supper."

—*Growing Up Lutheran*,
Janet Letnes Martin and
Suzann (Johnson) Nelson, 1997

CHURCH Basement Ladies

—you bet it's a big hit!



Troupe America, Inc.

The cast of *Church Basement Ladies* (L to R): Janet Paone '83 (Mrs. Lars Snustad—Vivian), Greta Grosch (Mrs. Gilmer Gilmerson—Mavis), Tim Drake (Pastor E. L. Gunderson), Dorian Chalmers (Mrs. Elroy Engelson-Karin) and Ruthie Baker (Signe Engelson—Karin's daughter).

BY ANY MEASURE, *Church Basement Ladies* is a monster hit. It has been running for more than 35 weeks at Plymouth Playhouse (scheduled through the end of 2006) at 101% occupancy. It now has a double cast and offers 10 or 11 shows per week.

Curt Wollan, producer and director, found inspiration for the play in his own mother. After she died, Wollan was asked if the gift she left the church could be used for their greatest need, a new stove for the kitchen. He agreed, and it was named Lorraine in her honor, a seemingly fitting legacy.

"We're honoring people who are never honored ... and who are under-appreciated," says Wollan. "The play has been hugely popular with women who have worked in church basements, and with their daughters and granddaughters, who are remembering mom and grandmother."

He remembers being a Luther Leaguer in his own church when they'd sing, "Come out, dear ladies, come out, come out" so the women could be recognized, and they were always bashful about it. "They were the unsung heroes of the church—they kept it clean and fed, and the coffee going."

He says the play is universal—it doesn't matter where or what church you're in—every church has its basement ladies. The show just happens to be Norwegian Lutheran because it's based on Nelson and Martin's book, *Growing Up Lutheran*.

The play is important, he says, because this part of church life is dying. "As women have started to work, there are fewer basement ladies and there is more catering," says Wollan. "This

celebrates the past and its heritage."

Church Basement Ladies is preparing to embark on a nine-state, 50-city tour from January-March 2007, in mostly small towns throughout the Upper Midwest, but reaching as far as New Mexico, Colorado, and Montana. Then, they'll wait a year and tour bigger cities.

Already underway are plans for a second cast to begin production in Chicago. New York is pending, and there has been interest in an off-Broadway venue where it would play in a real Lutheran church basement.

Norwegian Lutheran food is central to the play. One of Wollan's favorite lines is "Lutefisk and lefse are directly descended from the five loaves and two fishes at the Sea of Galilee, and have since lost their color."

The music and lyrics were written by Drew Jansen; here are two samples:

From "Closer to Heaven"—"You're closer to heaven in the church basement, Where we do the Good Lord's work. Everywhere you look you see spectacular sights; 40 kinds of food to feed some fierce appetites; Nearly new linoleum and fluorescent lights, managed by a stalwart squad. Here below the house of God."

From "Dead Spread"[term for the spreads served on sandwiches following a funeral]—"Dead spread, a splendid affair, to celebrate someone who's no longer there; dead spread, a wonderful thing, what sweet consolation a hotdish can bring."

For more information, go to <www.plymouthplayhouse.com>.