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from archives: News:

### Take two scoops of hotdish, hold the Jello and prepare for a hit

By Sally Thompson\Sun Newspapers  
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Janet Paone portrays Mrs. Lars Snustad in the Plymouth Playhouse production of "Church Basement Ladies" which opened Sept. 8. Photo by Craig Lassig/Sun Newspapers.

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Troupe America's Executive Producer Curt Wollan was helping his sister and brother-in-law move into their new home in Sartell, Minn., when they started talking about the former homeowner's sister, author Janet Letnes Martin.

Considering the success of "How to Talk Minnesotan, The Musical," based on a book by Howard Mohr, Wollan's family suggested he might take a look at the books of Martin and Suzann Nelson, who took their rural Norwegian Lutheran backgrounds and used them as the basis for warm humor in a number of popular books.

Wollan thought it was a good idea. He'd thought about it a few years earlier, but the concept of turning "Growing Up Lutheran" into a musical comedy hadn't reached fruition. Yet.

In fact, it took seven years to get "Church Basement Ladies," based on Martin and Nelson's Minnesota Book Award-winning book, to the stage. The show opened in a series of regional performances and workshops last February, hitting the stages of the Reif Center in Grand Rapids, Minn., The Historic Fargo Theater in Fargo, N.D., the Belle Meyhus Theater in Bismarck, N.D., and the Paramount Theater in St. Cloud, according to the news release.

The show opened Sept. 8 at the Plymouth Playhouse, where it is scheduled for an open-ended run, the news release said.

"We're really excited about it," Wollan said. "Right now 299 groups have bought tickets - that's 200 more than when 'How To Talk Minnesotan' opened. It's unprecedented."

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Working with Letnes and Martin, writers Jim Stowell and Jessica Zuehlke of Minneapolis put together the script. Drew Jansen of Golden Valley, who also wrote the music for "How To Talk Minnesotan," created the music and lyrics for all the songs in "Church Basement Ladies," the news release said.

Seven years ago Jansen wrote the first songs for the production, but by the time it metamorphosed into today's version, only one of the original songs, "Closer to Heaven in the Church Basement," still worked.

"I had to go back all over and start from scratch," he said.

But writing songs is something Jansen loves. Starting with a line or a couplet, the lyrics come first, followed by the music, Jansen said.

Once the actors were chosen, several of the songs were tailored especially for their voices, he said.

"I've had so much fun writing for this show," he said. "I've never worked with a cast so strong vocally."

Not only was writing the music fun, but watching people react to it was another thrill. Jansen said he attended some of the out-of-town performances and was pleased to see people laughing and enjoying themselves.

"That made my heart feel good," he said.

Cast members include Tim Drake as the pastor, Kyle Nelson as the church organist, and Janet Paone, Greta Grosch, Dorian Chalmers and Ruthie Baker as the church basement women, the news release said.

Like "How To Talk Minnesotan," "Church Basement Ladies" focuses on small town, rural themes, giving audience members the ability to feel as if they "know" the characters on the stage, Wollan said.

The church itself is non-denominational; it could be the basement of any church, anywhere. The show honors hard-working individuals who keep an organization going, he said.

"These women are the rocks, the foundation, the steel magnolias of the church," Wollan said. "My mother was a church basement lady."

Tickets for "Church Basement Ladies" are available from the Plymouth Playhouse, 2705 Annapolis Lane, Plymouth, by calling 763-553-1600.



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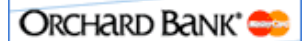

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