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Isn't that special?



Bruce Bisping, Star Tribune

Curt Wollan, artistic director of Troupe America.

Troupe America's prayers were answered with "Church Basement Ladies," and now producer Curt Wollan is staging the sequel.

By [GRAYDON ROYCE](#), Star Tribune

Last update: December 21, 2007 - 2:07 PM

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CHURCH BASEMENT LADIES

Who: By Jim Stowell and Jessica Zuehlke, based on books by Janice Letnes Martin and Suzann Nelson. Music and lyrics by Drew Jansen. Directed by Curt Wollan.

When: 8 p.m. Wed.-Sat. , 2 & 6 p.m. next Sun. Ends March 2.

Where: Plymouth Playhouse, in the Kelly Best Western, I-494 and Hwy. 55, Plymouth.

Tickets: \$22-\$35. 763-553-1600 .

Web: www.troupeamerica.com.

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If it truly is darkest before the dawn, then dawn came September 2005 for Curt Wollan. After tumbling through the depths of a play about bingo that may have been the worst thing ever staged at Plymouth Playhouse, the artistic director for Troupe America resurrected his golden touch with the help of four Lutherans known as "Church Basement Ladies."

Based on the book "Growing Up Lutheran," "Ladies" has played to more than 200,000 Twin Citians at Plymouth and has packed in crowds on several out-of-state ventures. William Christopher (Father Mulcahy on TV's "M*A*S*H") headlined a sold-out production last fall in suburban Kansas City. "Ladies" has sold out in one-nighters in 56 cities as far away as New Mexico and on an Indian reservation in Colorado. In fact, the only place the Ladies haven't been a hit was a nine-week run in Nashville.

"That town is all about country music and drinking," said Wollan.

Revenues pushed past \$4.7 million as of Monday, and Wollan expects the show will surpass "How to Talk Minnesotan" as the biggest success in Troupe America's history. So, as all great producers do, he's closing the show March 2 to make way for the sequel. "Church Basement Ladies II: A Second Helping" opens March 8. Composers Drew Jansen and Dennis Curley contributed music, and actor Greta Grosch, one of the original cast members, wrote the script. More than 200 groups have already booked tickets.

"'Church Basement Ladies' saved the Plymouth Playhouse," said Wollan, who last month marked his 20th anniversary at the helm of Troupe America. "I don't know where we'd be without it."

Budget reached \$3.5 million

Wollan launched his organization in November 1987 with two national tours, "1940's Radio Hour" and "Mr. Pickwick's Christmas." The following fall, he started producing at Plymouth Playhouse with the Twin Cities premiere of "Nonsense." Troupe America has programmed the suburban playhouse ever since and has built its tour business with productions featuring Gavin MacLeod, Dick Van Patten, Frank Gorshin, Mackenzie Phillips and Jamie Farr, among others. For 11 years, Wollan has sent out a "Christmas Carol" tour, using an adaptation by playwright Buffy Sedlachek.

Troupe America is something of a throwback, with a suite of small offices in the Hennepin Center for the Arts that has the feel of a small New York booking agency. With an annual budget of \$3.5 million, it employs about 125 actors and technicians on its shows.

The business has always been volatile, but Wollan rode the peaks and valleys pretty well until the middle part of this decade. A new iteration of "How to Talk Minnesotan" did well enough in 2004. (Over 10 years, four versions of this show have grossed about \$7 million.) But a reprise of "The Lovely Leibowitz Sisters" lost money; "Guys on Ice" failed to deliver, and "Queen of Bingo," which opened in April 2005, was an unqualified disaster.

Enter the "Church Basement Ladies."

Jansen wrote music for the show, which was scripted by Jim Stowell and Jessica Zuehlke and based on the book by Janet Letnes Martin and Suzann Nelson. Troupe America recouped its investment in the show after only six weeks, and paid off a debt of a quarter million dollars in four months.


The times, they changed

Wollan said the sequel gently nudges its icons of the Greatest Generation forward in time to grapple with the Generation Gap.

"It starts in the spring of 1969 and it chronicles how women are changing with the era," he said.

For those who weren't alive at the time, the cataclysm of war, rock 'n' roll, civil unrest and feminist expression created a perfect vortex that challenged all authority figures -- certainly the church. While Time magazine asked the question on its cover, "Is God Dead?" some congregations welcomed guitars into the worship service. *Guitars!*

"That was a big deal for Lutherans," said Wollan, who saw his first hippies during a Lutheran conference for teens in Seattle in 1969.

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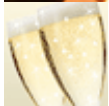
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