



Actors perform in "Shanghaied in Astoria" during a performance for sponsors July 6. About 250 local businesses and individual donors have backed the Opry Company over the years.

the problem, try again."

Seemingly nothing could deter her — even a lack of ticket sales. A decade in to the performance of "Shanghaied," audiences seemed to be drying up.

"I would call the women's shelter and ask if there were any families who wanted to see the show for free," Niland remembers. "I didn't want the cast to see an empty room. And this was the 10th year — it takes time."

"We tried everything," Niland says of the search for audiences, "dinner theater, serious plays. Somewhere along the line it became clear that we were really good at melodrama — it was great for amateur and professional actors, and it was great for the barbary coast fishing town style that we live in."

Around 20 years in, Niland began directing. She wrote "Scrooged in Astoria" and "The Real Story of Lewis and Clark," two of the Company's three repeating annual productions. Eschewing the spotlight, she has acted sparingly, only out of necessity. And while it may seem hard to believe, Niland maintains she's less-interested in theater as an art form than for the inclusive, safe space

and nurturing community it provides.

"I really don't like theater that much," Niland says. "And I'm sorry to all my friends out there. I like the process of why people get involved in theater, how it helps them grow, how it helps them grow more confident. I love watching that, seeing someone who feels they're not capable of saying a line and eventually taking a lead role."

"I provided a playground



For "Shanghaied in Astoria," dubbed a celebration of Astoria's Scandinavian heritage, 26 parts are open for actors, and each part is triple cast, so about 70 actors participate each summer.

for that personality to grow and become a better person," she continues. "All I did was provide a playground. I made sure the door was open, so they could keep doing it. I'm at the point now where some-

one else has to keep that door open."

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"The Opry Company came into my life when I needed an outlet," says Markus Brown. "I needed to help an organization.

'SHANGHAIED IN ASTORIA'

7 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, July 7 to Sept. 10

2 p.m. Sunday, July 24, Aug. 14 and Sept. 4
Astor Street Opry Company Playhouse
129 W. Bond St., Astoria
\$13 to \$21



This summer sees the 32nd annual production of "Shanghaied in Astoria" at the Astor Street Opry Company Playhouse in Astoria.



Over the past three decades, the Opry Company has grown to the point where 500 to 600 people participate each year by acting on stage or helping behind the scenes.

What they needed complimented my skill set, and what I got in return complimented what I needed. It was kind of a perfect synergy."

Brown came aboard around the turn of the century. He began with a bit of acting, and then lent his carpentry skills, assisting Niland with set construction.

In the role of Production Chair, and a member of the Board, Brown is one of many who will come together to help fill the void Niland will leave. He admits, readily, that she will be impossible to replace — even by committee.

"I'm heavily involved and have been heavily involved with other theater groups in the area," Brown says, "and nobody has been like Judith Niland. She's something else."

"I don't believe people in the community understand the level of dedication and the amount of work that Judith has had in her 30-year career in the Astoria Opry Company," Brown says.

While Niland is irreplaceable, Brown and the rest of the Opry Company family and organization are confident in moving forward. Sad as they are to lose Niland, they don't feel like the sky is falling.

"It's just changing," Brown says. "Now is a time of evolution for the Astor

Street Opry Company. We've gone through periods of turmoil, and this is not like that. It's time to diversify and expand our board and committees so we can meet our mission statement and commitment to the community."

For her part, Niland is content to step away quietly. She has forbidden the cast and crew from throwing any public party.

"I don't want anything to happen," she says. "It's embarrassing. I might throw my own retirement party. That was compromise — in my own backyard."

In leaving, Niland hopes to spend more time with family, and to free herself to take on the next artistic challenge, whatever it may be. "I like that idea that I still have a good 30 years left in me, and I like the idea that I can do something different," she says.

"You either keep growing or you die," Niland adds. "I just kind of reached that point. I pretty much have taken [The Opry] as far as my abilities and what I'm inclined to do."

As for the company's continuing, Niland looks toward a new generation.

"People love theater," she says. "That's why it's been going on since the beginning of man. There's a lot of people that it enhances their lives, and they're the ones who need to keep it going."