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Alyssa Evans
aevans@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK



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A historic glimpse at the 'Love & Politics' cast.

FROM THE ATTIC OF SUOMI HALL

Local residents find long-lost Finnish play

By RAY GARCIA
For The Astorian

It's not every day that the Astor Street Opry Company gets to perform a long-lost historical play.

But thanks to a recent finding of a variety of Finnish plays, local residents can watch a modern rendition of a 115-year-old play. The Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival and the opry company have partnered to offer a virtual showing of "Love & Politics," written by Finnish playwright A.T.

The one-act play was published in 1906 in Hämeenlinna, Finland. The show centers on widower Mr. Ketonen as he pushes his daughter, Hilda, to marry his best friend, Mr. Petola. However, Hilda is in love with Einar Salmela, a local Socialist leader whom her father despises because of his political ideology.

Despite the title and conflict of the play, the show is not political in nature, said Michael Desmond, operations manager for the opry company.

"(Salmela) could be a jazz singer. He could be a clown. He could be a baker. He could be anything that the father didn't really care for," Desmond said. "That's just the foil for the father to not like the daughter's choice of suitor ... In fact, the whole point of the play is that love and politics don't mix, so just because you don't like what party somebody belongs to, it doesn't mean you shouldn't let him marry your daughter."

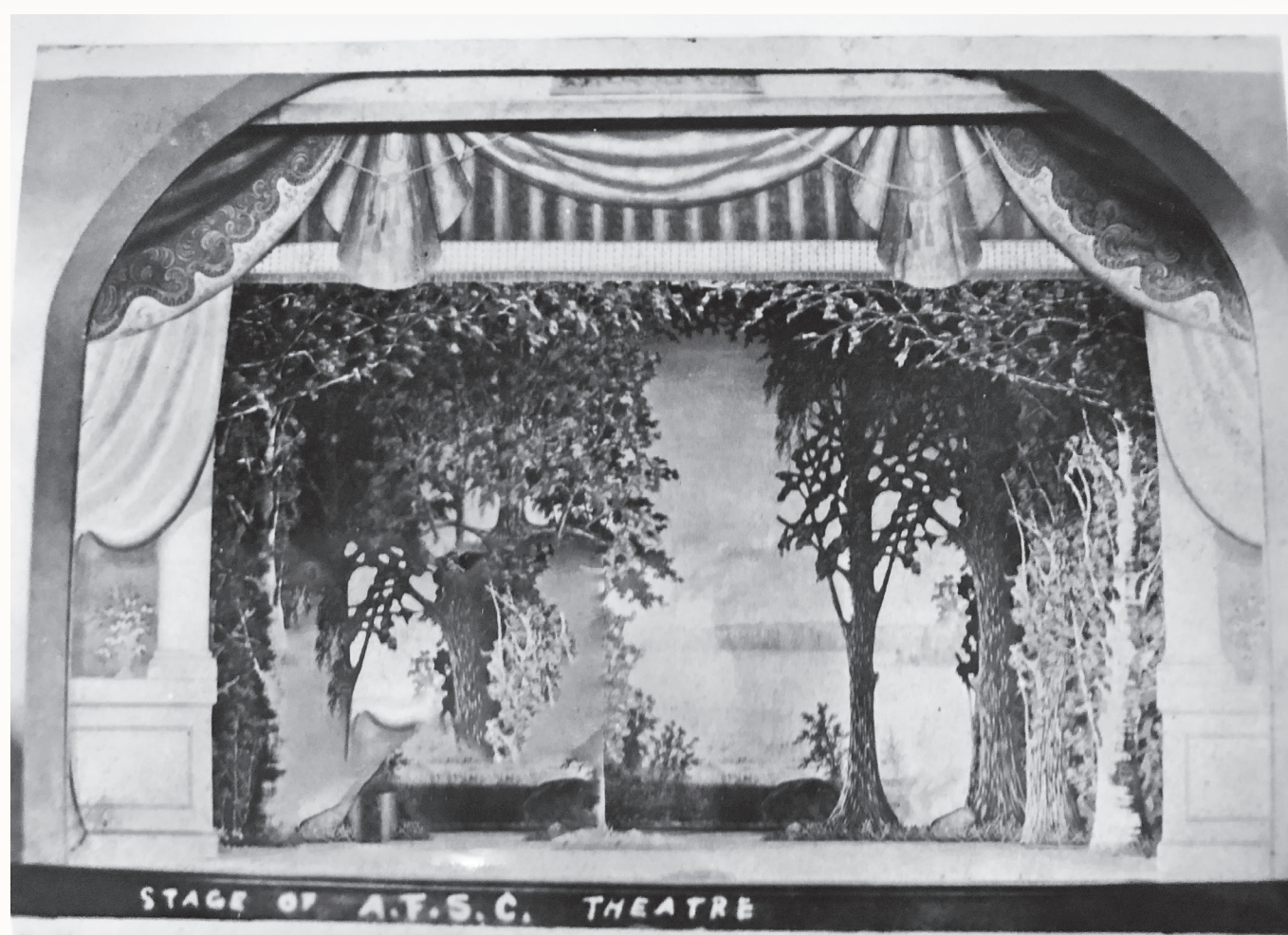
A recording of the play is available for viewing on the opry company's YouTube channel until Wednesday.

Discovering the script

The Astoria Finnish Socialist Club building was completed in 1910. The club building stood four stories tall with a theater run by a professional stage director from Helsinki.

When the club burned down in 1923, the actors from the theater began performing at the stage owned by the Finnish Brotherhood. After all those years, the scripts produced on the Finnish Brotherhood's stage were stored in the attic of Suomi Hall, which is where "Love & Politics" was found.

Janet Bowler, the entertainment coordinator for the Astoria Scandi-



Astor Street Opry Company

A snapshot of the Astoria Finnish Socialist Club's theater stage.

'WE KNOW WE'RE AT A TURNING POINT BETWEEN GENERATIONS. IT WAS IMPORTANT TO US TO MAINTAIN THIS HERITAGE NOW, SO WE CAN PASS IT ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION.'

Janet Bowler | entertainment coordinator for the Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival

navian Midsummer Festival, said for years she heard there were scripts kept in the attic of Suomi Hall. After speaking with Karen Van Cleave of the Finnish Brotherhood, Bowler soon found herself holding a shopping bag filled with about 19 scripts.

"I'm Norwegian, I don't speak Finnish," Bowler said. "So I asked Sirpa Duoos to browse through them and see if she thought any were appropriate for reader's theater ... We usually have a reader's theater performance as part of the (Scandinavian festival)."

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Duoos acted as chair of the festival's

Parade of Native Wear. The festival paid Duoos to translate the play from Finnish, then paid the opry company to produce the piece, using a grant from the Clatsop County Cultural Coalition and the Oregon Cultural Trust. Director Chris Lynn Taylor modified the script for reader's theater.

Honoring Nordic Heritage

Over one-third of Astoria's population identified as Scandinavian in the early 20th century, according to the festival. The Nordic community helped set the tone for the town during its early beginnings, Bowler said.

"We produce the festival to maintain our heritage," she said.

As part of the festival, the reader's theater event usually aims to both entertain and inform, Bowler said. In the case of "Love & Politics," its discovery and production stands as a testament to the Nordic communities that settled in Astoria.

In tandem to her role as entertainment coordinator, Bowler is also vice chair of the Astoria Nordic Heritage Park Committee, which is planning to begin park construction this fall. The park will not only commemorate the community's Nordic heritage, Bowler said, but will also honor the immigrant tradition to recognize those who've moved to Astoria for a better future.

"We know we're at a turning point between generations," Bowler said. "It was important to us to maintain this heritage now, so we can pass it on to the next generation."

Ray Garcia is a contributor to The Astorian and Coast Weekend.



Astor Street Opry Company

The cast for 'Love & Politics'