

FROM THE WINGS, A FINAL BOW

Behind-the-scenes powerhouse Judith Niland retires from helming the Astor Street Opry Company

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The numbers go something like this:

31 years.
3,000 actors.
1,500 performances.
120,000 tickets.

This is the legacy of Judith Niland, the indefatigable, do-everything impresario of the Astor Street Opry Company, who is stepping away on opening night of the 32nd annual production of “Shanghaied in Astoria.”

But statistics hardly capture the totality of Niland’s impact.

“Judith Niland has been one of my most dearest friends of my entire life,” says Markus Brown, who got involved with the Opry Company some 15 years ago. “She’s like walking, talking magic. She has given people second and third and fourth and fifth tries to redeem themselves. It can’t even be said, everything she’s done.”

“All the actors, we’re all friends,” Brown adds. “And we all have the same opinion of Judith: She’s a saint. She’s an unsung soldier in the community.”

“The first memory I have is meeting [Opry Company founder] Dr. Dell Corbet at a bar with some friends,” Niland says. “He tried to get me and my husband into theater, and we both jumped in with both feet.”



Judith Niland is retiring this summer from the Astor Street Opry Company after over 30 years of involvement with the theater. In the course of her time with the Opry Company, she has built sets and run lighting booths, wrote scripts, directed, recruited volunteers, sought sponsorships, directed marketing, production, concessions and more.

“It seemed fun,” Niland says, “like something to do.”

She began in costuming, sewing spats — shoe covers.

“I watched my spats dance around,” Niland remembers. “The feet were at eye level. I was like:

‘I did that! I did those spats!’ Then I was hooked. Then I wanted to do it all. I

wanted to make sets. I wanted to see if we could make the business work better.”

And, indeed, Niland truly did it all.

To create a performance space, she cleared waist-high rubble from lobby of the then-dilapidated Astor Hotel. She built sets, lighting booths, wrote scripts,



Formed in 1984, the Astor Street Opry Company moved locations several times before settling into the old Roy’s Maytag building at 129 W. Bond St. The nonprofit organization has grown from one production of its flagship “Shanghaied in Astoria” musical each year to three original musical melodramas, children’s and teen theater, live stage dramas, comedies and other events.

directed, recruited volunteers, sought sponsorships, directed marketing, production, concessions and so on.

“I pretty much have done every theater job,” Niland says. “My attitude was: I couldn’t ask someone to do something I wouldn’t do myself. I needed to know how much was being asked of the volunteers.”

It wasn’t so much the art, though, that first attracted Niland.

“I was more interested in the management than I was in the acting for a long time,” she says. “Business management was more interesting to me. It was a nice combination of art and management. I enjoyed that.”

And as a nonprofit, working with an all-volunteer cast and crew, there

was plenty of business to keep up with. For years, the Astor Street Opry Company struggled to find a permanent home. From the Astor

Hotel, the theater group moved to the Eagles Hall, where Niland had to build a bathroom and stairwell, to the Banker’s Suite building, tried out a church, moved to the Finnish Meat Market before finally settling in the former Roy’s Maytag Home Appliance building, the company’s current home.

“I’m born with resiliency,” says Niland, “and that’s what it is, really. I never took to school. I never took to the normal education system. I never was good at being tested. What I’m really good at is learning from my mistakes — eliminate

‘NOBODY HAS BEEN LIKE JUDITH NILAND. SHE’S SOMETHING ELSE!’