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Theatergoers know the ladies can cook, and they're welcome to seconds

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If you're not one of the 200,000 people who have seen "Church Basement Ladies," you'd better get your tickets. The folks at Plymouth Playhouse say they'll close the phenomenally popular show on March 2, 2008.

Why would director/producer Curt Wollan pull the plug on a show that has been playing to an average 92 percent of capacity since it opened in September 2005?

Why, to make way for the sequel, of course.

"Church Basement Ladies II: A Second Helping" is scheduled to open March 8, and Wollan can only hope the second installment will prove as successful as the first.

"The title alone sold tickets," said Wollan, who's celebrating his 20th anniversary as the founder of Troupe America, which produces at Plymouth Playhouse and tours other shows to small and midsize cities across the country. "Everyone has one of these women in their lives. The church clubs and bank groups and the tour operators all just ate it up. I think we've done more than 3,000 groups for

this show."

That group-sales business is bread and butter for a theater like Plymouth Playhouse. It's also the reason to close down the current installment, which has slowed its pace from a torrid 10 performances a week to a more standard eight-shows-a-week routine: Though the original show continues to sell well, big-order ticket buyers are clamoring to see what happens next to Mrs. Snustad, Mrs. Gilmerson, Mrs. Engelson and her daughter, Signe.

Based on the popular "Growing Up Lutheran" books by Minnesota authors Janet Letnes Martin and Suzann Nelson, "Church Basement Ladies" is set during 1964 in the fictional town of East Cornucopia, Minn. The story follows the quartet of women of different ages and their pastor as they take - and bake - their church community through weddings, funerals and holidays.

Greta Grosch, who originated the role of menopausal farm wife and jill-of-all-trades Mavis Gilmerson, has been tasked to write the sequel. Drew Jansen, who composed the tunes for the original (and for the Playhouse's other long-runner, "How to Talk Minnesotan"), will return to provide the music, working with Dennis Curley (an actor, arranger and composer of "U Betcha: The Making of a Minnesota Boy Band").

The sequel finds the ladies still living in East Cornucopia in 1970. Life in the town, in the church and even in their little church-basement circle is changing.

"Sequels can be a problem, but this one has a little bit more meat to it than most," said Wollan, who is in workshops with the new script. "It's really about these women finding themselves and changing. They're not afraid to go to 'The Cities' anymore."

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"Church Basement Ladies" has proven to be a bankable commodity for Troupe America outside of Plymouth Playhouse. The show has sold out extended runs in Upper Midwest cities from Kansas City to Rock Island and Wichita to Kalamazoo. The show completed a 50-city tour this year and will go out on the road again next summer.

"The only place it didn't do well was Nashville," said Wollan. "And Nashville's all about country music, so what can you do?"

In an ideal world, "Church Basement Ladies" would spin off into a series of shows, much like "How to Talk Minnesotan," which ran in various incarnations at the Playhouse for the better part of five years.

"We're already thinking about a prequel and a holiday version," Wollan said.

Sort of like the "Star Wars" of the hotdish set.

MEANWHILE, ON THIS SIDE OF THE RIVER

Downtown St. Paul's long-running "We Gotta Bingo" looks to be riding toward the sunset.

"We're still getting interest from groups and corporate parties," said Bill Collins, managing director of the Actors Theater of Minnesota, which christened the new Lowry Theatre in November 2005 with the original interactive comedy. "But it seems that the casual single-ticket buyer has seen it."

Collins hasn't announced a firm closing date for the show, which has groups booked through September's Republican National Convention in St. Paul. But he's planning on installing another show - a screwball musical comedy called "Song of Singapore" - in the space later this February. The two productions are expected to run in repertory while Collins formulates a post-

convention strategy for the theater.

"I think we'll look to the space for more medium-length runs," he said. "Not a couple weeks, not a couple years, but things that will run five to six months. We've had 70,000 or 80,000 people that have been down here for 'Bingo.' They know how to park; they know how to get here. Now, our challenge is to get people to come back."

All in all, Collins said he's satisfied with his experiment with "We Gotta Bingo." A second production opened in October in Cleveland, and Actors Theater is getting expressions of interest from other cities.

"Nobody got rich on it," he said. "But the show did a great job of chugging along, breaking even, keeping actors employed. We demonstrated that it had legs and could work in other cities. And we learned a ton on how to make things work better the next time around."

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