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The GO & DO guide for the north Oregon & southwest Washington coasts

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## Time to get SHANGHAIED

By CATE GABLE - Photos by ALEX PAJUNAS  
For Coast Weekend

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Stage Manager Shannon Shepler sets out popcorn and turns on the tableside lamps before the doors open for a performance of "Shanghaied in Astoria."

Over the past 25 years of the Astor Street Opry Company's existence, 70,000 or more people have purchased tickets and sat in the audience and another 15,000 have volunteered to help, in one way or another, with theater productions.

In the lingo of nonprofits, that's a "high touch" organization.

But as Judy Niland, managing director with a 25-year association with ASOC, shares, "Many of our supporters don't know that we have had to move four times - or maybe it's five. I've almost lost track."

The hardy actors of the ASOC have finally put their feet down - on boards they hope will soon be theirs for good. They are in the last stages of a capital campaign to purchase a permanent home.

"Let's see, we've been in a meat market, a banking building, a plumbing store and a laundry," Niland says. "This is our last stand."

### Lint on the rafters

Paula Fisher, board chairwoman and theater volunteer for 10 years, echoes this sentiment.

"We've all worked really hard to make this purchase happen," she explains. "I think the turning point was simply making the decision to buy our building."

"We just sat down and said, now's the time - it's now or never - we need our own place."

Both Fisher and Niland relate stories about their company's various moves over the years, and how at each subsequent move, the structure they leased had to be renovated yet again to accommodate the needs of a community theater.

### 'Shanghaied in Astoria'

**ASOC Playhouse**  
**129 W. Bond St., Astoria**  
**(503) 325-6104**

[www.astorstretoprycompany.com](http://www.astorstretoprycompany.com)

7:30 p.m. Thursdays through  
Saturdays through Sept. 11  
2 p.m. Sundays, Aug. 8 and Sept. 5

Tickets \$16 to \$20; senior, child and group discounts available.

To help out with funding in this last mile, contact Paula Fisher or Judy Niland at the Astor Street Opry Company.



They are hoping the last move, to the former Roy's Maytag building, will be the final chapter.

"With every move, we had to put in a tremendous amount of energy to begin again," Fisher says. "And this last move to Roy's Maytag - well, I can't tell you how it felt to walk in, pull off the drop ceiling and find the rafters covered with dryer lint."



An enthusiastic crowd watches the opening olio acts inside the Astor Street Opry Company Playhouse at 129 W. Bond St.

"Hundreds of volunteers have spent thousands of hours making and remaking our spaces over the years," Fisher adds.

### List of to-dos

Niland shares, "We've always left whatever building we were renting in better shape. We had to make places handicap accessible, repair electrical, plumbing, add sprinkler systems and bring everything up to a certain occupancy code."

Starring as Max Krooke, Michael Wangen regales the audience with the tale of Little Bunny Foo Foo during an olio act.



Derick Watson, playing the character of Eric, reminds Virginia, played by Lily Deufel, that he has been lifting fish all day. As with any performance of "Shanghaied in Astoria," plenty of popcorn is available for consumption or throwing on stage.

In 2007, ASOC was lucky to find a consultant specializing in nonprofit strategy. Rich Foster of Cascadia Consulting Partnership in Independence was recommended to the ASOC board by Oregon Coast Council for the Arts.

Finding Foster proved to be a critical step in the process.

Foster, from his office in Independence, shares, "We put together an initial strategy in 2007 and then the downturn hit in 2008, so we had to go back to the drawing board."

"As you can imagine, it hasn't been the best time to be involved in a capital campaign," Foster explains.

"For foundations, they had significant value lost in the stock market crash, which meant the size of grants has dropped," he continues. "Plus, given the severity of the downturn, there are fewer grants now being given for arts and culture."



"Shanghaied in Astoria" MC Rob DeuPree sorts through slacks during a visit to the wardrobe department backstage at the

"Many foundations have shifted their priorities to what are called 'intervention grants' - for things like homeless shelters and food banks."

### Strategy shift

Foster continues, "We had to reassess the playing field in 2009 and come up with a new strategy, particularly since Oregon isn't a large grants universe to begin with."

Rather than going for two or three large foundation grants, the new strategy called for finding perhaps 10 or 12 smaller grantors. The other change was the idea that ASOC would fill the gap with a commercial loan backed by assets.

**Astor Street Opry Company.**

**Richard Goosey steps outside for a breath of fresh air before the start of the show.**

So far, their strategy has been right on the mark. ASOC is very close to completing its goals for foundation funding (they have one major donor yet to hear from), and funds from local sources have also been essential to the success of their venture.

"Even though people locally were less able to give large amounts, we were able to demonstrate a solid track record for the Opry over a long period of time," Foster shares, "which meant that ASOC could handle the debt service on a commercial

loan."



**The Astor Street Opry Company hopes they will soon be able to replace outhouses with a theater expansion that will include indoor bathrooms and a new ticket booth.**

"Our pro forma based on historical data showed that even in these financially tough times, this strategy is a prudent and fiscally responsible approach," he adds.

"The Opry Company is an interesting and eclectic group of people. I've really enjoyed my association with them," says Foster.

### **Long time coming**

The benefits of community theater are probably too numerous to mention, but let's start with "Shanghaied in Astoria," the iconic production of the ASOC. In many ways, the piece is inextricably linked to the "rebranding" of Astoria - to the renovation of the Riverwalk and riverfront areas, the revitalization of the downtown and the resurgence of arts in the region.

Then there are the tangible benefits felt by anyone who stands up onstage or watches from the audience.

Del Corbett, one of the founders of ASOC and co-creator of "Shanghaied," puts it this way: "There is an empowerment people feel when they get involved with other theater people. I want everyone to feel the power that can only take place inside a theater."

Social media, Internet movies, cable television - theater has much more competition in the field of entertainment now than in past decades. But the vitality of live theater is palpable in Astoria; witness the birth of "Junior Shanghaied," which is training, nurturing and delighting a new generation of actors and audience members.

As Niland says, "Having our own theater space - it's been a long time coming."

"And now we have until Oct. 1 to sign papers on our building. We're waiting to see if the last pieces will fit into place, we're so close."

"But nothing's going to stop us now," she adds with finality.



**Paula Fisher, board president of the Astor Street Opry Company, pours a pitcher for thirsty theatergoers before a "Shanghaied in Astoria" performance.**