



## Play tells story of 19th-century Prescott suffragists



Courtesy photo

Arizona Gov. George Hunt (Parker Anderson) and Pauline Schindler O'Neil (Kathy Derry) argue over women's suffrage during a rehearsal for the Blue Rose Theater production "We Will Vote," which opens June 22 at Sharlot Hall Museum.

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The grit of three Arizona women pioneers at the forefront of the suffragist movement a century ago is the heart of "We Will Vote," a play opening Friday at Sharlot Hall Museum's Blue Rose Theater.

The play's heroines, Pauline O'Neill (Kathy Derry), Frances Munds (Kathleen Davis) and Josephine Hughes (Pattie Conrad), retell the story of women's long quest to win the right to vote that began long before Arizona's statehood.

O'Neill came to the Arizona Territory in the mid-1880s with her parents when her father, a purchasing agent for the U.S. Army, was transferred from San Francisco to Ft. Whipple. She married Buckey O'Neill, who died in the Battle of San Juan Hill on July 1, 1898. She came into her own when she was elected the second president of the Arizona Territorial Women's Suffrage Association that same year. Her friend, Munds, also of Prescott and a member of a pioneer ranching family, was elected the association's secretary. Soon enough, Hughes, a Tucsonan of prominence, joined their struggle, which had to surmount years of hurdles before women won the right to walk into voting booths and mark their ballots.

The setting for "We Will Vote" is Watson Lake, where the suffragists celebrate victory at a picnic. Even though the men of the Territory may have sympathized with the suffrage movement, they were afraid that Arizona would not achieve statehood if the state's Constitution gave women voting rights. Not willing to give up, the women collected more than 3,000 signatures on a petition to put the question on the ballot in the state's first General Election ballot in November of 1912. It passed by a wide margin, long before women across the United States gained the right to vote with the U.S. Constitution's 19th Amendment in 1920.

Gov. George Hunt (Parker Anderson), the state's first governor, is a guest at the picnic, and must confront the women as the play's chief antagonist. "He cared more about statehood for Arizona than he did for women's suffrage," playwright Jody Drake said. "At the Constitutional Convention, he did not support the suffrage bill. After he was elected governor and Arizona became a state, then he supported women's suffrage."

"We Will Vote" is another drama celebrating Arizona pioneer women who have rose bushes named for them in the museum's Territorial Women's Memorial Rose Garden.

One role in the play, famous pioneer journalist Nellie Bly (Jenel Taylor) adds her own dimension. "We needed someone to get the stories about the ladies out," director Randi Wise said, so they chose Bly, who was noted for exposing brutality and neglect in a mental institution in the late 1800s.

The play's storyline is "a good thing to do in Arizona's centennial year," Wise said, adding the actors in "We Will Vote" are "spot-on" in their portrayals. For each play in the "Ladies of the Garden" series, Drake and Wise research details they need to write a play, but the actors study their ladies well beyond that to get inside the characters they play.

"They are not just taking a character and bringing it to life on stage," Wise said. "They are taking real people and try to present them as that person."

The curtain goes up at 7:30 p.m. Friday, with additional performances on Saturday at 2 and 7:30 p.m., 6:30 p.m. on June 28, 7:30 p.m. June 29, at 2 and 7:30 p.m. on June 30. Tickets are \$10 (\$8 for museum members) in advance and \$14 at the door. For more information, call 445-3122 or visit sharlot.org. The museum is located at 415 W. Gurley St.

"We Will Vote" should reverse voter apathy, Wise said. "They (suffragists) really went through the wars to get us that right," Wise said. "And thank God they did."

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