

Taproot Theatre takes on story of American women who helped win WWI

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Jessica Ziegelbauer and Rico Lastrapes in “The Hello Girls” at Taproot Theatre. (Giao Nguyen)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Taproot Theatre Company has a mission to tell stories of hope. “The Hello Girls” tells the story of the American women whose long-unrecognized service to the Army on the front lines of World War I moved the war effort toward victory and moved women on the home front closer to the right to vote. And though it’s not immediately obvious from the script, it’s a story with a strong Seattle connection.

The musical by Peter Mills and Cara Reichel, inspired by the book of the same name by Elizabeth Cobbs, recounts the story of the women who operated the communications network that helped win WWI. Running at Greenwood’s Taproot Theatre July 12-Aug. 12, it’s directed by Karen Lund, Taproot’s producing artistic director, who’s working with her frequent collaborators, choreographer Katy Tabb and music director Michael Nutting, both musical theater veterans with numerous credits at Village Theatre and the 5th Avenue Theatre.

“I think ‘The Hello Girls’ is one of those fascinating moments of history that got swept aside,” Lund said. “It’s interesting to be talking about that right now when women are losing rights again.”

Because Taproot had successfully produced a previous play by Mills (“Illyria” in 2013), his agent sent Lund the script of “The Hello Girls” for consideration in 2018 when the play premiered at Prospect Theater Company in New York where Mills and Reichel are founding members.

“I read it and fell in love with it and hoped it would be part of our 2021 season,” Lund said. Although the pandemic interfered with those plans, Lund remained committed to telling the story. “It hit all my buttons,” she said. Lund’s father taught military history; her mother was an activist with the National Organization for Women (NOW supported the Hello Girls’ fight for recognition, although Lund’s mother was not directly involved

in that campaign). Besides Lund's interest in the story, she discovered a surprising Seattle connection.

When the United States entered WWI, it had the advantage of telephone technology that was more advanced than Europe's. The only people trained on the cutting-edge communication system were the female telephone operators popularly called Hello Girls. The Army recruited these skilled women, many of whom came from the University of Washington, and sent them to serve on the front lines.

"Gen. [John J.] Pershing said that they are one of the main reasons we were able to win the war," Lund said. But after the war, the Hello Girls returned to a country where they were denied the right to vote, and where the Army [refused to recognize them for their military service](#). The women became a force in the suffrage movement as they fought for their rights as veterans.

Merle Egan Anderson, a Hello Girl who settled in Seattle after the war, spent the next 60 years fighting for official veteran status. A Seattle lawyer, Mark Hough, worked pro bono for Anderson and was instrumental in finally gaining recognition for the Hello Girls in 1977. Hough still lives in the area and has been invited to the Seattle premiere of "The Hello Girls." Despite her activism, Anderson is not a character in the play, which deals primarily with the Hello Girls' recruitment and war service, only touching on their postwar struggles. The protagonist in the play is the wartime leader of the Hello Girls, chief operator Grace Banker, played by [Cassi Q Kohl](#).

"WWI is not a fun story, but anybody who's blazing a new trail, who's going down a new path, there's a lot of excitement and energy. So there's a lot of fun and comedy in the show as well," Lund said. To balance the heavy themes, the musical centers on the dynamics among the women and the way they worked together to change the world.

"The Hello Girls"

July 12-Aug. 12; Taproot Theatre, 204 N. 85th St., Seattle; \$25-\$56; 206-781-9707, taproottheatre.org
