**A Night at the Swede Hollow Opera and the East Side Freedom Library**

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*Picture Descriptions: Night picture of the East Side Freedom Library, inside view of the Library with the crowd anxiously awaiting the performance*

It was my first visit to the East Side Freedom Library. On this night, the Library was hosting a “Swede Hollow” opera. Walking through the front doors, I wondered how a library and an opera could coexist. One required silence and the other embraced voices and music. Taking my beginning steps, I discovered that this is not your typical library.

In the entryway, a woman in a black fedora hat was greeting people. She gave them a program for the night’s event and answered their questions. In a few moments, I learned that she wrote and composed the night’s production. Her name is Ann Millikan. In the corner, I saw members of the orchestra setting up their instruments. They came from the Mankato Symphony Orchestra. Throughout the library, I spotted people in costumes. They were members of the Swede Hollow Youth Chorus. It was shaping up to be a big night.

Many seats were still open as people filed in the building. Before the opera started, I took a peak at the library’s features. I loved the historical characteristics of the building, with its high ceilings, hanging lights and large windows. There are old newspapers and a banner for the American Railway Union included in the décor. Constructed in 1917, this was one of several libraries built through donations by American industrialist Andrew Carnegie.

Besides its historical significance, I noticed the multicultural attributes of the Library. The diversity and heritage of the East Side area are reflected in many paintings, photographs and quilts throughout the library. Perhaps the most striking of all the artwork are the murals in the stairwell that lead to the Library’s basement. They depict the hard work of immigrants. There are also books in the Library dedicated to learning about different cultures and their history, including the Hmong Archives.

Throughout the library, signs promoted social justice and awareness toward labor issues. In the center of the library there was an area that Ann Millikan called “the media center.” This circular front desk contained several handouts for guests to read. The East Side Freedom Library will hold activities in December. These events include Mindful Meditation sessions with Urban Monk Marc Anderson, a film screening for “Bessie,” story hours for children called “Kids Rising,” and History Day Learning Center activities for students participating in the 2017 History Day Competition. I signed a guest book to receive emails about future events.

Suddenly, the show was starting. People found their seats quickly. The room became silent and the lights dimmed. The first scene took us back to Dec. 11, 1956. On this date, the City of Saint Paul deemed the Swede Hollow area unlivable and forced residents from their homes. Before relocating that winter, these residents witnessed the city burning their homes. Although the characters for the opera were fictional, the stories come from historical research and the accounts of people that lived in Swede Hollow.

From this scene, the opera takes us backward to witness Swede Hollow immigrants from the 1920s and the 1850s. Although these scenes examine the lives of different ethnic groups at different times, their stories are very similar. Immigrants fled their former countries to find a better life. They had dreams and a desire to “move forward.” Their journeys included many setbacks, such as the challenges that come with unfamiliarity in a new country.

The final scene was a tribute to the Native Americans that first lived in the area. Marcie R. Rendon wrote the text for this scene. The scene was called “Dakota Land,” and featured traditional Native American drum tones. Every performer from the opera was onstage together to perform the final act.

The “Swede Hollow” opera included remarkable performances from all participants. The music and vocals captured the emotions, including the heartbreak that the Swede Hollow immigrants felt. Tracey Engleman, Victoria Vargas, David Walton and Andrew Lovato were the opera singers. Their costumes and acting took us back in time and made us feel that we were witnessing history.

In the end, all of the performers received a well-deserved ovation. The night’s performance brought smiles to people’s faces. Conversations erupted, and the discussions were about their enjoyment that evening. I look forward to visiting the East Side Freedom Library and attending another event.

**[Special Note: The Swede Hollow Opera recently recorded a CD of their opera. They will have a CD-release party on Dec. 11, 2016. The event will be at Saint Paul’s Flat Earth, 888 Minnehaha Ave. E. in Saint Paul. It will take place from 3:30 p.m. until 6:30 p.m. You can also visit Ann Millikan’s website,** [**www.annmillikan.com**](http://www.annmillikan.com)**, to find information about her projects.]**