

Rebecca Udden's Down-to-Earth 'Utopia'

Grounded in Main Street Theater's trademark intimacy, the artistic director brings Tom Stoppard's epic trilogy to Houston

BY FRANK BOUDREAU

Director Rebecca Greene Udden, left, with *Coast of Utopia* cast members Joel Sandel and Shannon Emerick.

I LOVE STOPPARD," INTONES REBECCA GREENE Udden, with the sort of deep-voiced relish most people reserve for Swiss chocolates.

Over the course of her 36-year (and counting) career as founder and artistic director of Houston's Main Street Theater, Udden has earned the bona fides to support that assertion: Main Street has produced no fewer than 11 of Tom Stoppard's plays, staging both his non-canonical works and local premieres of popular scripts such as *Arcadia*. (When prodded about her favorite Stoppard production over the years, Udden notes, laughing, that she keeps returning to *The Real Inspector Hound* because it reminds her "how fundamentally absurd" the work of theatre artists can be.) Now Udden and her company—which holds a Small Professional Theater Equity contract and has a two-theatre combined seating capacity of 250—has scored the rights for the *second-ever* American production of Stoppard's three-part, nine-hour masterpiece *The Coast of Utopia*.

Udden's version of the epic—the first part of which opens Jan. 12, with the second two parts running in repertory in February and March—will have been preceded only by the celebrated (and star-studded) premiere at New York's Lincoln Center Theater in 2006. (Shotgun Players of Berkeley, Calif., has also announced it will stage *Voyage*, the first part of the trilogy, in March.)

"It's the most ambitious thing we've ever done," Udden says with the knowing twinkle of a director driven

by the risks she takes but experienced enough to know what colossal undertakings they can be. Udden recalls Main Street's staging of Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (not exactly a small play) in the theatre's 2006–07 season as a casting challenge on ethnically accurate grounds, but *Utopia* presents enormous hurdles strictly from a numbers point of view. The trilogy—which follows a group of 19th-century Russian intelligentsia agitating for czarist overthrow and social revolution—requires 30 adult actors (count 'em if you can!), as well as several child roles. Main Street's press materials boast the employment, all in all, of nearly 50 Houston artists.

On the practical side, it is simply the largest production, payroll-wise, to which Main Street has ever committed. But Udden and the company are embracing the considerable opportunity for their locally known theatre "to raise our regional profile" and to attract theatregoers from across Texas and the surrounding states. Udden expects the production to raise the play's profile among U.S. theatremakers, too. Given the timely resonance between its political and philosophical subject matter and current events such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street—and considering its large cast, full of challenging roles for men and women—Udden wonders aloud "why universities with serious acting programs" in particular are not doing the play. "Our production has the potential to show them that it is a possible play, that they should be doing it," she believes. ▶

Utopia's hurdles, some would argue, go beyond logistics. Yes, the Lincoln Center production was generally reviewed well, but several critics across the country pointed out its many—how does one put it delicately?—dramaturgical issues. Stoppard himself sounds a defensive note in his introduction to the second edition of the script. All but calling the play obtuse, he writes, “I had to read a lot of books about Russians and radicalism, and if your purpose is information you must read the same books.” Why take on such a lumbering giant? Even Udden remarks, “I saw the Lincoln Center production, and by the third play I was tired of the actors walking on stage and declaiming things.”

Yet she cites this very frustration as inspiration for her closer reading of the script. “To me, this is really a play about a few friends arguing passionately about ideas that mean everything to them,” Udden asserts. “We are eager to show that the plays can be just as effective when produced on an intimate scale as they are in Lincoln Center.”

FOR MANY THEATRES, THE TERM “intimate scale” is used as code for “low



Luisa Amaral-Smith and Lisa Thomas Morrison split sweets in Main Street's *Cakewalk*.

budget” or to help sexy-up an overall lack of production values. For Udden and Main Street, the term is not a qualifier; it's the aesthetic. “The limitations helped to form our performance style,” Udden recalls.

“People and the work. It's always been about the people and the work,” is how Main Street's director of marketing and development, Shannon Emerick, describes Udden's abiding ethos, which goes back to

her earliest days of putting up work before an audience.

The year was 1975. “The impetus to start Main Street was pretty much the same impetus as for so many other theatres in the mid-'70s,” Udden recounts: “a critical mass of people who wanted to pursue a career in theatre in one place.” As opposed to making the pilgrimage to established theatre cities like Chicago or New York, Udden and friends

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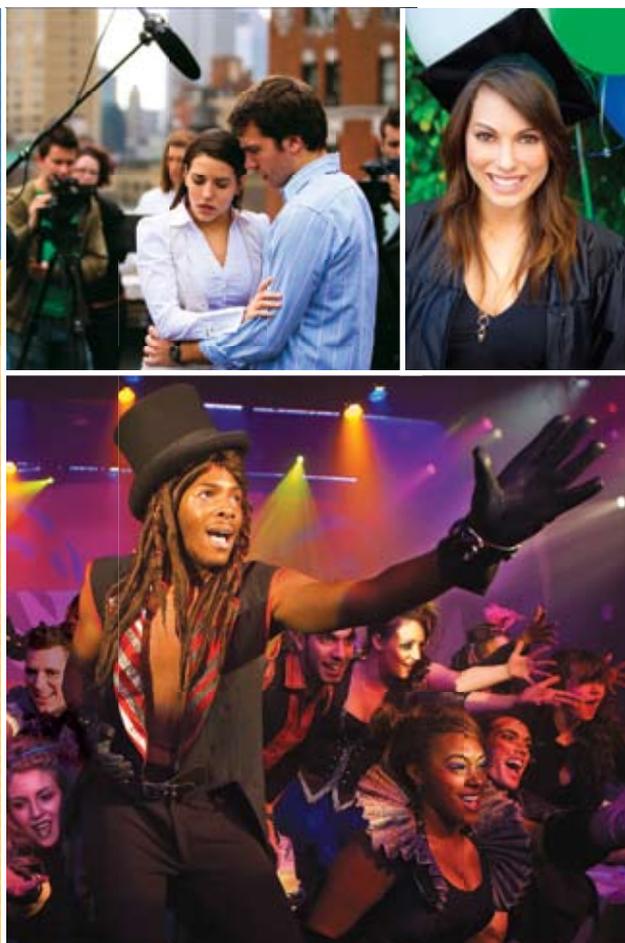
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DOUG KILLBORE



Christianne Mays in Main Street's 2006-07 season production of *Homebody/Kabul*.

consciously decided to do the work they wanted to do in the place they lived.

Houston was home because Udden and friends were recent graduates of Rice University. "For a university at that time with absolutely no theatre department, Rice was a theatre-loving place," Udden says. The Rice Players, of which she was a company member, was the first troupe in Houston to stage boundary-pushing productions such

as *Marat/Sade* and *The Devils*. She recalls, "We were reviewed in the *Houston Chronicle* and everything, so I knew that there was an audience for really interesting theatre."

After the briefest of jaunts in graduate school in her home state of Tennessee, Udden realized her calling was back in Houston. She returned, immediately starting to make work with a collective of collaborators, finding space after-hours at the Autry House,

a community center inside an Episcopal Church across from Rice's campus. With little means, but energy to spare, this nascent troupe of experimenters presented a different play *every month*.

"Most important was that we were establishing a style of playing," Udden says of the Autry House years. "Because the space we were using was being used for other things during the day, we had to concentrate on the language, the interpretation, the acting." They were establishing their theatre of intimate scale. "*Minimal* sets and *minimal* lighting," Udden emphasizes. "When we finally made curtains to actually darken the room, that was a real triumph!"

While boundlessly youthful, energetic and idealistic, Udden and company knew they would not be taken seriously until they had their own space. As they shopped around and schemed to make the finances work, they began cohering into a more conventionally organized company, at least on paper, incorporating in 1979. Udden says she "kind of made sense" as artistic director at the time because she was already working full-time at the Autry House's community center during

Success has a face.



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True Blood (HBO)
Mad Men (AMC)



Alex Hoeffler ('10)
War Horse (Broadway)



Rebecca Naomi Jones ('03)
American Idiot (Broadway)
Nurse Jackie (Showtime)



Dane DeHaan ('08)
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the day—but given her longevity in the role, one suspects even her early collaborators recognized her producing savvy.

After six years, the evolving collective finally found the right space for the right price in Houston’s Rice Village, a 92-seat house it still occupies today. Though the company had moved its operations to Times Boulevard, its name is a reminder of its beginnings at the Autry House’s Main Street address.

IT WOULD BE NICE TO SAY THE REST

is history, but anyone who can appreciate what 36 years of sustained success in theatre means must know that is not the case. Massive renovation of Main Street’s new home was necessary and the company called upon all possible resources (including a particularly far-fetched favor from a distantly related air conditioning man in Florida). Taking this necessary step toward the professional stature of the company put the lack of professional status for its personnel in sharper relief. “Everything we’ve done, we’ve done with an eye toward providing jobs,” Udden maintains, recalling how Main Street’s wildly popular youth program was born during this



Timothy Eric in *Woof*, which made its debut at Main Street this past September.

period of identity-formation in the early '80s. Theater for Youth, Udden goes on to explain, “was not designed to make money for the theatre, but to make money for the people doing it.” The income enabled these artists to run the company: “In the mornings we would do the children’s show; in the afternoons we would rehearse the next one and do the other [administrative] work; and in the evenings we would rehearse and

perform the mainstage shows.” In the early years in the Rice Village space, Main Street could only afford to employ Udden, along with one production manager or tech director and an occasional box-office employee, but as Theater for Youth grew in popularity, Main Street was able to commit to six full-time employees. Schools interested in attending began clambering for more space for more students. After a two-year search,

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the board announced the acquisition of Main Street's second space of 190 seats in Houston's Chelsea Market.

Theater for Youth currently plays for more than 130,000 audience members annually in Houston and through its tours all over Texas. This is an impressive statistic on its own, but Udden insists the program is not only a celebrated trainer of young theatre artists and a ticket-sales booster. "The kinds of creativity" it requires of the adult staff, Udden says, inevitably strengthens their resourcefulness in their mainstage work as well.

Today Main Street works on a "three-tier" professional model that provides some enduring security: the main stage; the Theater for Youth (producing director, Vivienne M. St. John); and the education department (director of education, Troy Scheid), with Udden presiding as executive artistic director, assisted most closely by Emerick ("my right and left hand," Udden calls her). Eight other full-time company members round out a staff of 12 salaried employees.

"She's very open to input if there happens to be a play that we would like to see

produced at the theatre," writes 22-year veteran Main Street actor Joel Sandel in an e-mail, supporting Emerick's point that "the people and the work" remains Udden's guiding force. He adds that the artistic director can be found "frequently sewing costumes backstage while we're rehearsing."

Main Street has put on hold its capital campaign to renovate the Times Boulevard space in this uncertain economic climate (nothing fancy, Udden insists: "all we want is clean and sleek"), but it has certainly settled into a working model with enough security to afford an enviable amount of artistic freedom and remain a consistent job-maker for Houston artists. This season alone, in addition to its massive efforts for *Utopia*, Main Street has produced two world premieres (*Woof* by Y York and *Cakewalk* by Nalsey Tinberg) and is co-producing *Richard III* with Prague Shakespeare Festival.

The Coast of Utopia is an episodic play. It is full of breakthroughs in the characters' struggles for justice and reform, followed repeatedly by setbacks, disappointments and perversions of purpose. This may be the enduring takeaway from the massive work:

Human progress is incremental and it favors perseverance. (It may even be Stoppard's justification for the nine-hour run time: That is how long it takes to demonstrate the point.)

It seems Udden has met her story. Granted, a ragtag band of theatre collaborators in Houston in the mid-1970s is not exactly equivalent to 19th-century revolutionaries from the Russian aristocracy, but Udden has built a fulfilling career for a great many people, as well as herself, by trusting that progress is incremental and favors perseverance. A reader familiar with *Utopia* could imagine her guiding principle in the mouth of Alexander Herzen, the play's radically pragmatic protagonist: "People and the work! Don't you see? It's about the people and the work!" ☒

Frank Boudreaux's plays have been seen at Dixon Place, the Bushwick Star and the Cutting Room in New York City, as well as at Houston's Country Playhouse. He holds an MFA in playwriting from Brooklyn College.



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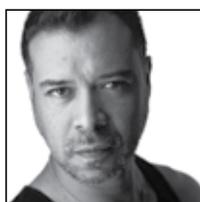
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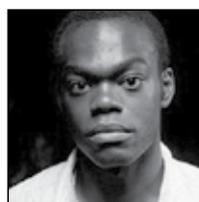
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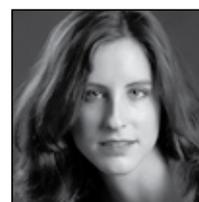
Lauren Klein ('78):
Lost in Yonkers
(Broadway); *Big Love*
(Berkeley Rep); *Broken Glass*
(Broadway)



David Anzuelo ('89):
The 2-2 (CBS);
Labyrinth Theatre Company
(NYC);
INTAR Latino Theatre
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Will Harper ('02):
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