

Susie Medak spills the beans on running the show at Berkeley Rep

Being a managing director is a lot like climbing mountains

Susie Medak made her stage debut in “The Three Little Pigs” in kindergarten. She’s had a life in the theater ever since. The 65-year-old has been leading Berkeley Repertory Theatre as its managing director for 29 years. Artistic directors have come and gone while Medak has run the operations of the \$21 million Tony-winning organization with a steady hand.

A veteran theater manager, Medak is known for her unstoppable spirit. While many people choose to sit on the beach while on vacation, she prefers to scale a mountain. She’s also part of the faculty at Yale University’s School of Drama, and she has served as the president of the League of Resident Theatres, a service organization that represents 75 of the largest theaters around the country. She’s also a member of the International Women’s Forum and the Mont Blanc Ladies’ Literary Guild and Trekking Society.

At Berkeley Rep, she calls the financial shots of a huge operation that presents show on two stages, the 400-seat Peet’s Theatre and the 600-seat Roda Theatre, fosters new works as part of its Ground Floor project and teaches the young at its theater school.

Unlike an artistic director, who shapes the creative identity of a theater company, the executive director’s job is to make sure the organization is stable — from financial assets to community support. Smart as a whip and strong as steel, Medak recently took a few minutes to talk about her love of theater and what makes the business of the arts so complicated. The fact that she was recovering from hip surgery didn’t dim her energy, warmth or the trademark mischievous glint in her eyes.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: When did you first fall in love with the theater?

A: My folks took me to see shows all the time. But maybe what really made me fall in love was being in shows. I can describe in great detail our kindergarten production of “Three Little Pigs,” in which I played the third little pig.

Q: What has made Berkeley Rep such a perfect home for all these years?

A: What has made it perfect for me has been that it has changed all the time. That and the fact that I love this community and this audience. We are who we are as a company because of where we are.

Q: Do you ever worry about theater falling out favor with the young?

A: Years ago, former artistic director Tony Taccone and I were lucky enough to have lunch with futurist Peter Schwartz. We asked him whether there was any future for theater. Should we get out while the getting was good? His response was that with more young people than ever becoming educated, with cynicism about authentic images and with fewer and fewer live experiences, the opposite was true. That eventually the value of live, authentic and unedited experiences would have heightened value. I think we are seeing that to be true.

Q: How do you plan to reach out to new audiences?

A: Everything that challenges national sports, the national parks and other experiences that rely on the live experience challenge us as well. The decline of a unified media voice, the decline of print media, the decline of arts in the schools, the devaluation of the humanities, traffic, the migration of great theater writers to television ... yes, it all makes for challenges. Our response to these challenges is that we need to reach people through new media. We need to rethink what the experience of an evening in the theater means to a new generation. They want to know more about the experience before they arrive. They want and expect more of an event when they get there. They find out about events through more venues. And who we are as a country is undergoing yet another massive change. Artists have told new stories for every generation. A country knows itself, in part, by the stories it tells itself. We have to be attuned to that. We are constantly retuning.

Q: The company is undergoing a period of great change right now with a new artistic director taking the reins. What's that like? How will the troupe change?

A: This is just such a fantastically stimulating time. Johanna Pfaelzer officially started as our new artistic director on September 1, and we are having a blast as we put everything on the table — everything is up for discussion. How do we make theater? How do we support artists? Who is our community? What are our critic obligations? What kind of relationship do we want with our audience? What will bring out the best among the working professionals who have been responsible for making us one of the most impactful non-profit theaters in the country? I really love this chance to revisit it all. How will we change? I think it will take a while for people to see the change. It will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Johanna has no interest in throwing out everything that came

before. And our board selected her because she was already engaged in the wide range of work for which we are known. But that said, she does want to bring writers who have not been showcased on our stages before. She wants to engage audiences in more early stage development of new work. She is interested in how we acknowledge in a more active way that we are part of the Pacific Rim and that makes us different from other places in the country. And from where I sit, I'm seeing more stories that speak to me, as a woman.

Q: What is the biggest challenge facing the company right now?

A: Philanthropy for non-profit arts is the challenge we share with all our colleagues. We are not global. Our impact can't be quantified. By virtue of what we do, only a small portion of our work can be monetized. Many people understand that for every start up that turns into a financial success you have to invest in dozens that won't. We invest in dozens and dozens of artists and their projects that may not, in themselves, become box office hits, but may have other profound benefits. We are out of step with the current culture of philanthropy. If something doesn't change, much of what we have valued in the Bay Area will be lost.

Hopefully, as some of our new philanthropists mature, they will become attuned to the value of regional philanthropy in addition to their global interests, to the need to sustain institutions even as they enjoy disruption. That they will grow more reflective and see how the arts are such important vehicles for reflection.

Q: What do people frequently misunderstand about your job?

A: Some people think that because I run a non-profit, I don't know much about running a "real" business. Running a successful non-profit requires skill as well as an ability to be nimble in the face of change. And running a theater requires the constant choice-making that brings out the best in a creative workforce.

Q: Is being a managing director a lot like climbing mountains?

A: You've just nailed the theme of the book I will eventually write. Climbing a mountain is the perfect metaphor! Sometimes there is beauty. Sometimes it's so hard it feels as though it will kill you. The valleys can seem endless. But when you reach the top....Well, not only can you see forever....you really are just on top of the world!

SUSIE MEDAK PROFILE

Position: Managing director

Previous jobs: Northlight Theatre, People's Light theater company

Age: 65

Education: Lawrence University, Wisconsin

Residence: Berkeley Hills

Family: Married

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SUSIE MEDAK

1. She loves nothing more than a busman's holiday; an evening in the theater is her idea of heaven.
2. She lives in Berkeley so politics is a blood sport for her.
3. She's a founding member of the Mont Blanc Ladies' Literary Guild and Trekking Society. They've hiked all over the world, talking about books. They have very strong calves and mouths.
4. Her husband, Greg, is a fantastic cook. You want to be invited for dinner.
5. She seems like a pushover, but she's tough as nails. Don't mess with her.

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