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WITH A SMALL BUDGET BUT LOTS OF SPUNK, CITY LIGHTS TAKES ON DAUNTING PRODUCTIONS LIKE 'ANGELS IN AMERICA'

Karen D'Souza, Mercury News

Scrubbing toilets just before the curtain goes up - that's the not-so-glamorous reality of a life in the theater facing Lisa Mallette and Kit Wilder, the husband-and-wife team who run San Jose's City Lights Theater Company. A walk down the red carpet, it ain't.

Mallette, 41, and Wilder, 46, met doing a show. They got engaged during an audience talk-back, and they got hitched on stage. So they're quite adept at juggling the 24/7 hustle of showbiz with the reality of paying bills and raising kids (they have two girls, ages 4 years and 7 months).

But they've never taken on a project as bold and ambitious as "Angels in America." City Lights has launched its 25th anniversary season on a beyond-audacious note with "Perestroika," the second half of the epic journey they began last year.

"It was very scary deciding to do 'Angels,' " says Wilder (associate artistic director), sitting side by side near the lip of the stage with Mallette (executive artistic director), during a break in rehearsals for "Angels 2," which runs through Oct. 21. "But we're all adrenaline junkies in the theater. If we're not a little scared to death, what's the point?"

Making "Angels" soar means stretching the company's wings as far as they go. Not only is Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-winning masterpiece one of the biggest plays of its generation (seven hours in its entirety), it's also among the most complex.

Subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," it's a theatrical marathon that races through the zeitgeist of '80s America, from trickle-down economics and the AIDS epidemic to the looming environmental meltdown. It's a gutsy play for any theater to produce. But for scrappy little City Lights, where a \$20,000 surplus qualifies as a fortune (they actually took a picture of their bank balance to celebrate!), it's like scaling Mount Everest, and then bungeeing off the top.

"Some theaters fear that audiences might not come if a play is too weird or uncomfortable or just unknown," says actress Gemma Barozzi, who plays the angel. "City Lights challenges the South Bay audience by taking risks. I appreciate that they don't just go for what will sell. They also do not shy away from intense and uncomfortable subject matter. In fact, they embrace it."

The pressure to deliver is made even more intense by the fact that the play was born in the Bay Area (at San Francisco's Eureka Theatre back in 1991), got a splashy revival at ACT (in 1995) and was thrust into mainstream pop culture by Mike Nichols' HBO miniseries version in 2003.

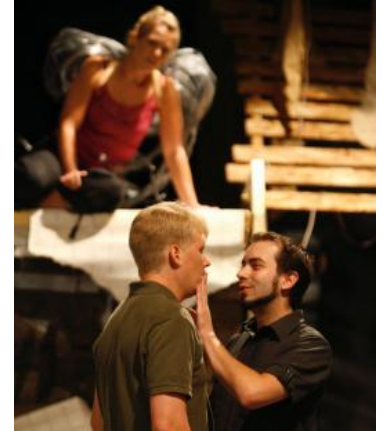
"We've set the bar very high for ourselves," Mallette notes. "Now we can't slip."

Can City Lights compete with the stratospheric production values of those landmark productions? Nope. That's the genius of this directorial vision. If you can't fly the angel, you don't. Instead City Lights is exploring a minimalist aesthetic that embodies Kushner's own theatrical motto: Let the wires show. Embrace the artifice.

"The illusion is always incomplete, inadequate," the playwright once wrote. "The work behind the magic is meant to be appreciated."

From this perspective, the magic of the theater is about language and ideas, not special effects and pyrotechnics.

"I didn't want anything realistic," notes Wilder, rambling around the rubble-strewn set design for "Perestroika." "You have to trust the text and not get in its way."



"The Angel", played by Gemma Beddo Barozzi, top, "Joe Pitt" played by Jeff Clarke, left, and "Louis Ironson" played by Jason Arias, from the City Lights Theater Company rehearses for "Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika" in San Jose, Calif. on Wednesday, September 12, 2007. (Nhat V. Meyer/Mercury News) (Nhat V. Meyer)

Besides, meager budgets mean that throwing money at the stage, relying on spectacle to mask a lack of intellectual rigor, is not an option.

"For us, a \$2,500 set is expensive," Mallette agrees. "We are really good at scrimping. We're not about dazzling special effects. We're about storytelling."

While City Lights budgets have blossomed under Mallette's watch, from \$170,000 in 2001 to \$470,000 in 2007, resources still are stretched thin. She dreams of the day when they can flesh out their skeletal staff and remodel their bathrooms.

"It's hard, and sometimes you get tired of it being so hard, but we have to have faith," Mallette sighs. "Someday we will be able to pay everyone a living wage. Someday we will have a day off every week."

Stage manager-assistant artistic director Robin Winslow pipes in with her fondest hope: "Somebody we will have a janitorial staff."

To which Mallette retorts: "Don't dream too big!"

Mallette is the one who has to raise the dough, after all. That's why the actors call her the "velvet hammer." She isn't shy about admitting that she will follow a potential supporter all the way into the ladies restroom to lobby for resources. "I'm the kind of person who is always pushing, pushing, pushing," Mallette says, "and Kit has to remind me to step back and take time off every once in a while." All that elbow grease has paid off with the support of volunteers and donors and the respect of other artists.

Timothy Near, artistic director of San Jose Rep, says, "There are no miracles here. Lisa has worked like crazy. She and Kit have been willing to work for almost nothing to build what was a community theater into San Jose's first truly off-off-Broadway style theater."

Until they have as much money as chutzpah, programming a season means striking a balance between pushing the audience out of their safety zone ("The Goat") and getting the butts in the seats ("The Full Monty"). Despite having her eyes glued to the bottom line, Mallette says she won't be intimidated by box-office pressures.

"I pick plays that need to be told, plays that San Jose deserves to see," Mallette says. "Who will do them if City Lights won't do them?"

A willingness to throw convention out the window is part of the company's rough-and-ready charm. Here, you can bring your snacks back into the theater after intermission (experience has taught them to draw the line at Chinese takeout). Here, the stage is so close that you can see the sweat on the actors' faces. Here, everyone is urged to speak their mind.

"No one is shy about telling us what they think," Winslow notes.

Alas, one theatergoer canceled her subscription because she felt there were too many gay characters last season. The criticism stung, but Wilder and Mallette had no intention of backing down from their vision.

"It's not unexpected that, the more you go out there on the edge," Wilder says, "the more some folks are going to fall behind."

'Angels in America –

Part Two: Perestroika'By Tony Kushner

Where City Lights Theater Company, 529 S. Second St., San Jose

When 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 7 p.m. Sept. 30 and Oct. 7; 2 p.m. Oct. 14 and Oct. 21

Through Oct. 21

Tickets \$25-\$40 (student and senior discounts available); (408) 295-4200, www.cltc.org