

ARTS

How Lisa Scheps has made Ground Floor Theatre indispensable to Austin

Michael Barnes

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In 2003, when Lisa Scheps first arrived in Austin from her previous home bases in Chicago and, before that, New York, she immediately founded a theater company called Play Theatre Group.

“I brought with me all this big-city energy and attitude,” Scheps now says with a laugh. “I thought I would be queen of Austin theater.”

She did make waves. Her first show, “Marvin’s Room,” performed in a tiny former church in East Austin, was praised.

Yet Scheps soon stepped back from the arts. Among her next gigs were with social justice groups such as the Transgender Education Network of Texas and Equality Texas, where, among other things, she advocated for people who, like herself, had experienced gender transition.

She also hosts a radio show about theater, “Off Stage and On the Air,” on KOOP Radio.

By 2014, however, Scheps was ready for a new start in theater. This time, she carefully consulted with other Austin theatrical leaders to see what was missing from the local arts scene.

She found gaps, especially for groups who had been generally ignored. She couldn’t be all things to all people, but she brought to a new outfit, Ground Floor Theatre, a mission that focused like a laser on, among others, the trans community, women, people with disabilities and people of color.

Ground Floor Theatre, which opens the edgy but accessible musical, “Unexpected Joy,” on Dec. 2, has stood out among the city’s 85 or so theater groups — some of them full troupes, others transitory projects — to become absolutely indispensable to the scene.

In fact, it’s hard to imagine the Austin performance scene these days without Scheps — and her co-artistic director



Co-artistic director Lisa Scheps has helped make Ground Floor Theatre into a welcoming and essential part of Austin’s arts ecology.

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Patti Neff Tiven — and their Ground Floor Theatre.

‘I became an advocate and activist’

Scheps was in a hurry to go places during the 1970s.

She grew up in the leafy Memorial area of West Houston. Yet after a short time at college, she headed straight to New York City on June 21, 1977, to study theater where it counted.

“I lived there for almost 20 years,” Scheps, 63, says. “I consider New York home. I grew up there. I would move back in a heartbeat.”

Her first job, one she treasured, was selling snacks at the observatory deck atop the World Trade Center.

Theatrical jobs followed and she thrived in the Broadway and commercial sectors, especially producing and directing “industrials,” the sometimes lavish performances staged for — and about — business groups. (The documentary to see about musical industrials is the engrossing “Bathtubs over Broadway.”)

By 2000, Scheps owned a Chicago-based company that specialized in industrials. Yet when she revealed her gender transition — 1999-2000 — those partners forced her out.

“It was my entire life,” she says. “That stuff is still pretty raw.”

Scheps was ready for some aspects of transition, not for others.

“There was never a time when I didn’t feel trans,” she says. “I went from being

‘Unexpected Joy’

When: Dec. 2-19.

Where: Ground Floor Theatre, 979 Springdale Road (park in the back of the building).

Cost: \$25-\$40.

Information and tickets:
groundfloortheatre.org.

part of the most protected class to being totally marginalized. I became an advocate and activist. I had a voice and I decided to use it.”

After a few years mostly away from theater, Scheps took into account what was already in place in Austin: three touring houses, two large university training programs, along with some smaller ones, one large residential company, a handful of longtime midsized companies — some highly experimental, others resolutely traditional — and a wide range of small, perennial theatrical projects.

Among other strategies, Scheps wisely allied with some blazing talent at the University of Texas.

Ground Floor Theatre produced Lisa B. Thompson’s “Single Black Female,” Raul Garza’s “There and Back” and Florinda Bryant’s “Black Do Crack.” The team was not afraid of big or sometimes alarming musicals such as “Parade,” “Fun Home” and “Next to Normal.”

Along the way, Scheps put together “TRANSom” about a found family made up of transgender and nonbinary people.

“I didn’t want a depressing, woe-is-me piece,” Scheps says. “I wanted a narrative. A slice of life. A story about trans people where the trans part is secondary. So many people came up to me to say, ‘I’ve never seen myself portrayed in a “normal” situation.’”

During the pandemic, she also produced “Trans Lives, Trans Voices,” a

See SCHEPS, Page 9T

ARTS

Scheps

Continued from Page 8T

grouping of 5-minute personal stories from the trans community.

To be fair, it is not as if other Austin theaters ignored the topics explored in these and other shows, far from it, but Ground Floor Theatre gave several communities what appears to be a stable home.

Curating a theatrical space

One thing that distinguishes Ground Floor Theatre is its theater space.

A basic black box in a vast former industrial complex that once housed a frozen-food outfit, it stands pretty much alone among Austin venues run by small companies. The Oscar Brockett Theatre at UT and the Rollins Studio Theater at the Long Center are comparable, but the smaller indoor stages in town are generally configured as



Michelle Alexander rehearses “Unexpected Joy,” a musical about three generations of female singers, long-held family tensions, and a week together where change is in the air. It opens Dec. 2 at Ground Floor Theatre.

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GROUND FLOOR THEATRE

thrusts, arenas or cabaret spaces, whereas Ground Floor can be arranged flexibly by way of lightweight risers.

Scheps and Neff Tiven have strived to make sure that the artists who rent the space in between the in-house shows are allied with Ground Floor’s sensibilities. Personally, I’ve never seen a bad performance there.

“Unexpected Joy,” with music by Janet Hood and words by Bill Russell, came to director Scheps in a roundabout way. Like other theaters in town, Ground Floor has shuffled its schedule to adjust to the ups and downs of the pandemic.

Scheps was all set to stage “Memphis,” the Tony Award-winning musical loosely based on the story of one of the first white DJs to play music by Black artists during the 1950s. By fall, however, when the delta variant was doing its worst, it didn’t make sense to put a big cast with crew and orchestra in an enclosed space.

Scheps had long admired playwright and lyricist Russell, who had a promising project in the works, but didn’t want to scale it down. Instead, Russell suggested his earlier musical, “Unexpected

Joy,” that had opened in New York’s York and London just before the pandemic.

The musical concerns three generations of female singers, simmering family tensions, some of which involve sexuality, and a week together in Cape Cod, where change is in the air. Just four performers on a simple set. Heard on the original cast album, the music is lively and timely, although it will take seeing the show to figure out how the songs relate — or do not relate — to the story.

“What I love: It does not wrap up the story in a pretty bow at the end,” Scheps says. “There is a bow, but the bow is messy.”

Again, like so many other Ground Floor projects, the show is accessible and at the same time edgy.

“Part of our mission is to be welcoming,” Scheps says. “I think we’ve done a pretty good job of doing that.”

Michael Barnes writes about the people, places, culture and history of Austin and Texas. He can be reached at mbarnes@statesman.com.

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