

SUSAN CLAASSEN

ARTS / ENTERTAINMENT / SPORTS



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They say big things come in small packages. Standing at five feet, Susan Claassen just might agree. But she wouldn't be referring to herself. She'd be smiling proudly at the small theatre – 80 seats, total – tucked into the corner of Eldon Drapery Cleaners.

"It's a building that needed the least amount of money to bring it up to code," she laughs. But even she admits that it turned out to be so much more.

Nestled in a small Tucson community just blocks from the University of Arizona, among bungalows and Spanish revival homes with prickly pear-studded yards, The Invisible Theatre represents more than Claassen's life work. It's her passion, her home.

Named for the invisible energy that flows between performers and audiences to create the magic of theatre, it is a place where magic has, indeed, materialized at the creative hands of Claassen, artistic director for 37 years.

"We're all about intimate, interactive theatre here, and it's a great place to perform. Its size demands truth in every aspect," explains the New Jersey transplant who settled in Tucson in 1974 after earning theatre and teaching degrees from the University of Denver. As artistic director, she wears the actor's, director's, fundraiser's and playwright's hats – all with flair.

Claassen admits that payroll is a constant worry for small theatres, but it doesn't stop her and her team from developing creative solutions. "I don't think money buys creativity," she says. "So we created a process of producing shows that really respects people's artistry." It's a process, also, that honors and respects community – the community of co-workers playing multiple daily roles at the theatre, the arts community of Tucson and the city at large.

"I think those of us in the arts have a responsibility to entertain, but also to enlighten and engage," she says. The Pastime Players, an innovative arts education program she developed in 1984 that caters to children with mental disabilities, does all those things.

Twice a week, Invisible Theatre artists teach music, dance and drama classes in the Tucson Unified School District, with an annual culminating performance. For so many of the performers, Claassen says it's the highlight of their lives.

"That's why we hire those students back as teaching assistants once they've graduated." The program is offered free of charge, through grants that Claassen, herself, secured. "I love this project. People say I do so much for these kids, but they

don't get it. The kids do so much for me. I see their courage and I'm inspired."

Claassen's outreach doesn't end there. In 1993, she received Tucson's Humanitarian Torch Award for her work on behalf of people living with AIDS. Named one of Tucson Lifestyle's 10 Most Admired Women, and one of Tucson's 13 extraordinary women by The Jewish Federation, she delights in the long-term influence of The Invisible Theatre.

"Our longevity and presence has certainly opened doors for many local artists and artists' groups," explains Claassen. It has influenced big-name artists as well. "Not only do we offer a service to Arizona audiences and artists when we bring national and international guests in, but to our guest artists, it's an eye opener." Claassen recalls one performer saying, "In New York, I don't have audiences as appreciative as yours."

Claassen knows all about performing in New York – and venues around the world. She's played numerous roles, among them Bella in *Lost in Yonkers*, Alice B. Toklas in *Gertrude Stein and a Companion*, and most recently Edith in *A Conversation with Edith Head*, a one-woman act co-written and produced by Claassen about Hollywood's most famous costume designer.

"I think everyone looks for that defining role," says Claassen. For her, it is Edith, but not just because of the uncanny physical resemblance. "Premiering here in Tucson, co-writing it at my theatre, performing it in The Republic of Georgia, Hollywood and London ... the New York Times covering it and liking it. It has been extraordinary to keep Edith's legacy alive." And it's something Claassen plans to continue. "Edith died four years before her eighty-fourth birthday, so I guess I have 20 years left."

Claassen says she's never been lured by the fame and fortune of New York or Los Angeles. "What I have here is the most enriching thing you could ever want. I started at Invisible Theatre at a time when women weren't traditionally in decision-making positions in the arts; I got on-the-job training and learned I had an affinity for understanding the whole picture. I've worked with extraordinary people. I have a wonderfully supportive life partner, Bella. I have a wonderful life."

Arizona, she says, is home – a place where she appreciates the sunsets, an icy cold Corona, a good guacamole and good theatre.

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ARIZONA'S MOST INTRIGUING WOMEN