



Rebecca Greene Udden receives Gutsy Gal Award for 2009

by Beverly Denver

After graduating with a degree in French from Rice University in 1973, Rebecca Greene Udden turned her love of the theater into the founding of Main Street Theater — now a nationally recognized playhouse. And, for her initiative, vision and leadership, she is the recipient of the 2009 Gutsy Gal Award, part of Houston Woman Magazine’s Nominate HER Awards program.

Started in 1975, Main Street Theater began as a collective of artists in the Autry House, the Episcopal Diocese’s community center on Main Street. Three years later, the organization became a more conventional non-profit theater.

Udden’s leadership as Artistic Director, Main Street Theater quickly grew in size and reputation. In 1981, the theater outgrew its original location and transformed an abandoned dry cleaning plant in the West University area into a 99-seat theater. Then, in 1996, Main Street Theater opened its second space in Chelsea Market. This 274-seat theater showcases large-scale MainStage classics and musicals and is home to Houston’s top youth theater program, the Main Street Youth Theater.

Shannon Emmerick, a co-worker who nominated Udden for the Gutsy Gal Award, commented, “Not only is it a huge accomplishment to have founded and run a theater for nearly 35 years, it is most impressive that Becky started Main Street Theater with a certain vision in mind, and she has stayed true to it.”

Emmerick continued, “That mission – and the reason I believe she should win a HER Award – is human-being based. The whole reason Becky helped start MST was about people: to provide Houston actors and designers with a place here in town to work, learn and grow and to nurture the Houston theater audience by providing them with a thought-provoking, challenging repertoire and the opportunity to explore new dramatic territory — always at reasonable cost. All of those tenets are still crucial to MST today, and it’s because of Becky.

“So, the fact that she made a stand back in 1975 about what Houston artists and audiences deserve and is still holding true to it and succeeding at it is pretty remarkable. Her commitment to her beliefs has definitely helped better the Houston community. MST has become an integral part of the Houston arts scene.”

When asked what has been the most rewarding part of her work with MST, Udden said, “Growth itself has been incredibly rewarding. Also, it’s been great watching our artists grow and learn, building our programs, molding and shaping our repertoire, so that it evolves as we do, creating a partnership with our patrons, so that they grow along with us.”

Udden continued, “As a place that works with children (in our Theater for Youth and Kids On Stage programs), as well as adults (in our MainStage and Theater for Youth programs), we have the chance to connect with people of all ages. That connection and the intimacy of our spaces are crucial to us.”

Main Street Theater has just launched a capital campaign to buy and renovate the theater in Rice Village.

Udden said, “We are thrilled and excited for this much-needed next step.” Continuing, she said, “The economic climate is hard on all the arts. However, we are fortunate to be holding steady — even growing. Our Kids On Summer Performing Arts Camp is our biggest yet — over 800 students. Our MainStage season will give voice to the English-language premiere of *The House of the Spirits*, an exceptional piece by Caridad Syich, based on the popular novel by Isabel Allende; the world premiere of Lans Traverse’s *Driftwood*; the Houston premiere of Caryl Churchill’s stunning and stark *A Number*; revivals of the delightful *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* and Tom Stoppard’s sparkling *Arcadia*; and more.

“Our Theater for Youth boasts five in-house productions based on literature, including *Click, Clack Moo: Cows That Type*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business*. We’re taking *Romeo and Juliet* and *Stuart Little* on tour, as well. As we say around here, it’s always something at Main Street Theater.”

Of the HER Awards, Udden commented, “I am so impressed with the HER Awards program. The event itself was so lovely. I honestly hadn’t known quite what to expect and was taken aback in the best of ways. I was honored to receive the Gutsy Gal Award and mainly to be in the company of such incredible women and role models. Each recipient has an inspiring story surrounding her. It is not a typical awards ceremony – just as they are not typical awards. This event and these awards are truly about the people themselves. It was a joy to be part of such a gathering.”