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CULTURE/ENTERTAINMENT

 by [Richard Ciccarone](#)
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The Z Space, Lisa Steindler, And The Future Of San Francisco Theater

Lisa Steindler, the Executive Artistic Director of the [Z Space](#), sits comfortably at her desk bathed in the afternoon sun as it streams in through cathedral-like windows. Her desk has the organized stacks of a corporate executive that reveal a flurry of activity being managed efficiently. And if the Z Space were a corporation, I would buy their stock as quickly as possible.

When speaking to Steindler on theater, to which she had dedicated her adult life, she is frank and honest. She also offers an ethereal quality to her gaze and one can easily imagine why she was cast as the Angel in the world premiere of *Angels in America*. (Ms. Steindler had a successful Bay Area acting career before becoming a producer.) While her soft-spoken demeanor and genuinely friendly nature may invite underestimation, she is a woman who could very well hold the key to San Francisco theater in the next two decades.

The Z Space is a multi-disciplinary organization that promotes new plays and educational programming. And while other theaters are looking down the barrel of fiduciary ruin, Z Space has just moved into their new location, (Theater Artaud's vacated facility) an early 20th century warehouse cum pseudo-cathedral. While touring the three-story, 268 seat theater complete with offices, a future art gallery and a planned cabaret-style venue, Steindler's attitude towards her new home is appropriately reverential. "This is like a church to me. It has cracked my head open in terms of the possibilities." She is not exaggerating. The theater is daunting in size and belittles the individual to Lilliputian proportions.

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What is so surprising is that she has managed to accomplish this growth in this economic atmosphere. The Magic has had to close their Southside venue, A.C.T. turned hat in hand to the community begging for assistance, and now it is rumored that Thick Description will be closing their doors as well. All in all, it has been an ugly theater season. Despite that and the fact that she has not received one penny in NEA Stimulus Grants (an injustice considering how much school outreach she accomplishes as well as the nourishing of new playwrights to a national level, but more on that later) and that

she came to her position two and a half years ago with inherited debt, Steindler and Z Space have accomplished this feat. But it wasn't easy.

When Steindler arrived in her position, Z Space was in questionable financial health and had just lost the founder of the organization. Facing these challenges, she was confronted with tough decisions the moment she arrived. "My goal was to help turn [Z Space] around. I had to make some very hard decisions." And some of those hard decisions came in the form we are all familiar with, personnel cutbacks. "When I started we had 11 full time staff members and now we have 6 part time. But I had already implemented all of these strategies before the economy tanked. I had already started to pull back so we could continue programming the quality of work we were accustomed to producing."

In a time of financial strain, most theaters resort to "staying the course" fearful that they may chase away already skittish subscribers they stick to their core demographic and balk at taking risks. Which is probably an intuitive reaction if you're responsible for an organization's financial health, but what do you do when your entire company, nay, entire industry, is based entirely on forging new and risky material? "I think we're going to take more risks because hey, we're going to lose our shirts anyway. No, but seriously, we're so used to having to manage with nothing we've been trained to operate in this crisis atmosphere. We'll probably come out ahead." Yet it's not merely her business discipline that has prompted her success at Z Space.

Lisa Steindler is also the artistic director of Encore Theater, one of the most successful independent producing agents of new plays in the Bay Area. Her eye for successful new works helped nurture a litter of prominent new playwrights in the region including [Adam Bock](#), [Steve Yockey](#), [Mark Jackson](#) and [Peter Sinn Nachtrieb](#) to name a few. Not content to merely dig up a resume or list of reviews in her quest for commercially successful work, she relies on her own compass. "People ask me how I pick shows and I don't pick plays. I pick people who I want to work with. When I first met Adam [Bock] and he read his work and produced *Five Flights*, I told him 'I'll produce your next 10 plays'. Done." Her instinct for people has produced not only critical acclaim, but financial successes that are above average for San Francisco theater with a healthy five of her last seven shows profiting.

Ultimately, the theater community as a whole is facing daunting challenges. Cuts to the arts are staggering, audience numbers are down and the larger local venues are taking bigger slices from what is available. While some see this as a time to retreat, it is refreshing to hear Lisa discuss her vision. "I do think things are going to get worse in the next two years financially. It's going to get rough. But I also see right now as an opportunity to forge a new San Francisco theater for the next 20 years and not just here at Z Space, but by collaborating with other theaters. Now is the time to do it." It might just be a prayer, but in the church-like setting of the new Z Space, maybe someone is listening.

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