

Designing Women

Clockwise from top: Janet Roeder, Marann Faget, Sinéad Chick, Mari Imaizumi, Denise Ruemping and Sarah Aydllett. Their work becomes your plays.

THE ESTROGEN POWER BEHIND ROCHESTER CIVIC THEATRE

BY MICHELLE SAXTON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FAGAN STUDIOS

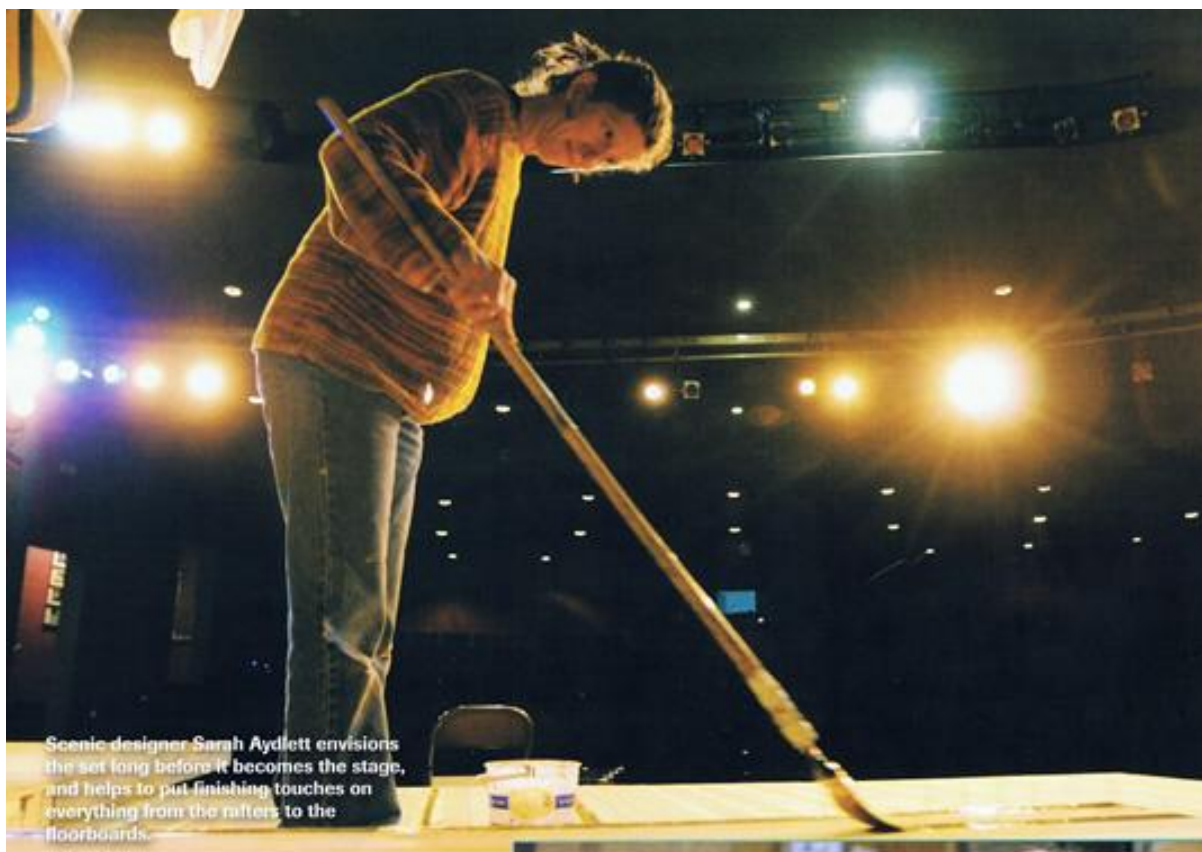
Scene One: The curtain opens on a shabby, yet charming corner building on a busy street. Two women are sitting on the front stoop chatting it up and enjoying the early May evening. The audience gets its first glimpse of New

Orleans, Rochester-style.

The two women are deep in conversation when Stanley Kowalski saunters up. He is rugged and good looking and, thanks to **Marann Faget**, resident costume designer for Rochester

Civic Theatre, he's dressed the part of a blue-collar street hunk from his too-tight T to his fabulously, just-right jeans.

Marann dresses him for success on stage. Mother Nature gets credit for his hunky demeanor.



Scenic designer Sarah Aydlett envisions the set long before it becomes the stage, and helps to put finishing touches on everything from the rafters to the floorboards.

Dressing the Divas and Dudes

In fact, Marann dresses all the characters, Stanley, Stella, Blanche, Steve and Eunice, to perfectly fit the role Tennessee Williams envisioned for them when he first penned *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Marann does her homework in "getting to know" the characters she's outfitting.

Being the costume designer is much more than pulling something off the costume rack and calling it a day. "It's about researching the parts so you understand the personalities of the characters. It's having a vision of what the costumes will look like when they're done. It's about movement and how the outfits will look on the actors when they're onstage. And it's about doing a lot of laundry," she says.

Marann is just one of six women who work behind the scenes in plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, just finishing its run in Rochester.

As the scene progresses, Stanley stops in front of the building and hollers up to his wife, Stella. (Stella undoubtedly wonders why he can't just come in the house to talk to her. But this is 1951 and Tennessee Williams didn't build that kind of questioning into the original script.)

Janet Roeder coordinates scene building, backstage volunteer help and lighting. She aims to "tell the story through light."



Imagine it, Build it, Move it, Move it, Move it

Stella walks down the front steps of the building on Elysian Fields Avenue to calmly greet Stanley. While the audience listens intently for what she'll say to him, in another part of the theatre, resident scenic designer **Sarah Aydlett** considers the ease with which Stella descended the staircase. "The goal is not too steep, not too many steps, never slippery ... something just right for graceful entrances," says Sarah. "I love the challenge of moving people within a certain timeframe. My challenge is in getting characters from place to place in the scene in a way that makes sense."

The steps are just one of hundreds of pieces of the Streetcar set that volunteers put up, move around and tear down before, during and after the show. By final-curtain time, some 50 volunteers – who have been at the theatre night after night – are likely wishing they had been moving Sarah's first version of the set, the miniature version that's more apt to fit inside a shoebox. That's how Sarah begins each set, with handcrafted, miniature versions of the eventual full-scale models.

Almost as quickly as Sarah imagines the scenes, **Janet Roeder** builds them. She is the "handyman" of the group and has been the veteran member of this woman-based workforce for the past 15 years. "I love getting dirty and doing what I need to do to get the job done. I love shopping for the supplies for the sets that Sarah creates. I handle all the technical aspects of the performance. I oversee the scene shop in building the scenes and I coordinate the volunteers to make sure we have enough backstage help for each performance."

Janet's official title lies somewhere between technical director, resident lighting designer and all-around go-to person for whatever questions need answering.

But her talents don't end in the workshop; Janet also literally sheds light on what she's crafted.



Marann Fagel, costume designer, dresses characters for each play by researching and custom-creating outfits.

Lights and Literature

As each scene of Streetcar opens and closes, each mood, each moment, each memory is etched in light. Janet has a passion for creating the ebb and flow of each scene through the splash or subtlety of lighting accents. "As the lighting designer, I work closely with the director to determine how each scene should be illuminated ... to tell the story through light. It's an art form. I like to think that we all tell the same story, just in different ways," she says.

True enough.

The storytelling continues during intermission. As audience members take a stretch break, they also take the opportunity to re-read the program handed out when they arrived at the theatre. They double-check their knowledge of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, remembering that Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh were the first televised Stanley and Stella, and they check to see if their friend's niece is playing the part of Eunice.

This is what they really want to know.

Thanks to **Mari Imaizumi** the answer is in front of them in black and white.

Mari wrote the playbill and made sure there were enough copies to go around – approximately 1,500 for a show like Streetcar. She also took care of the advertising that piqued their interest enough to go see the show in the first place. Mari collected the bios from the actors so playgoers could see who played the role of fading Southern belle, Blanche DuBois. And she wrote the press releases that appeared in the paper and took care of the announcement on the marquee out front. Without Mari, no one would have even known that Streetcar had come to Rochester.

"I went to school for economics and hated it. While going to school in Japan, I got involved with staffing the school festival and I loved that. From there, I worked in theatres in Japan doing behind-the-scenes work. I've been hooked ever since," she says.

The Class Act of Acting Class

Denise Ruemping

You could say it's in her blood. Or you could say she is a product of her education. Or you could say she's a combination of the two. Regardless, Denise Ruemping has always had a flair for the dramatic and a fondness for teaching. She's pursuing both passions as the education director for the Rochester Civic Theatre. For Ruemping, it's a custom-made calling.

"I have always loved the theatre and have always been involved in some kind of theatre production or play ever since I was 16. This is just where I am supposed to be."

However, upon graduating from college, she shrugged her stage ways, gave up the theatre and went into elementary education. It wasn't long before she figured out that, in her world, the theatre and teaching were the yin and yang of who she is. Her individual interests weren't complete without the other. "I love children and I love to teach so I simply combined my passions into one career."

Today she runs acting classes for youth and adults, and puts together summer camps and youth programs that speak to the Stanley or Stella in all of us. She herself can be seen on stage throughout the year.

Some of the programs Ruemping is working on include: STAR 2009, RCT's summer theatre day camp; Theatre Academy, theatre classes that run during the school year; Youth Performance Troupes, Theatre Art Series, a collection of workshops and seminars designed to enhance the theatre experience; and the nation's longest continuously run program on sexual abuse awareness and prevention called Touch/No Easy Answers.

Ruemping's goal is to enrich the lives of youth and adults through theatre. This is one job she was made for.

Education director Denise Ruemping runs acting classes for children and adults at the theatre, inspiring a new generation of actors and refining the skills of the rest.



Office manager Sinéad Chick and Administrative assistant Mari Imaizumi handle all things detailed, including programs, ticket and membership sales, royalties, licensing – and paying the bills.

Upcoming Shows

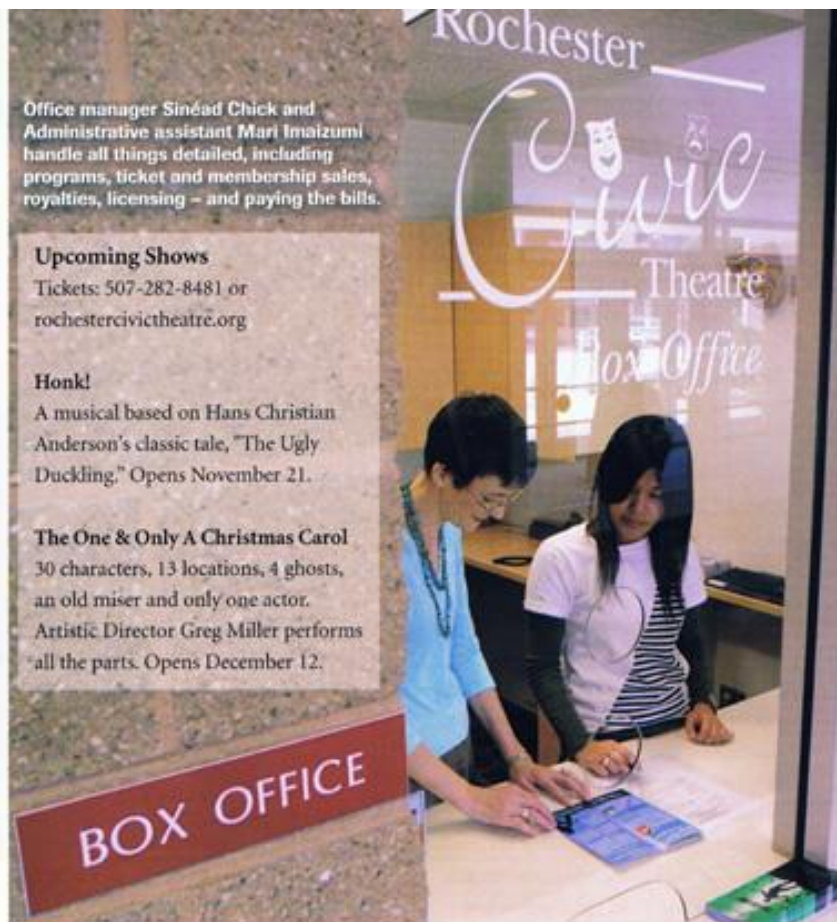
Tickets: 507-282-8481 or
rochestercivictheatre.org

Honk!

A musical based on Hans Christian Anderson's classic tale, "The Ugly Duckling." Opens November 21.

The One & Only A Christmas Carol

30 characters, 13 locations, 4 ghosts, an old miser and only one actor. Artistic Director Greg Miller performs all the parts. Opens December 12.



Setting the Stage

Mari's spread-the-word persona is a dual effort with office manager Sinéad Chick. Without Sinéad, there would be nothing to put in those thousands of playbills Mari sprinkled around town. In addition to keeping the place running, Sinéad could be considered the starting and ending point for each show.

"In relation to the production, most of what I do happens before the show even begins and after the show ends. I make sure the production is available and the royalties and licensing issues are all dealt with close to a year in advance of the show." She also ensures patrons have the information they need to continue their season memberships and book seats for the productions. With up to nine shows a year, Sinéad is always one step ahead of the rest of the workforce in making sure all loose ends are tied up in order for the show to go on.

Sinéad keeps everything moving, and although it's not always the most glamorous part, she makes sure the bills get paid and the lights stay on. Someone has to do it.

A Team Approach

Productions such as Streetcar require the concerted efforts of the team, yet highlight the individual talents of each member of the group. Members of this group complement each other in talents and sing high praise of their colleagues.

"Rochester Civic Theatre is a place where we can be ourselves while we help each other succeed in our overall goal of bringing the very best shows, the very best performances to the people of Rochester," says Marann. "This theatre is filled with love." ♦

Michelle Saxton is a freelance writer who lives on a small acreage near Byron. She enjoys a life of telling tales, spinning stories and chasing children ... her own, of course.