

Debra Batzofin – Richard Loring Enterprises

There is a respect within theatre circles for Debra Batzofin, affectionately known as “Miss B”. She may prefer not to be centre stage, but her strong and perfectionist presence ensures that everything on and off stage runs impeccably. The saying “dynamite comes in small packages” couldn’t be more appropriate.



Debbie in Australia

Miss B expects high standards so don’t try soft soap her, but when you need a friend and someone you can trust and rely on, she’ll be there.

Debbie has of course worked with some of the world's top talent to their feet and has performed in countless shows around the world.



in Footprint, Hairspray at the Lyric Theatre and of David Loring's Sound Stage which brought audiences to Road, Touch of Webber – Taste of Rice and in 1983, and their partnership has seen them travel the world. "I've had fantastic opportunities so I cannot

complain."

Growing up in Port Elizabeth, Debbie was knee high when she and her brother, David Batzofin who is also in the entertainment field, were hauled to the theatre by their parents. She always had the inkling that theatre would be her life, and grew up with like-minded friends (to this day) including Simon James (Civic Theatre) and Dave Whitehouse (Congo Blue).

Working with the Port Elizabeth Shakespearean Festival Group and selling sweets at the Opera House, Debbie confesses that she is not entirely sure how she managed to matriculate! At her parent's request, she enrolled for a Hotel Receptionist Course, but dropped out soon after when called by the city lights of Johannesburg.



Cruella De Ville!

Here she managed to secure a secretarial day time position at Peter Brown Men's Wear. Debbie was familiar with this trade as her father was employed for many years at Rubin's the Man's Shop and she had worked there during school holidays. In the evenings, however, Debbie sat on the pavement outside the Academy Theatre for a month, waiting for someone not to show up for work. "On one particular night someone came running out of the theatre and asked if I could dress." Of course Debbie could and it wasn't long before she had proved herself and moved across to the Brooke Theatre to do lighting on Ipi Tombi.

One of the few "old school" console operators, she worked on the Grandmaster at His Majesty's. "It was such fun and it was a challenge to make things happen," she says, explaining that she made use of pencils and rulers to get the best out of the old manual boards. When the boards became computerised, that all came to an end and she stopped doing lighting.

"Today kids come in to the theatre, they want to have the corporate type jobs and tell you what amount of money they want... but they haven't paid their dues," says Debbie. She smiles and adds, "Working on Ipi Tombi was my two years of national service."



The Jester! Debbie at the New Orleans Mardi Gras Warehouse where African Footprint performed.

Debbie was freelancing and working on *Ipi Tombi* (Brian Brooke Theatre), a controversial musical considering the time in South African history. “It was the apartheid years in 1974 and we were followed by the police and were even arrested,” says Debbie. “We went into townships and on one occasion in Soweto, Isaac Dladla, one of the dancers, put his foot through the stage floor so we could not continue. A riot broke out and we had to be escorted off the property”.

Debbie worked for five years at His Majesty’s Theatre where she met Denis Hutchinson, who at the time was serving his national service and was back then a novice lighting designer. Freelancing for Brickhill Burke in 1983 on *Razzle Dazzle*, Debbie met Richard Loring. “He was giving out so much free advice at that stage that I suggested we start a company,” Debbie recalls. “Richard already had a company but our association started on 1st April 1983 – we should have known!!” While she looks after the nuts and bolts, Debbie says that Richard is the creative one. “And he always pushes me to the next level.” The pair has proven to be unstoppable.

The partnership saw the Sound Stage being born, which also unintentionally became the training ground for many a lighting designer such as Alistair Kilbee, Glenn Duncan and the list goes on. Both artists and technical crew were given work opportunity for many, many years.



Debbie pictured here with Lou Gossett Jnr in New Orleans and Thabo Komape, a Footprint Dancer

Audiences, including corporate companies, streamed to the Sound Stage where the shows were complimented with a buffet style meal and entertainment. But the traffic congestion to Midrand became a problem, and audiences could not get to the Sound Stage on time. Friday nights, in particular, saw frazzled guests, sometimes arriving late, because of the traffic. "On a Friday evening we started giving our guests complimentary sherry," says Debbie. This just took off the edge and helped everyone unwind. Two years ago the Sound Stage closed their doors, and the Lyric Theatre, with Richard and Debbie once again at the helm, opened at Gold Reef City, Johannesburg.

On two occasions Debbie had to put on new shows in new buildings which were being built. One was the much acclaimed Hairspray which opened at the Lyric and then of course prior to that African Footprint which initially showcased at the Globe Theatre and has now been to all corners of the world.



Debbie and Richard Loring at the Royal Variety Show, London

On 31st December 1999 it was a proud moment when African Footprint was performed on Robben Island. "We were also the first people to be invited from South Africa within 25 years to be part of the Royal Variety Show in London" says Debbie proudly. At this event, it was her highlight to meet "Mr Bean" (Rowan Atkinson) backstage. "I was so excited," remembers Debbie. "Shirley Bassey was there, Lionel Richie and the Calendar Girls. But Mr Bean, he was brilliant. He was so charming and didn't seem to know how popular he was in South Africa."

There have been many milestones too, like stage managing the 50th anniversary of South African Airways where Debbie's final cue was to call in a Jumbo with dancers on the wings. Adventures and memories have been made along the way, like travelling in China for a month, spending 16 to 19 hours a day on the bus and then avoiding turtles for supper!

With her passion for travelling, she has also met other interesting celebrities such as Bette Midler, Liza Minnelli, John Mahoney and David Hyde Pierce (both from Frasier) and most recently, the pleasure of working with international psychic medium, John Edward. Special moments have included whale watching in Australia and of course she has had to find a way around her sea sickness to follow her dream of snorkelling and scuba diving.

The longing and connection with friends and family in South Africa have always ensured that Debbie returns home. "In our industry, associates are friends." Debbie is saying goodbye to the Lyric Theatre and no doubt there are some exciting plans for the future. "I'm going to miss Graham (Brune) and my team... If you don't have a crew, the curtain doesn't go up. I've also enjoyed teaching and training and hope that they will continue to love the Lyric Theatre as much as I do"

The industry is her first love, but Debbie adds there's nothing wrong with staying up all night to finish a jigsaw puzzle.