

## Claire Robins – Events and Installations



Claire Robins

We know Claire Robins as the person behind Events and Installations, a magazine covering the South African entertainment and events industry news. Her life in theatre, however, has been remarkable and you may just look at Claire with different eyes when hearing her story..... if only we could write a book instead.

Claire was born in England where she lived in Clifton, Bristol and attended school at Bedminsterdowns. Her earliest recollection of theatre was at the age of six, when her parents took her to the ballet. "That was the end of me," recalls Claire. "The music was a world of magic." She would dance in front of her wardrobe mirror, the radio playing in the background, and demonstrated her natural flair on stage when taking part in an Irish Jig at school. When her co-star "leprechaun" was overcome with stage fright, young Claire improvised and ended up doing the scene by herself.

For her 11th birthday, Claire's father gave her a special gift. "It's something you can't touch or see," he gently explained. To her delight, he had signed her up for ballet lessons. She later received a scholarship to attend the Ballet School in London, moonlighting in clubs and musical theatres.

Then Claire got married. "I was 18," she recalls. "I thought it would give me career freedom. An Australian Duty Director for tv shows like Coronation Street, her husband longed for sunny barbeques and his mates back in Australia. He was reemployed at an Australian television station and no longer expected Claire to continue working in the theatre.



Claire could not get her head around this. Invited to attend a dance class, she was approached by the choreographer directly afterwards. "I'd like you to be in a musical we are doing called *Funny Girl*," Betty Pounder said. Young Claire packed her bags and toured Australia for the next three years. Claire and her husband met up again, he arriving one night after a show around a year later. He wanted her back but said things would not change. "That was a no brainer for me," says Claire. They were officially divorced seven years later.

In 1968 Claire left Australia for England by a ship which was destined to stop over in South Africa. A monsoon forced the vessel to dock in Durban. As Claire stepped onto African soil, she was taken aback when an older gentleman from African Consolidated Theatres was there to meet her. He was the father of someone she had met in Australia. "My daughter said you were coming," he said. He had arranged accommodation and took her to the opening of *'La Traviata'* that night. There she met Ronnie Quibell who was producing the musical *'Daddy Longlegs'* and he asked Claire to be part of the production. Claire opted against it.

She bought a VW Beetle in good nick and eventually travelled to Johannesburg with the names and telephone numbers of theatre producers like Pieter Toerien, Brian Brooke and Hymie Edwin.



Claire had tea with Pieter Toerien on her first day in Johannesburg. "We need someone like you in South Africa," he said. You should go see Brookie who is casting a show."

The next morning Claire called Brian Brooke, went to his office at 10am and by 10h30am had started rehearsals for the show. She found herself under Brian Brooke's wing, he found her a flat, and she along with the cast, enjoyed lunches at his home and skiing at the Vaal as one of the family.

Taubie Kushlik asked Claire to understudy the lead in her production of Cabaret. "She wanted to cast me for two and six and as much grass as I could eat... I couldn't afford to work for pocket money," remembers Claire. She was then offered a job at the Adam Lesley Theatre. "Adam was a satirist and all his musical reviews had a satirical bent."

Claire stayed with Adam for a year, and after 18 months in the country she returned home to England in December 1969. "I hated it," confesses Claire. "I was a bit horrified, shocked, that a lot of my peers were on the dole. I had been half way around the world while they sat with their feet up, some of whom had the same education as me. The theatre was in the doldrums."

Claire stayed in England for 15 months. She bumped into an old acquaintance who needed a replacement in a show called 'Oh Calcutta!' Says Claire, "It was a very naughty show. I went to the theatre and saw the first half and then left. I didn't want to dance around the stage with nothing on!"



During her time in England, Claire did everything except working in theatre. She deliberately avoided it to explore any other avenues. Then one day she received a telegram from Adam Lesley asking if she would come back to South Africa immediately for a show. "You'd better go," said her mom. "You're not happy, as much as I would like you to stay."

To Claire South Africa felt so free in comparison to London, it certainly did. "The strange thing was, South Africa gave me the freedom I didn't feel I had in England," she said.

Travelling through country with Adam Lesley's show 'Sweet Fanny Adams', Claire performed and worked as show assistant director. "The performing side eventually became less important," she says.

Many other productions followed such as 'Straight Up' with English Director Frank Shelley, 'Manners and Morals' for Geoffrey Sutherland and 'The Best of Birds and Beasts' for Robert Kirby.



At the end of 1973, Geoffrey Sutherland was casting a production of 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat' being staged in South Africa by Louwrens Snyman for PACT (Performing Arts Council of Transvaal). Nobody had an inkling of the phenomenon it would become.

"Louwrens wanted me to play Potiphar's wife in the show," said Claire. "I didn't really want to do it, but he would not take no for an answer. For such a small role in the show, it would be like taking a step backwards."

Joseph was only scheduled to run at the Alexander Theatre in Braamfontein but from the opening night it was huge. "It became an animal," says Claire. "Families would follow the show, they would pitch up for the production all over the country. We had more fun than anyone deserves."

Over the years that followed Louwrens Snyman made sure Claire kept working in every show he could. "I used to always perform in a show and act as assistant director. My life was the theatre, it was like a family, but most importantly I loved and respected the technicians but they never got the glory."

Financially, with the future in mind, Claire became concerned. "At that stage I was approached by one of the Directors of Anglo American Properties, a man by the name of Nigel Mandy in 1981," she says. Claire was appointed as PRO for all the Anglo American's shopping centres. She remembers him saying, "You qualify because you have a degree in abnormal psychology... you've worked with actors and musicians."

Nigel Mandy gave her invaluable guidance to running a business. "Nigel taught me to invite the Chief Fire Officer to breakfast every month, and walk around the centre, recorder in hand, taking notes of the meetings. He in turn would tell us what we could and couldn't do for the next event...that was Health and Safety in 1981. It was critical then, and people think it doesn't matter these days."

Still running the shopping centres, Claire continued doing the odd production and one day received a phone call from Louwrens Snyman, who said, "I need you for the opening of the Pretoria State Theatre." PACT would showcase all the performing arts, including Joseph.

At the end of that year, the much loved director of PACT, Eghard van der Hoven, retired. This was devastating news and many members of the PACT fraternity feared for their future. Nick Michaletos and Rudi Kesting left to form Production Projects and Louwrens approached Claire to form a partnership to create a new production company and asked her to find a backer.

Claire approached Herman Youngleson, who was head of Kinekor (now Ster Kinekor) for financial backing and they formed International Players and Theatre Production (IPTP). David Land, the agent for Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, furthermore supporting the new company, promising them future rights for all their productions. "But first of all I want you to do Joseph again," said David Land.

"We agreed and asked Nicky and Rudi to supply the set and full technical production for the show which would open at the Alhambra Theatre in Durban," said Claire. "Their quote for the entire job was R20 000."

At that stage Claire was 34. She resigned from Anglo American and started working on their production of Joseph. "We knew we had to be careful with the budget and from what I'd learn regarding sponsors as a PRO, I got hold of Gilbeys who owned Douglas Greene. We negotiated that we would have a scene in the show that was branded with their products. Another sponsor was Adidas who supplied Joseph brothers' costumes for the show. "Purist turned up their noses, but the sponsors enabled us to afford the show."

After opening in Durban, Joseph was again a huge success. Then came the phone call. Marloe Scott-Willson, who was playing the narrator, had been involved in a serious motorcycle accident along with her fiancé.

Claire's experience always emphasised the importance of an understudy. The accident was a huge blow but the show was able to continue with Alvon Collison as Narrator.



The show closed in Durban on the Saturday night and was moving to the Johannesburg Civic Theatre when tragedy struck again. That Sunday morning the phone rang at Claire's home in Johannesburg. It was the Warden Police notifying her that there had been a car accident in which two of the cast members, Kritch Krook and Janine Bowen, had died on their way back to Johannesburg.

The next day it was in the press: 'Jinx of Joseph'. Regardless, Joseph opened. "It was not the ability to cruelly dismiss and disregard, I just couldn't afford to be in shock," remembers Claire. The cast had met and were given the opportunity to cancel the show but had jointly decided to carry on. "We had a new Narrator, Kim Kallie, a beautiful blonde girl who looked like an angel, to open the show the show in Johannesburg. "I don't think anyone in the audience could believe what they were seeing," says Claire. "There was a standing ovation."

The show was scheduled to tour the country and Claire left Johannesburg to visit the relevant theatres to sort out ticket sales and checking the technical side of things. "In my absence, Herman Youngleson got cold feet. He said to Louwrens he couldn't go on with IPTP."

Claire reminisces, "There really was no need for us to close, but by the time I returned the "notice" was up: The run of Joseph would come to an end in two weeks time.

"I was a very even tempered person in those days but I flew off the handle. IPTP was a dream come true for Louwrens and I, we had everything going for us."

Within a few days, a friend asked Claire to produce and direct a show for the launch of the Hyperama supermarket which was to be held at the Civic Theatre. "So in 1982 it became one of the first companies to launch a theatrical production for a major corporate event."



Louwrens in turn went off to run The Magaliesburg Country Restaurant. Claire was contracted to create an event for the opening of the Menlyn Park Shopping Centre in Pretoria which included setting up the marketing, advertising and buying of capital equipment for events. Thereafter she was approached to run a company that created computer generated images for event presentations.



“It was 1984 and out of the blue I received a phone call from Louwrens who was in Johannesburg and wanted to meet up with me” said Claire. He wanted to rekindle our partnership and to start producing productions again.

After discussing the feasibilities of doing so we decided to go ahead. We arranged to meet the following Sunday morning to finalise our plans. “At 8am on the Sunday morning, two friends of ours arrived at my place in Westdene with tragic news. Louwrens was dead. A gang had arrived at his brother’s club the night before searching for someone – when Louwrens intervened he was shot.”



Skip a year and Claire was convinced to go back into acting. She wasn’t yet forty when Pieter Toerien asked her to do a play called “Stepping Out”. Whilst attending the opening night of another of his productions, Claire was approached by a young 15 year old girl, who said, “Claire, do you remember me?” It was Suzie Collins, the daughter of Val Dunlop with whom Claire had appeared in a play. “I’m here with daddy,” Suzie added, then dragged Claire off to meet her dad Stephen, a now well known technical production manager. “We’ve been together ever since and I’m enjoying live as a ‘grandmother’ to Suzie’s children,” smiles Claire.

“Over the years I have had to reinvent myself. With Stephen constantly away on events, I looked for a new avenue of work. After working for two publishing companies, I started Events and Installations, my own magazine, in 2000, which still continues to this day.”