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Megawatt director/actress Susi Damilano powers one of San Francisco's hottest small theaters

By: Karen D'Souza

Susi Damilano may be best known as a leading lady of theater, but she's an accountant by trade. One of the driving forces behind the fast-rising SF Playhouse, she was a crack auditor for San Jose's Ernst & Young for years. Only recently did she retire the green eyeshade to go from counting beans to stealing scenes, which she did playing the drug-addled cocktail waitress in Tracy Letts' "Bug" and the pill-popping invalid in Allison Moore's "Slasher."

"I got to the point where I knew there had to be more to life," says Damilano, who launched the SF Playhouse troupe with hubby Bill English in 2003. "Now I feel like everything that has happened in my life culminates in running this theater."

Her head for business gives the troupe a real edge. While most emerging theaters are run on creativity and chaos, Damilano thinks like a CPA. She sees the poetry in an orderly quarterly report. She loves spreadsheets (really!).

"They're very logical, and they force you to figure out how to relate things to each other," says Damilano, who lives in Point Richmond. "I love analyzing data. I love breaking things down, and that's the same part of your brain whether it's audited financials or character motivation."

Born in Heidelberg, Germany, Damilano moved to Cupertino in time for kindergarten. She went to high school in Los Altos before studying accounting at San Diego State. The security of the gig initially appealed to Damilano, whose immigrant parents equated the arts with struggle and starvation. Then, in her 30s, she took an acting class in the back of a shoe shop in Sunnyvale, and suddenly the stage beckoned. She now embraces the fragility of a life in the arts.

"I think great actors open up their rib cage and ask you to hold their heart," says Damilano, who hesitates to divulge her age.

Over the years, she has blossomed as an actress who can go from glamorous to gut-wrenching in a heartbeat. By day, she still toils in the corporate world (she's now a human resources honcho for a financial services company), but by night she runs one of San Francisco's hottest small theaters. As producing director, she controls the purse strings, but she also has built a reputation as a formidable artist.



Theater producer Susi Damilano is photographed with the poster of "Honey Brown Eyes," at the SF Playhouse, in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, Sept. 15, 2011.

Photo courtesy: Ray Chavez / Staff - Mercury News

Right now she is directing Stefanie Zdravec's "Honey Brown Eyes," a bracing Bosnian war drama, in its West Coast premiere.

"This theater is our child," Damilano says. "It's like we had a baby, and now we are watching it grow up."

Together, she and English (artistic director) have built an organization known for its chutzpah. SF Playhouse stands out because Damilano and English know how to find the sweet spot between provocative and popular, with juicy new plays that connect emotionally with audiences, such as "Dead Man's Cell Phone," "Shining City" and "Tigers Be Still." They attract top local actors (from Stacy Ross and Robert Parsons to Paul Whitworth), and they have great taste in spotlighting little-known playwrights, such as Rajiv Joseph and Stephen Adly Guirgis, who go on to fame and fortune.

Of course, before the theater got on the radar, they struggled to fill the seats for their 100-seat main stage. They even hawked tickets to tourists at the half-price ticket booth in Union Square.

"We knew what kind of theater we wanted to build, and we knew we had to hustle to do it," says Damilano, who adds that many of the most loyal subscribers track back to those early days.

As a former auditor, Damilano knows how to stretch a dollar, and she doesn't take no for an answer.

"Bill and Susi are enthusiasts, which is infectious," says Rebecca Martinez,

a major supporter of theater in general and SF Playhouse in particular. "They encouraged me to come to the theater. For years, I was extremely resistant, but they never gave up. I am now deeply involved, and one of their major admirers."

No matter what the project, Damilano works overtime to balance low budgets with high ambitions. If something has to go, it's downtime -- which, when she has some, she likes to spend beach-hopping, surfing and theatergoing.

"Susi's the hardest working woman I know. And she never seems overwhelmed or thrown by any of it," director Amy Glazer says. "She's the antithesis of the diva. Sometimes she would show up after a full day of work, then rehearse a straight six hours and then organize a board meeting with great finger food and detailed agendas. She made my head spin. She claims to sleep, but I don't believe it."

Damilano says she learned the 24/7 work ethic at Ernst & Young, where she specialized in Intel and Apple before they were giants.

"The thing I learned about being an entrepreneur is that it's not a job, it's a life," Damilano says. "It doesn't matter how many hours you work, you work until you're done."

While some artists are tortured by their craft, having to face down demons for each role, Damilano always seems bouncy and upbeat. She can tap into the darkness for a part that demands it, but she's no drama queen.

"Susi is bright like a light, strong and clear," actress Stacy Ross says. "She's also steadfast, true-blue and very funny. It's the coolness of the people that makes the Playhouse work."

On the other hand, she can be all business. She's a tough customer when the bottom line is at stake.

"You have to take the emotion out of it," she says. "It's kind of like when you clean out your house. You have to throw some things away, even if you love them."

That kind of practicality inspired "plugger night," the one night during the run of each play when the troupe actually encourages people to tweet on Twitter during the show. Theater snobs were aghast, but the idea caught on with tech-happy subscribers. (Those who participate are seated in the back row, where they can't disturb others.)

"People are going to text anyway, so why not channel that impulse creatively?" Damilano asks. "Theater is an ancient art form, but it is also important that we try to keep up. We want to break boundaries and keep things interesting, for ourselves as well as the audience."

That adventurous spirit informs her choices as a director and an actor.

"Susi is fearless as an actress, and totally committed to finding authenticity and truth in every moment that she's on stage," Glazer says. "She isn't afraid to be exposed and emotionally naked on stage. She is totally willing to become a character in this very authentic and relaxed way. She just takes it on."

Collaborators say she's a team player in a genre dominated by monster egos. And she doesn't put on airs; she freely admits to being a huge Oprah fan, for instance.

"There is nothing narcissistic about her," Glazer says of Damilano. "She makes everyone in a room feel comfortable and loved, but she also gets the work done. She's a no-nonsense gal."

Multi-tasking is definitely her mantra, but even Damilano had to set boundaries when English starting giving her notes on her acting performance one night after rehearsal. At home. While they snuggled in bed.

"It is complicated when you work together, but you've really got to draw the line somewhere," she says with a laugh. "Once we hit the bed, I turn into the wife."