

## Toronto's Crow's Theatre to get a permanent home – in the east end

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Chris Abraham's work as a theatre director fits in almost anywhere.

Over the past year, you might have seen the Crow's Theatre artistic director's productions in a tiny 100-seat studio (*Winners and Losers* at Richmond, B.C.'s Gateway Theatre) or from one of 1,826 seats around a fabled thrust stage (*The Matchmaker* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival).

The 38-year-old is a versatile and nomadic artist – Abraham even directed in both of the country's official languages in 2012 – which makes the news that he and his theatre company are about to put down permanent roots a genuine surprise.

On Tuesday, Crow's Theatre will announce plans to open a 200-seat theatre in the heart of Toronto's east-end Leslieville neighbourhood, an \$8-million home built into the base of a new condo tower being erected by Streetcar Developments. "Fingers crossed, everything will be good to go for the Pan Am Games in 2015," says Abraham, looking every inch the prosperous new property owner in a sharp suit, over a lunch of steak tartare on Queen West.

For at least two decades, there has been a recurrent complaint from Toronto's theatre artists and audiences about the physical state of the three original mid-size companies in town that date back to the 1970s – Factory Theatre, Theatre Passe Muraille and Tarragon Theatre. This housing crisis came to a head in the summer with the firing of Ken Gass as artistic director of the Factory as he agitated for ambitious renovations.

As a recession grinds on and arts funding stagnates, however, Toronto's arts space problem is being addressed – but, unexpectedly, through a boom in brand-new theatres as the second-wave generation of companies that emerged in the 1980s finds innovative ways to procure real estate.

The Daniels Spectrum (a.k.a. the Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre) opened on Dundas Street East this fall, providing a permanent base for the 30-year-old Native Earth Performing Arts and its sister companies. Meanwhile, the Theatre Centre, established in 1979, will finally move into permanent digs next fall, taking over the former Carnegie Library on Queen Street West.

Now, Crow's Theatre – established in 1983 by Jim Millan, and known for a long time as Toronto's

“sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll company” due to shows like *High Life* and *Unidentified Human Remains* – will become the first mid-sized theatre to open on the “other” side of the Don Valley.

“It’s about going where the space is possible, where there’s an audience, where there’s opportunity,” Abraham says. “Also, it’s a city that celebrates new things – it’s harder to cherish, support and nurture our existing institutions.”

Abraham took over the reins from Millan in 2007, when the Crow’s founder moved on to an eclectic and lucrative international career that has, of late, involved directing former CNN host Larry King in a one-man show, as well as a touring *50 Shades of Grey* parody.

While some theatre companies built around a single artist’s vision have not weathered transitions well, Crow’s has kept an impressive artistic reputation under Abraham – co-producing new productions in Vancouver, Calgary and Montreal and touring hits like Anton Piatigorsky’s *Eternal Hydra* and Kristen Thomson’s beloved *I, Claudia*. (This Thursday, Abraham’s production of Thomson’s new play, *Someone Else*, opens in co-production with Canadian Stage.)

But a nest for Crow’s has been a goal for Abraham all along. The first major step was to hire managing director Monica Esteves, who had been a student of his at the National Theatre School and gone on to administrative positions at Canadian Stage and Nightwood, and then launch a feasibility and strategic planning process.

“We’re both East Enders and we’re really interested in looking at this growing community – increasingly gentrified, a lot of cultural workers, and absolutely no professional cultural institutions,” says Abraham, who lives on the Danforth with his actress wife, Liisa Repo-Martell, and their two children, ages 6 and nine months.

Buildings – with the cost of insurance, maintenance and unexpected repairs – can be money pits for small companies that once only had to worry about the artistic work. But Crow’s Theatre’s place in Leslieville will be unusual in that it is designed specifically to be a revenue generator. In addition to the theatre productions, the venue’s three spaces will be available for community programs and rented out for weddings, parties and corporate events – all of which will help fund the art.

Abraham calls the model “social entrepreneurship” and he and Esteves are pursuing it on the assumption that public funding may not really increase in the next quarter-century. He looked to the United States for models and found one in the Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn, a cultural venue that does not accept government grants or public funding. He describes it as “luck” that the project got off the ground so quickly: “It was the kismet of having met the right developer at the right time – and our city councillor Paula Fletcher championed the partnership right away.” (More than \$1-million of the cost of the project is being covered through Section 37 funds.)

As for Abraham’s directorial work across the country, Crow’s will produce fewer tours as it moves to the new building – but he’s not giving up his relationship with Stratford, which he calls a second artistic home. Next summer, he’ll tackle *Othello* with Dion Johnstone and Graham Abbey in the Avon Theatre, making him one of a tiny list of Canadians to have helmed productions in all four theatres at

the Stratford, Ont., festival.

Through Crow's new home, Abraham hopes to pay some of his success forward to other younger theatre companies – curating their work to add to his season, but also offering hope that the days when theatre venues could just pop up are not over. “I'm hoping that it's inspirational to other artists who have ambitions to grow their organizations – to think maybe a little more entrepreneurially about models for sustainability,” he says.