

As the crow lands: Chris Abraham preps a nest in the east end

ROBERT CUSHMAN | Jan 26, 2013 2:00 PM ET



Crow's Theatre "I think the new relationship I am looking for has to do with wanting to redefine for myself my relationship to the people I am making theatre for," says director Chris Abraham.

When people talk about "the theatre district" in Toronto, they usually mean King Street West, where the Royal Alexandra and the Princess of Wales live. Even if you take the majority view among ticket-buyers that theatre in Toronto really means commercial theatre, that picture is geographically limited. It leaves out the Yonge Street strip between Queen and Dundas, guarded at one end by the Elgin and Winter Garden and at the other by what is now the Ed Mirvish. If your taste runs rather to what are sometimes called the independent theatres – the established non-commercial ones that we might call "institutional" if they were a bit bigger and a lot more comfortable – then the theatre district is a bit further west. New York has off-Broadway, we have off-Bathurst; which is where the Factory, Theatre Passe Muraille and, a little to the north, the Tarragon are all situated. Commercial or non, big or small, Toronto theatre is a west end deal (though not in the bright-lights London sense). Theatres east of Yonge, certainly east of the Don River, are rare creatures.

That may be changing. Near the Beaches, there's already the Red Sandcastle Theatre, housing a constantly changing slate of visiting small-company productions. And a more grandiose project is now taking shape in Leslieville, at Dundas West and Carlaw: not too far away, as the crow flies. Or as Crow's flies, because this new theatre, scheduled to open in two years time, is the brainchild and the future home of the previously peripatetic Crow's Theatre company, whose artistic director for the last seven years has been Chris Abraham.

Abraham himself lives in the east end – as does his administrator Monica Esteves, a vital partner in the enterprise – so for years now he's been travelling to work, or to see other people's work. He's universally acknowledged as one of our leading young (well, younger) directors; he also has a reputation for having built his career with exemplary canniness.

When I mentioned this to him during a phone conversation this week, he denied having had any great master plan; he's gone where the work was. "It's a challenge having a directing career, especially if you want to stay in this country. I've not thought hugely about what I'm doing or where I'm going."

Still, he's had an impressively varied freelance career both before and during his time at Crow's; he became known for directing new plays, most notably Kristen Thomson's *I, Claudia*, but he also directed classics and rarities with the late

Bill Glassco's short-lived but exciting Young Company in Montreal and later with Soulpepper; for the last few years he's been a rising star at Stratford, culminating last year in his hilarious, loving production of Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*.

"I definitely enjoy directing — I seize as many opportunities as possible to be in a rehearsal hall," Abraham says. He'll still be getting them, as in their new premises, Crow's, which has been averaging two productions a year (currently Thomson's *Someone Else*, a co-production with Canadian Stage), will probably be mounting three. Even that of course hardly makes a full season, but that isn't the aim. The architect is Joe Lobko, whose previous projects include Wychwood Barns and the Brickworks.

"This isn't," says Lobko, himself an east end resident, "just about building a theatre; it's about sharing it with an area that needs it. For one third of the year, that will be theatre; for the other two-thirds, it will be available for community activities" — among which he lists musical performances, art exhibits, conferences, cooking classes (the planned facilities include a kitchen) and weddings. ("Weddings," Lobko says, "are cultural events in some societies.") This, obviously, is a business model as well as a cultural one; the diversification is aimed to keep actual theatre ticket prices down to \$20. Which, by current standards, is a steal.

There will be 200 seats, designed to be flexibly arranged, plus a rehearsal space ("roughly the size of the stage" — a luxury), and what Lobko calls "a generous lobby space, that can itself be used for community events." And it's all to take up the ground floor of what will otherwise be a condo. This seems to be one of the things that especially interests Lobko: "There's an exciting history of making theatrical spaces in the bottom of large buildings." (He instances the Auditorium Building in Chicago, designed by Louis Sullivan, mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright). "And the acoustical buffering problem, from both directions, is an interesting technical challenge."

Abraham describes his own challenge as "wanting to develop a different relationship with the audience. I am interested in getting to know the audience that is coming to see my plays. Recently I've started to make myself available to audience members after performances and spent time speaking with them about their experiences, why they come to the theatre. I never used to do this. I think the new relationship I am looking for has to do with wanting to redefine for myself my relationship to the people I am making theatre for. What are my obligations to them? What is important to them when they come to the theatre?"

I think that's healthy. Practitioners often give too little consideration to audiences, unless as pressure groups or as the abstract recipients of good intentions. Abraham is also unfashionably sanguine about the future of the theatre in the city, "I'm not worried about future leadership. I think there'll be a renewal. I grew up in an era where many of us learned to do a lot with very little. Maybe we've tended to think too much inside the sandbox."