

‘Something had to give’: Joel Ivany on leaving Against the Grain Theatre after 13 years

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Joel Ivany, the founder of the Toronto-based Against the Grain Theatre, has stepped away from the experimental opera company after 13 years. Taylor Long/Handout

In its latest annual report, Opera America documented a depressed state of affairs for the business in North America. For example, figures showed that as many as 30 per cent of subscribers had not returned to theatres in 2022 after the live-arts restrictions had lifted. The report also noted the widespread “Great Resignation” had affected the world of arias, as companies struggled to rebuild their staffs after professional talent scattered during the pandemic.

The great resignation has now hit the Canadian scene. Joel Ivany, the founder of the Toronto-based Against the Grain Theatre (AtG), has stepped away from that experimental opera company after 13 years of outside-the-box opera experiences, which include the staging of pint-sized productions in pubs across the country.

“These two last years have obviously been very hard for us in the arts to come back from,” says the 42-year-old Ivany. “It was taking a toll on me mentally and physically, and something had to give.”

The industrious Ivany leaves the company with two coming seasons of programming. He will continue in his role as artistic director with both Edmonton Opera and Opera at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. The man once described as Canadian opera’s enfant not-so-terrible spoke to The Globe and Mail about the fate of Against the Grain and the state of opera in general.

Was your departure from Against the Grain inevitable?

Interesting question. When I started it, I didn’t think it would be what it has now become. Back then, no one would hire me. Against the Grain was a way to do some work to show people what I could do.

You showed you could do things differently.

Opera is expensive. There was no way we could do what opera had always told me it was. Doing what we could do with the resources available, we created a product and type of production that defined the company. I think it changed a lot of people’s outlooks about what opera is and what it can be, and that it could be so much more than a big orchestra in an opera house.

Will the company fold after its scheduled programming runs out in 2025?

Anything’s possible. But it’s not what the board wants or what general director Robin Whiffen wants or what I want. My last day is Aug. 12. The job could be a great opportunity for someone who has the time and energy to take the company to the next level.

What kind of opera world would somebody new be walking into?

Attendance is not what it was before the pandemic. And before the pandemic, it wasn’t all roses, gold and jam-packed houses either. Opera companies are going to run out of money unless things change.

Playwright Jeremy O. Harris recently was quoted as saying theatre companies are increasingly dependent on the whims of board members who are wealthy but out of touch. Do you see that in opera as well?

It totally is an issue, though not at Against the Grain. Boards need to understand where opera and theatre is today and what challenges are being felt across the industry. There needs to be an embracing of new norms and challenges instead of blindly assuming everything will just return to what was.

The length of theatre productions is trending shorter. Same with opera?

Yes, 100 per cent. What I've been learning about the last two years with Edmonton Opera is dealing with orchestras and unions and overtime. The standard call you get with an orchestra is three hours, which means you get them for 2½ hours, with a 30-minute break. You can't get through many operas at 2½ hours. So, there's a financial desire to have shorter operas.

They say the theatregoer's favourite four words these days are "90 minutes, no intermission."

I believe that. Opera companies are going to have to make some very tough decisions on what music we cut. At Edmonton Opera we're doing *Don Giovanni*, and we're going to leave out some arias. That will upset some singers and probably the diehards who know this music inside and out. But we have to get these operas into a more digestible length. It's been done with Shakespeare for hundreds of years.

What about changing up the programming? I understand Edmonton Opera's experimental spectacle *Orphée+* did well at the box office.

It outsold our *Tosca*. Gluck's *Orfeo* is not a money maker. It's not *Carmen*. The fact that something with projections, sound effects and singing aerialists did better than Puccini's *Tosca* just says that we need to be creative. There has to be something in there that cracks through the question of why we're doing this in the first place.

You're leaving *Against the Grain* after the company just won three Dora Awards for *Bluebeard's Castle*. How does that feel?

We beat out the Canadian Opera Company for outstanding production. It's always fun beating out the Goliath and the millions of dollars that went into those COC productions. It shows that it's not about size and scale, but quality. It's not to say that the COC didn't produce quality. But there can be quality and worth in the small and intimate as well.

How were ticket sales for *Bluebeard's Castle*, though?

We met our goal, but our goals were modest. We had Gerald Finley, who won a Dora for outstanding performer. We had a great cast and a great show. But it still didn't sell out.

I don't imagine that's unusual in 2023.

It goes to show you. I've heard from other companies that we're still not back. The thing is, I don't think we'll ever be back. We have to start from scratch and build this from where it is now. We need to think of it as the new normal.