

With the appointment of Joel Ivany as its artistic director, Edmonton Opera cuts against the grain

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Canadian stage director and artistic director Joel Ivany in Edmonton on Nov. 16. Joel Ivany has been appointed artistic director of Edmonton Opera. JASON FRANSON/The Globe and Mail

Edmonton Opera, a company that is “going slowly broke,” according to its interim general director Richard Cook, has appointed opera-world wunderkind Joel Ivany as its artistic director.

Recruiting the maverick founder of Toronto’s indie collective Against the Grain Theatre is a bold remedy for a long-running company built on traditional North American opera practices, which have become increasingly unsustainable for regional companies.

“The board felt we needed to expand the product,” Mr. Cook tells The Globe and Mail. “We spend a lot of time selling seats to people who already buy seats, and the model of three mainstage productions a year does not allow for enough touchpoints with audience members to do effective fundraising.”

Mr. Ivany, 41, adds the top-dog spot at Edmonton Opera to a portfolio that not only includes his leadership role with Against the Grain but his job as director of opera at Banff Centre, a four-hour drive from Edmonton as his Subaru Forester flies. He says that while there will be “some overlap” with his three jobs, the “main gig” will be in Edmonton, where he’s lived since July. (His wife, the soprano Miriam Khalil, teaches at the University of Alberta.)

“This is a new challenge, running a larger company and bringing some of the energy we’ve been building with Against the Grain to Edmonton,” Mr. Ivany says. “These types of jobs don’t come up too often anywhere, let alone Canada.”

Mr. Ivany succeeds Tim Yakimec, general director from 2013 to 2021. (Ivany's job title, artistic director, is new.) When Mr. Yakimec took over, Edmonton Opera, founded in 1963, was on the brink of financial collapse with a \$2-million debt. Over his tenure, the company was stabilized, producing "traditional works in a traditional way," according to Mr. Cook.

The traditional way is to draw from a dozen or so potboilers and repeating them on a cycle over several years. The company's current mainstage season, truncated because of the pandemic, offers Puccini's *La bohème* and Mozart's *Così fan tutte* this spring. It is the opinion of board members that the conservative approach was no longer workable.

"In a city of a million people," Mr. Cook says, "it's a hard road to sustain a performance art as expensive as opera.

Total artistic expenses for 2018-19 (Edmonton Opera's last full season, pre-COVID-19) amounted to just less than \$800,000 for three productions and nine performances at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium. The bill for music provided by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra alone was \$303,000.

"We need to sell a lot of tickets in order to pay the costs of mounting these full-scale productions," Mr. Cook says.

But rising expenses and smaller budgets reduce the definition of what's considered full-scale. When the size of orchestras and choruses are reduced, for example, opera enthusiasts notice the difference. "The audience can tell good art from great art," Mr. Ivany says.

Most known for founding Against the Grain in 2010, Mr. Ivany has directed *Macbeth* for Minnesota Opera and *Carmen* for both Vancouver Opera and the Canadian Opera Company. He actually made his mainstage operatic directing debut at Edmonton Opera, in 2013, with Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

At Against the Grain, Mr. Ivany has made his mark with small, eclectic productions that included a monthly Opera Pub series in Toronto that was literally pint-sized.

With in-person performances largely banned last year because of COVID-19, Against the Grain had an international hit with its virtual presentation of *Messiah/Complex*, a daring outdoor reimagination of Handel's *Messiah* filmed across the country.

Some Albertans might have caught Against the Grain's bar-storming cross-Canada tour of a stripped down and modernized *La bohème* in 2019 at Medicine Hat's Mainliner Pub. That production serves as an example of the type of informal presentation that can attract "alternative audiences," in Mr. Cook's words.

“Sitting through a performance that is three hours or longer in a hall where the singers might be 200 feet away is a turnoff for some people,” he says. “We feel there’s an audience that isn’t inclined to attend opera but could be persuaded to attend something involving operettic music.”

Mr. Ivany’s flair for presenting offbeat opera in unconventional spaces is seen as a good fit in a city with a dynamic theatre scene that boasts North America’s largest and longest-running Fringe Festival. While there are no plans for Edmonton Opera to completely abandon its mainstage productions at Jubilee Auditorium, it won’t be business as usual.

Before it was cancelled because of the pandemic, Mr. Ivany was set to direct Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide* for Edmonton Opera in March, 2020. Looking back, he says the budget drove some of the artistic choices – choices he would not necessarily make now as the company’s artistic director.

“We need to dream big and bring in some of the best conductors and directors we can,” Mr. Ivany says. “If we’re going to do *The Magic Flute* at the Jubilee Auditorium, we’ll put the resources behind it. This city deserves that.”

“But if we can’t do that, it will have to be a different show. And if not that, it’s going to be in a different venue. We’re going to have to be creative.”

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