

ARTS CLUB ANNIVERSARY ESSAY: “THE ARTS CLUB ON SCREEN”

BY MARK LEIREN-YOUNG

Surf the channels at prime time any night of the week and you're guaranteed to spot something that was filmed in Vancouver, and someone who got their start on a local stage. Chances are that local stage was the Arts Club. Maybe you'll see Michael J. Fox on his latest sitcom, or Linda Boyd on *Republic of Doyle*, or one of the dozens of supernatural guest stars on *Supernatural*. When Vince Gilligan was in Vancouver the week before the finale of his TV series *Breaking Bad*—a contender on almost everyone's list of the best TV shows of all time—he was singing the praises of one of his writers, Moira Walley-Beckett. In 1982, when she was Moira Walley, the future *Breaking Bad* scribe strutted her stuff in Ann Mortiffee's *Reflections on Crooked Walking* on the Granville Island Stage.

Since Stephen J. Cannell began transforming Granville Street into Jump Street in the late 1980s, Vancouver has boasted about being Hollywood North. But the initial L.A. invasion was about cutting costs and convenient flights, not about working with local talent. It was rare to see Canadian actors on screen in U.S. productions. But it was almost as rare to see local actors who hadn't cut their teeth at the Arts Club.

Throughout the theatre company's 50-year history, the Arts Club has made it possible for Vancouver's actors to make a living. And I've always felt that the two most unsung contributions it has made to creating a theatre community was a) providing places to congregate—like the lounge at Seymour Street and later the bar at Granville Island—and b) making sure that theatre professionals could make a living even when there wasn't a job for them on stage. Some of the city's finest performers, playwrights, directors, designers, and technicians paid their dues and rents working in the Arts Club's bar or box office, or doing all the other off-stage jobs that keep theatres running. The Arts Club's longtime boss, Bill Millerd, is proudly and infamously tight with his money. But the money he's saved—and the money he's spent—has changed a lot of lives, made a lot of theatre dreams come true, and helped create a cultural ecosystem where Hollywood producers could discover first-rate local talent.

Because the Arts Club's longest-running hits tend to be crowd-pleasing commercial fare, the company's critical and national reputation tends to derive from its success as a mainstream production company. But despite the commercial reputation, the Arts Club has never shied away from new works, new writers, and new theatre artists. And some of its most successful commercial fare—like *Talking Dirty* or *It's Snowing on Saltspring*—was created by local writers and starred local actors.

Over the last 50 years, the Arts Club has established itself as arguably Canada's most influential and successful theatre company not devoted to the works of dead British playwrights. So after you're done surfing the channels spotting all the Vancouver scenery, start surfing the internet and buy yourself some theatre tickets.

There was a comedy revue in the 1980s, produced in a small makeshift theatre space in Gastown, called "Off Off Granville Island." Nobody missed the joke that Vancouver's Fringe and fringy productions weren't aiming for Broadway; the Holy Grail for new work and new theatre talent in B.C. was, and generally still is, a run at the Arts Club.

Mark Leiren-Young wrote Easy Money (with composer Bruce Kellett), the first original musical ever produced at the Stanley Theatre. He also wrote and starred in The Year in Revue, which ran annually at the Revue Stage for three years in the early 1990s, and wrote the memoir Never Shoot a Stampede Queen. He is the theatre critic for The Vancouver Sun. www.leiren-young.com