

Reaching for the Stars

Danielle Egan | Image: Peter Holst | Published: January 04, 2011



With a grant from Vancity, Elia Kirby is building an incubator lab for arts professionals.

A local scene shop's designs to become a cultural incubator.

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A trapeze artist spills down from the rafters, unravelling from a large silk ribbon, braking just short of the ground. Nearby, five carpenters build a three-metre-high rollercoaster and a giant, round bed. It's a surreal setting but a typical day at the office for Elia Kirby, founder of the Great Northern Way Scene Shop, a 10,000-square-foot facility that has designed and produced sets for performing-arts organizations ranging from large outfits such as the Vancouver Opera and Bard on the

Beach to smaller groups including Touchstone Theatre and Green Thumb Theatre.

"Our shop provides the purchasing power of a large organization," explains Kirby, 41, who started the shop in 2003 when Finning International Inc. donated its Great Northern Way property to UBC's theatre department. "Performance artists have limited funds," he says, "so we provide a one-stop facility where arts groups access everything from lumber to expensive machinery to a large roster of people: designers, carpenters, painters, welders, graphic designers rolling from one project to the next."

The non-profit scene shop now produces about 40 sets yearly, employing up to 30 workers. It brought in \$1.5 million in revenues in 2010, the majority from Vancouver's approximately 140 theatre groups and visual-arts organizations such as the Vancouver Art Gallery. Another 10 per cent of the Scene Shop's work is corporate jobs, and last year it scored a \$500,000 production gig with VANOC to build the venues for the Cultural Olympiad's Code Live events.

Kirby is plotting to grow corporate and non-profit clientele and double revenues by expanding into an adjacent industrial building. With a grant from Vancity, he's currently developing the business plan. "The goal is an incubator lab for arts professionals with offices, rehearsal spaces, studios and production shops," says Kirby, whose blueprint is the world-renowned Banff Centre. "Imagine the synergy generated by all those people under one roof: architects, prop masters, costume designers, digital artists, directors, actors. It'll stimulate local arts and make Vancouver an international destination for creating art that travels around the globe."

Kirby had a unique incubation process. He spent his childhood travelling across Western Canada with his parents' horse-drawn Caravan Stage Co. While attending SFU in the '90s, he worked in the carnival and the film industry, then married a clown (Lois Anderson, co-founder of Leaky Heaven Circus), started raising a family and got a master's degree at UBC. By 2003, looking for a stable career and missing the eclectic inventiveness of the theatre community, he recognized an industry void: the Arts Club Theatre Co. and the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Co. are the only Vancouver theatre companies to have dedicated production shops.

"Vancouver has built a great reputation in the performing arts," says Kirby, but our geographic isolation, lack of population density, skyrocketing real estate pushing eastward into industrial zones and precarious arts funding have contributed to an increased space crisis. The result is "a ghettoization among theatre, dance and visual arts disciplines," according to Kirby, whose shop received about \$30,000 in grants in 2010, barely enough to cover overhead, including the \$24,000 in yearly rent that UBC began charging in 2010. Kirby prefers building corporate partnerships to fuel the shop's growth so that more arts groups can afford larger production budgets.

Production costs typically eat up about one-fifth of a theatre group's budget, and by pooling resources the shop "can help cut costs and provide new and established individuals and groups more room for artistic exploration," Kirby says. "We're all stronger working together than apart."

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