

The Start of Something Big

A gem of a theatre opened its doors on Gladstone Avenue this fall, and director John P Kelly has found his theatrical home at last
By Janet Uren



“YOU KNOW THE STORY,” says John P Kelly. “The one about the little red hen.”

How does it go? Oh, yes. Once upon a time, there was a little red hen that found a grain of wheat. “This grain should be planted,” she said. “Who’ll help me?” “Not I,” said the duck. “Not I,” said the cat and dog. “Then I’ll do it myself,” said the little red hen.

That’s a story that has inspired John P Kelly. When he moved from Ireland to Ottawa in May 2004, Kelly was confident that with 35 years’ experience under his belt as a director in theatre, he would easily find a job here.

He was wrong. “Everyone was lovely,” Kelly recalls. “I talked to everyone. They were all so welcoming, but there was no work. Finally I thought about the little red hen and decided to ‘do it myself.’ ”

Kelly’s career in the theatre began in Dublin in the 1970s,

Showtime: After close to a year of searching for work in Ottawa as a director or an actor, Kelly decided, somewhat grimly, to reinvent himself as a producer. Finding a stage was tricky, and his first play was mounted at the Mercury Lounge. Little wonder he’s thrilled to be producing six shows at the Gladstone Theatre this season

when he more or less fell onto the stage. “I didn’t come from a theatrical background. My father worked on the docks in Dublin, and I was 16 before I even saw a play. Then one day I ran into a friend on the street, and he said, ‘Hey, Sean. Let’s put on a play.’ So we did. And neither of us ever looked back.”

From that day on, Kelly has lived and breathed theatre. “I had stars in my eyes, and like a lot of young people, I started chasing the breaks.” In 1977, one of those breaks arrived with a bang. Kelly directed an award-winning community play and won a bursary to study at the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin. That

Profile

opened a door into professional theatre (specifically, Irish radio drama with RTÉ, the Irish National Broadcaster, and later, work with the European Broadcasting Union). In 2004, when his wife was offered a job in Ottawa, Kelly had no hesitation in following.

Only to find there was no job here. After close to a year of searching, Kelly decided, somewhat grimly, to reinvent himself as a producer. “I never wanted to produce theatre,” he claims, “but what choice did I have?” His first attempt was an Irish play called *Eden*, by Eugene O’Brien, a story of marital dysfunction played out in an alcoholic haze. “I wanted to offer something modern and gutsy,” Kelly explains, “a side of Irish theatre not yet seen in Ottawa.”

Finding the play and a talented cast was easy compared with finding a stage. “It isn’t a lack of talent that’s the problem in Ottawa,” Kelly insists. “There are lots of good companies here but very few stages. Someone suggested that I try the Mercury Lounge in the Byward Market.”

Fitting his play onto a minuscule nightclub floor, Kelly got his feet wet as a producer. He also found a name for the new company. “We had to be out of there before the dancing started at 10, so we started every night at 7:30 precisely.” That is how SevenThirty Productions was born.

The venture was a modest success, breaking even financially, and Kelly was encouraged to try another play in 2006. He mounted *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (a wild and profane lament for five Irishmen exiled to London). This time Kelly staged the production in a bar. It was the perfect setting for action that, in fact, revolved around a hard-drinking, tough-talking wake in a London pub.

The Kings of the Kilburn High Road was produced for tiny audiences crammed, almost like eavesdroppers, into an upstairs space at the Aulde Dubliner in the Byward Market. In the final moments, when actor Pierre Brault — portraying a brash and violent man — faced the house with tears running down his face, the connection between actors and audience was almost painfully close.

SevenThirty started to feel its oats with that production. “That’s when we began to coalesce as a company,” Kelly



Fancy facelift: With its crystal chandeliers and art-deco style, The Gladstone is unrecognizable as a former cinderblock garage. The new owners have put together an ambitious schedule, with shows playing 43 weeks in the coming year

reflects. “Though still very small, people started to say, ‘John, you’re doing good work.’”

The Kings of the Kilburn High Road was seen by very few people, however, and SevenThirty was still virtually unknown to Ottawa theatre-goers. Kelly kept risking his shirt and, all in all, produced 10 plays between 2005 and 2008. And the work started to pay off. In 2007, Kelly won the Capital Critics Circle Award for Best Director for *A Night in November*, while actor Pierre Brault won Best Male Performer. That same year actor Michelle LeBlanc won Best Emerging Artist in the new Rideau Awards for her performance in *The Good Father*. SevenThirty was on a roll.

Encouraged, Kelly went on in 2008 to produce *Iron*, by Scottish playwright Rona Munro. Hoping for bigger audiences, he invested in a larger theatre space at Arts Court. It was a nearly disastrous decision. “Critics called the production ‘world-class,’ but unfortunately practically nobody came to see it. I lost a small fortune!”

Never mind. The critics came. Alvina Ruprecht, describing the play to *Ottawa Morning*, admitted that she had been “moved to tears.” And, indeed, there were moments in this production that were wrenchingly well crafted. Consider: The set is a prison. Two guards are pacing ominously back and forth in the

background as a mother (imprisoned for murdering her husband) encounters her daughter across the vast, dividing surface of a small table. The guards glance at them coldly from time to time, their footsteps drumming out a slow, chilly counterpoint to the smoking emotions at centre stage. Such coherent and elegant theatre, says Ruprecht, comes only from wonderful direction.

“What I saw at Arts Court that night showed me that director John Kelly has reached new heights of directorial skill with this absolutely gut-wrenching production of Munro’s play. For me, he and Peter Hinton [National Arts Centre] are now the most interesting English-language directors in Ottawa. If Kelly had Hinton’s budget, who knows what he would do.”

The bittersweet experience of *Iron* — critical success and financial disaster — might have spelled the end of SevenThirty Productions. In fact, it marked the threshold of a new theatrical adventure. In September 2008, the company was invited to move into the new Gladstone Theatre, where Kelly has signed up to direct six plays this year (four for his own company and two for the newly formed Gladstone Productions). “Be careful what you wish for,” says Kelly, smiling ruefully. “Four years ago, I couldn’t get a job — and now six plays!”

Incidentally, when SevenThirty moved into 910 Gladstone Avenue in September, it helped to preserve an important piece of theatrical heritage in Ottawa, for these are former quarters of the Great Canadian Theatre Company. Since GCTC graduated to the new Irving Greenberg Centre in 2007, there has been speculation about the fate of the old stage. Some feared that the building, which started life many years ago as a garage, would soon be demolished.

Those fears were laid to rest on September 11, when the Gladstone Theatre threw open the doors for its inaugural production — *How the Other Half Loves*, written by Alan Ayckbourn and directed by John P Kelly. Kelly did the new theatre proud with his take on a play that *The New York Times* once described as “a relentless comedy of perpetual deceptions.” Critics gave glowing accounts of the production, describing it as “energetic, smart, often

Profile

hysterically funny.” (Kelly’s second offering — on stage until November 15 — is *Catalpa*, the true story of a whaling ship in 1876. This historic event has been described as the most extraordinary prison escape ever.)

As for the Gladstone Theatre, it no longer looks like a jumped-up garage, as it did even in the heyday of GCTC. The new theatre is a little jewel of design and elegance, complete with marquee, a great arched window in front, and a marble-floored lobby with chandelier and bar. Visionary businessman Steve Martin (he also co-owns the Arthur Murray Dance Studio just down the street) has invested lavishly to give this theatre a new lease on life. As well as providing a home for Gladstone Productions and SevenThirty, Martin has invited *Odyssey* (famous for its years of commedia dell’arte in Strathcona Park) and *A Company of Fools* (Shakespeare under the trees) to move indoors. Both companies have survived years in the wilderness, literally, and they are ready for mature lives as companies with a permanent home.

The Gladstone will be running shows for 43 out of 52 weeks in the coming year. This is unprecedented for Ottawa, where the idea of “season” is bred in the bone. But can they fill 235 seats night after night, month after month? Martin believes that they can, by offering an unbroken series of high-calibre plays — such as *Doubt*, for instance, a moral tale that audiences are still arguing about in New York, and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, one of Ireland’s blackest comedies. SevenThirty will also reprise *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*. “People keep saying they’re sorry to have missed it, so we’re bringing it back with the original cast,” Kelly reports.

In fall 2008, John P Kelly feels that he has arrived at the beginning of something important. It confirms his belief that Ottawa is a wonderful city. “I really mean that. A friend of mine, a fellow Irishman, said to me when I arrived here: ‘John, the thing about Canada is that it’s not fully built yet. You have a chance here to contribute a little something to its final shape.’ ”

Ottawa audiences have that same chance — to join in at the beginning of a theatrical adventure story. As for SevenThirty, given its history, it might consider changing its name to Red Hen Productions. **END**