

# MAKING SPACES FOR ART

## TORONTO CENTRE FOR THE ARTS



IMAGE VIA [STEPHANIE FUSCO](#)

### Splitting the Stage: The Mainstage Theatre Becomes Two

Bigger doesn't necessarily mean better. For the Toronto Centre for the Arts, 'big' was their Main Stage theatre – a mammoth stage with an 1,800 seat audience capacity. Grand as it was, the opulent Main Stage theatre spent a great deal of time unoccupied. In the early 2000s, the Main Stage theatre was seeing about 100 days of occupancy a

year while the Toronto Centre's other stages, the 1,000 seat George Weston Recital Hall and the 200 seat Studio Theatre were bursting with bookings. Seeking answers, the Board of Directors conducted a feasibility study in 2004 to investigate what could be done with the gargantuan space that was the Main Stage. A number of proposals came forward with suggestions to rework the space – an area for catering prep, meeting and rehearsal rooms, and the idea of dividing the space into two smaller theatres. Despite the study, the theatre remained as was and the feasibility study and proposals were shelved.

In 2008, a seemingly perfect solution presented itself. The commercial theatre producer DanCap Productions came along and wanted to set up shop in the Main Stage theatre. After a successful run of *My Fair Lady* in early 2008, DanCap brought in the wildly successful *Jersey Boys*. For two years, audiences filled the Main Stage theatre almost 365 days a year. DanCap continued its residency and the Toronto Centre for the Arts saw a flurry of colourful shows, including Green Day's *American Idiot* and the *Addams Family* musical. The days when the theatre went unoccupied were a thing of the past – the Main Stage theatre had a perfect anchor tenant and the previous concerns drifted to back of mind.

Unfortunately, while the old adage says, "there's no business like show business," the curtain fell on DanCap Productions in early 2012 and the company folded. The Board of Directors faced a dilemma: not only had they lost their main tenant, but while the Main Stage had been occupied by commercial theatre

for four years, they had lost the other renters that had once occupied the space a meagre 100 days a year. In an attempt to build up users again, the Board hired a consultant to perform a thorough investigation of the market and find new tenants for the space. The consultant came up completely empty – there were no organizations who could come in and fill a theatre that size for a significant run.

What the consultant did find was the organizations they approached were begging for a smaller theatre. There was significant interest in a 300-700 seat theatre – and there simply wasn't one in North York. Knowing there was a need for a smaller theatre, the Board dug out the 2004 feasibility study that included the plan for how you could realistically turn the Main Stage into two smaller theatres – and the wheels were set in motion.

The consultant hired to find tenants for the Main Stage set out with a new mission – find out how much interest there was in a smaller theatre. The results were phenomenal. They came back saying that there was enough interest to fill two smaller theatres 365 days a year – 700+ days of demand vs. 100 days in the 1,800 seat theatre. The organizations asking for a smaller theatre were not commercial producers that had the resources to sell out an 1,800 seat theatre. Rather, these were not-for-profit arts organizations and cultural groups operating at both a professional and community level. The Toronto Centre for the Arts embraced this client base, listened to the people and let their needs inform a strategic plan.

The strategic plan, along with the 2004 feasibility study and the results of the consultant investigations were presented to the City to full support. In 2014 they received the approval to go ahead with the renovations funded through contributions from the City and a long-nurtured capital reserve fund. A request for proposals from architects was put out and a committee was established to review the proposals through a transparent selection process. Architecture firm Diamond Schmitt was selected to lead the renovations. Having designed and built dozens of theatres worldwide as well as Toronto's acclaimed Four Seasons Centre, they were well-equipped to tackle the job. Renovations went underway.

The Main Stage theatre was strategically split into two – what was previously the stage and back stage area is now the 296-seat Greenwin theatre. It adds to the thrill of attending (or performing in) the Greenwin, knowing it was once the stage where Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons crooned “Sherry” and Christopher Plummer performed as John Barrymore (a performance for which he won his 1997 Tony). There was a significant need to complete the Greenwin



The Greenwin Theatre

theatre first to relieve pressure on the Studio Theatre, which was so overwhelmed with bookings they had been turning people away. The local *Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company*, which had been operating out of the Studio Theatre was ready to expand and moved into the new larger Greenwin Theatre, opening over 100 days of availability in the Studio Theatre. By completing the Greenwin space first, the Toronto Centre for the Arts has been able to maintain activity throughout three of their theatres during construction.

Set for completion in fall 2016, the Lyric Theatre will be like no other. With approximately 576 seats, the Lyric Theatre delivers exactly what the North York community asked for. As its name suggests, the space will be ideal for musical theatre with acoustic panels wrapping every wall. These panels are literally multi-faceted: in addition to acoustics, the translucent panels can be individually backlit and customized for each performance with colour-changing LEDs. Kristopher Dell, Director of Production and Facility Services at the Toronto Centre for the Arts excitedly illustrates the possibilities – the walls could slowly turn blood red during *MacBeth*, or could be playfully plaid for a production of *Forever Plaid*. The first theatre of its kind in Ontario (and possibly Canada, Dell mentions), the space itself will literally be incorporated into the show. The user-friendly system will allow for endless possibilities and unadulterated innovation on the part of lighting and production designers.

It isn't just these state-of-the-art features that are ahead of the curve. Both the Greenwin and Lyric Theatre are on the forefront of accessibility – because as Dell tells us, the minimum just won't cut it. In the 296-seat Greenwin theatre there are 16 accessible seats. In the Lyric, the front two rows can be removed for assistive devices and feature movable arm rests for sliding seat transfer. Both theatres feature stair lifts to assist artists accessing the stage. Both spaces are visual and logistical works of art.

Although it all seems like this major renovation went off without a hitch, Kristopher Dell wisely stresses the importance of using consultants and expertise, no matter how big or small the project. Dell credits the acousticians, electricians, technicians and other consultants that made the Greenwin and Lyric Theatres a reality. While consulting may seem like a significant expense, he muses, “You save money with the consultants... Money well spent working with them.” His other piece of sage advice? “Set your budget, then have more money than that. Have a contingency. There are always surprises that are beyond your budget.”

The Toronto Centre for the Arts is excited to be meeting demand with these two new spaces. They listened to what their audiences and theatre-makers wanted and used that to inform their strategic direction. Careful planning and a thoughtful approach to the renovations allowed them to continue to stage productions almost uninterrupted, and by constructing the Greenwin theatre first, they were able to meet the needs of their tenants throughout the build.