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Saskatoon-raised Kris Nelson is at the top of the UK arts scene



CAM FULLER, SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

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Kris Nelson, a Saskatoon native, has forged a career at the top of the UK Arts scene. Handout.

Kris Nelson got hooked on theatre as a child in Saskatoon. Fast-forward a few decades and he's the outgoing head of the Dublin Fringe and is about to take the reins of LIFT, London's biennial of international theatre, as he tells Cam Fuller.

Q: How old were you when you left Saskatoon and when was that?

A: I left Saskatoon in 1998 when I was 17. I'd just finished Grade 11 at Aden Bowman and was awarded a scholarship to do an International Baccalaureat at Lester B Pearson United World College in Victoria. I came back home on and off between 2000 and 2002 and worked in restaurants, a scientific toy shop, a fruit stand, at YMCA camps and as a tour guide at Batoche National Historic Site. I also had a coveted Green Eggs and Ham slot on CFCR for about three months.

Q: Who do you have in your family still in Saskatoon?

A: Both my parents, Steve and Edie Nelson are still in Saskatoon, along with my grandmother, Antonia Peters. I have lots of extended family and very old friends still there and love getting time to come home when I can.

Q: What were your early theatre influences growing up in Saskatoon?

A: I've been involved in theatre for a long time, and attending Rosemary Hunt and Elaine Gorenson's acting classes at Victoria School was the central point of my life when I was about 8-13. I loved it. They fostered an amazing space for creativity, impulse and confidence. I auditioned for plays and was in a Gateway Theatre Production of Armadillo for Young Audiences when I was 12 or 13 as The Sphinx and was in this play called Paris Is Out, in which I believe I got my first review from Cam Fuller. I was in theatre at Bowman as well, and the environment there was so encouraging — especially for those of us in the arts. For instance, I was in the same class and involved in lots of shows with Joel Bernbaum who is now Artistic Director of Sum Theatre and bringing such strong theatre experiences to

Saskatoon audiences and making a huge difference for independent Saskatoon artists.

Q: How did the opportunity to run the Dublin Fringe come about?

A: I was based in Montreal, working on a few festivals in Canada as a freelance curator and producer — Magnetic North in Ottawa and PuSh Festival in Vancouver, and I had my own agency, Anonym, which was devoted to touring the works of experimental Canadian theatre and dance companies. Through Anonym I consolidated tours in Europe, Australia, North and South America and all across Canada. Along the way I attended Dublin Fringe Festival and was really impressed by the festival and its ethos. When the job came up, I put my hat in the ring by applying and interviewed for it and moved here in summer 2013 to put my first festival together for September 2014.

Q: What does that job entail?

A: Dublin Fringe Festival is one of the world's only entirely curated Fringe Festivals, which makes it different from ours in Saskatoon which is on a lottery system. In Dublin, the festival programmes 70-80 Irish and international theatre, dance, music, comedy, circus and performance art events — the majority of these are having their world premieres during the festival. As it's curated, we often follow artistic themes or lines of inquiry and we're devoted to experimentation and giving audiences adventurous artistic experiences.

As Festival Director, I lead the team, I set the artistic tone and consolidate Irish and international partners for our programme. I'm responsible overall for the budget of the festival and the year-round management of FRINGE LAB, our studio space where artists access free rehearsal and development space and we provide training and professional development. Overall, it's my job to ensure an exciting context for artists to be able to make bold, brave choices in pursuit of daring ideas and to connect what they do to audiences.

Q: What have you enjoyed most about it?

A: Dublin Fringe Festival attracts 30,000 + attendees each year and they're enthusiastic, curious and excited to see new work — they're frequent arts goers and the type of people who make Fringe their only arts stop in the year. It means that we're engaged with a really diverse group of fans and followers. It also means that Dublin Fringe has a place of pride in Irish life — people know, respect and deeply love the festival.

The Irish arts sector is full of skilled, intelligent and passionate artists and cultural workers — it's been a thrill to get to know them all and work alongside them. I love the job, the festival is flexible and dynamic enough that means I can put my stamp on it and continue the incredible legacy that it has.



Walk through a pop-up city of stories. Inside each tent, encounter a person who tells the true story of a moment in their life when everything changed. Move through the city of stories, visit as many tents as you feel drawn to. The installation's evolution is determined by your actions. As the day passes, the tents transform into multi-coloured structures covered in stories of change. Trophy is a living monument to the experiences that make up

our lives and a compelling conversation about change. A Canadian-Irish co-production by STO Union and Change of Address at the Dublin Fringe. DAHLIA KATZ / DAHLIA KATZ, [HTTP://WWW.DAHLIAKATZ.COM](http://www.dahliaKatz.com)

Q: What's it been like living in Dublin?

A: Dublin is an amazing city, full of spontaneity, talent, skill and fun. I love the city's size and even more its personality. People here are witty and always up for some banter or some good craic and they're also engaged in what's happening here; in the politics, in the arts, in community life. It's similar to Saskatoon in that regard, people here are fiercely proud of what's local.

Q: Describe your next job, at LIFT.

A: LIFT is London's biennial of international theatre. The festival is one of the world's leading events for contemporary, political and experimental theatre and it has a remarkable history. It's changed the shape of the arts in London; when its founders Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal started it in 1981, they were told that no one could do theatre better than the English and they swam counter current and introduced artists from all over the world to London audiences. By 2012 LIFT had earned such an esteemed place in the hearts of Londoners that they shut the Thames twice that year, once for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and once for a performance LIFT presented as part of the Cultural Olympiad. Held every second June, the festival presents about 20 shows from around the world. It commissions and co-produces new work and collaborates with institutions like the Barbican, Young Vic and Royal Court. Some of these works then tour throughout the UK in outings produced by LIFT. LIFT plays one of the UK's leading roles as the force for international theatre in UK and also is embedded in the local, it's LIFT Tottenham programme develops participatory arts projects with international and local artists in a way that the expertise and personality of Tottenham plays a leading role.

The challenge at LIFT will be to add to its incredible legacy, to continue to represent international voices and artists within the city, to be daring, to create a festival of ideas and impact that resonates on a civic and international level. I start

in April and I'm really looking forward to the move and putting my first LIFT programme together for June 2020.

Q: What's your advice for a young person considering a career in the performing arts?

A: Be a generous collaborator. Be engaged in your local scene and keep yourself informed about what artists are doing outside of your home context. Be curious and hungry. Value the expertise of those who've come before and add your own thing and nurture it. Disrupt the status quo if you have to make your own context for what you want to do.