

Accidental impresario

Promoter and event organizer planned a law career but strayed into the arts

BY MIKE DEVLIN, TIMES COLONIST SEPTEMBER 23, 2009



Tyl van Toorn of Fantan Group is the brains behind Transmission, a music industry conference taking place in Victoria at the Crystal Gardens today and tomorrow

Photograph by: Debra Brash, Times Colonist

Tyl van Toorn doesn't necessarily mind being interviewed -- he's got an opinion on just about everything -- but he strongly dislikes talking on the record about a few specific things, one being himself.

By that yardstick, I'm pretty much van Toorn's least favourite person right now, given the unmentionables he hurled my way after grudgingly agreeing to a this-is-your-life interview.

It isn't the first time this concert promoter-cum-event producer-cum-one-man wrecking crew has cursed me out during our seven-year professional relationship. But that comes with the territory. Van Toorn has a molten lava tenacity; you always know where you stand with him, whether or not you asked for such an update.

The easily offended don't last long in his vortex, but those who stick it out will go to the wall for him. One of those is Nick Blasko, co-owner of Atomique Productions and a longtime friend of van Toorn, who first met him almost two decades ago while at Camosun College.

"I walked into class, and within the first two minutes, I identified him as this black-haired maniac,"

Blasko said with a laugh. "I thought, 'Who the hell is this jackass?' It was almost as if he felt that he should be teaching the class."

There's a lot van Toorn could be doing -- acting, playing music, running a small country. But his skill set is best-suited to festival production companies such as TNT Productions (of which he is CEO) and music industry get-togethers like Transmission, which he co-founded in 2006, and which takes place this week in Victoria.

Born in Montreal in 1973, van Toorn was shuttled west with his family, in a Ford van, at age one. There were various stops during his childhood -- his mother, Janet Michael, is an actress; his stepfather, David Ross, who died in March, was the artistic director of Kamloops' Western Canada Theatre -- but when van Toorn eventually settled in Victoria in 1993, he knew it was for good. "This is the best city in the world," van Toorn said.

Though he's an avid flamenco guitarist and has plenty of event production experience, van Toorn's initial plan was to avoid the arts altogether. When he took a left turn and delved into the arts and entertainment community during the mid-1990s, it was during preparations for law school. "I [got into the arts] because it was easy for me to do," he said. "It was built into my family and I had access to it. But I didn't think it would be what I ended up doing."

His first paid gig in Victoria was as a stage tech at the 1994 Fringe Festival. Soon after, he met his current business partner, Tracy Summers, while working at the B.C. Festival of the Arts. The pair worked together again at Victoria's Folkfest in 1997, and in the fall of 1998, festival organizers hired them as producers, hoping they would take the festival in a new direction.

For the next nine years, their company, TNT Productions, was at the helm of Victoria's longest-running annual event, and in 2003 helped create the Open-Air concert series, an offshoot of Folkfest.

Van Toorn said he learned plenty during the near-decade run: Prior to TNT's arrival, the event operated on a \$130,000 budget with largely amateur programming; during its final bow in 2006, it had a \$1-million budget and offered 240 shows on four stages. One of the biggest: A K-Os concert that drew thousands of enthusiastic fans to the Inner Harbour in 2005.

Folkfest led to hordes of opportunities for TNT as both a producer of events and manager of other festivals and action sports competitions, including Whistler's Telus World Ski and Snowboard Festival. Van Toorn's next big move, under the umbrella of his and Summers's newly formed Fan Tan Group, of which he is also CEO, was his boldest one to date: Transmission, an exclusive think-tank conference featuring leading lights of the worldwide entertainment industry.

The first three editions were staged in Vancouver and featured former KCRW music director Nic Harcourt and Polaris Prize-winning musician Patrick Watson, among others. The fourth is being held this week in Victoria and is attracting guest speakers and musicians such as DJ Champion, producer

Sandy Pearlman (the inspiration behind Saturday Night Live's "More cowbell" skit) and AEG Concerts vice-president Elliott Lefko.

"It was never our intention to host it in Victoria," van Toorn said of the four-day event, which features two days of round-table discussions at Crystal Gardens and an additional three days of showcase concerts tomorrow, Friday and Saturday at Market Square, which are open to the public. "But the more and more we looked at the ideal location, it felt more appropriate for it to be hosted in a smaller town."

Some of the discussion will centre on emerging markets and technologies in the entertainment field, and how the issue of intellectual property relates to music, two areas van Toorn is most passionate about.

"Transmission is very engaging on an intellectual level," he said. "I love the entertainment business, but there's a deeper socio-economic relationship to culture than a lot of people perceive." Offshoots of Transmission have already taken place in China and Scandinavia, and van Toorn said he is planning to expand into Mumbai, Moscow and São Paulo.

It's a good-news story on the business front as well. Van Toorn expects Transmission will bring more than \$1 million to the local economy.

By this point in the conversation, van Toorn's voice had dropped a few decibels. He was no longer yelling, but he was still getting his point across loud and clear.

Transmission, a conference for music-industry professionals, runs through Sept. 26 in conjunction with the Rifflandia festival, www.rifflandia.com.

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