ARDEN THEATRE

season dazzles with diversity

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CRISTINA WOERNS/Photo

Grammy Award recipent Alex Cuba shares his Latin music with Arden Theatre audiences on April 24.

Listening to music beamed into your living room is great. But there's something magical about being surrounded by people in a large venue. It's more than sounds simply washing over you; it's about interpreting emotions singers communicate and sharing them socially with people around us.

The Arden Theatre is the perfect venue for theatrical productions. It draws big crowds yet is intimate enough theatregoers experience those powerful physical and emotional bonds. And it can hum with emotion both joyful and sad, effervescent and melancholy.

As the world heads into a New Year, the *Gazette* spoke to Elliott Garnier, the Arden Theatre's professional programming presenter for insights into upcoming performances.

"The first half of our season was incredible. We had 12 shows and sold out seven. It's hard to predict what will sell in the second half. Traditionally when times are tough, people turn to entertainment. Whatever happens in the global economy — music, dance, theatre can help us through those times," said Garnier.

The Irrelevant Show returns performing its *20th Anniversary Special: Doing Our Best o*n Jan. 18, 2025. Unfortunately for fans, the smash-hit comedy show is sold out. The two-hour special will star Mark Meer, Donovan Workun, Jana O'Connor, Peter Brown, Neil Grahn and Marianne Copithorne.

"They've done 700 sketches through the years, and they're taking their best and putting them together," Garnier said.

Jazz singer Laila Biali shifts gears with her new project titled *Joni Mitchell & the Canadian Songbook Reimagined* on Feb. 1. Biali takes audiences down memory lane with reimagined covers of Canada's musical icons: Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Leonard Cohen, K.D. Lang, and the Tragically Hip.

"Laila is way more than jazz or pop. She's showing she can master the great Canadian songbook."

The Black Opry, a home for Black musicians playing country, blues, folk and American, makes its Arden premiere on Feb. 7. The powerhouse voices of Tylar Bryant, Shelley Hamilton, Grace Givertz and Jett Holden perform.

"Black Opry is an organization that connects Black artists in country and Americana who didn't see themselves represented in the country genres. The organization posted their mission and within two weeks, they were inundated with requests for singers. A booking agent and a festival director puts together the shows. This is one concert where you can learn the roots of Black country music. Beyonce just released her country album, and it has brought a lot of attention to the history of Black country music."

On Feb. 14, Valentine's Day, Montreal-born Grenadian Canadian Kaia Kater will provide a taste of her songcraft. She is a folk artist who studies Appalachian music and is known for her fiery banjo musicianship. The singer-songwriter also draws on her Quebec and Caribbean roots reflected in her new album, *Strange Medicine*.

"Her music is lush and a bit psychedelic at times. But anyone who can get Taj Mahal and Allison Russell on their album must be doing something right. We're catching her on her artistic rise."

JUNO and Polaris Music Prize nominated singer-songwriter Basia Bulat drops by Feb. 15. The multi-instrumentalist is expected to release her next album, *Basia's Palace*, a presentation that pulls from R&B, soul and freak folk.

"This is going to be a sneak peek at her new album."



CHRISTINE HEWITT/Photo

Ballet Kelowna brings The Cowboy Act Suite & Other Works to the Arden Theatre on Feb. 28.



RICHARD MCNEIL/Photo

Kaia Kater performs at the Arden Theatre on Feb. 14.

Ballet Kelowna steps up Feb. 28 with T*he Cowboy Act Suite and Other Works*. The contemporary ballet's triple bill features Cameron Fraser-Monroe's *taqes*, Alysa Pires' *MAMBO* and Fraser-Monroe's *The Cowboy Act Suite*.

MAMBO delivers a joyous Latin vibe while *taqes* is very moving. And *The Cowboy Act Suite's* looks through a satirical Indigenous lens.

"Simone Orlando has been the artistic director for 10 years. She's been at the helm and built up a reputation of artistic excellence."

Al Simmons, a one-man variety show, has entertained families for 50 years. The Winnipeg-based actor returns to the Arden stage on March 1 with his oddball act.

"Kids of all ages respond to his comedy, music, dance and situation gags. He really knows how to play to audiences."

Globe-trotting group The Paperboys make an appearance on March 7. The sextet will stomp through Celtic reels, traditional Mexican folk, fiddle tunes, New Orleans brass band, classic pop and a waltz or two.

"I was first introduced to them at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival. Tom Landry, the founding member, is from Mexico and he brings an infusion of Mexican folk music. And Geoffrey Kelly is the spirit of western Celtic. This band is known for its incredibly lively performances and a lot of people will be moving in the audience. This concert gives people a choice of celebrating an early St. Paddy's Day."

International Women's Day follows on March 8, and Garnier invited the women-led ensemble, *Bel and Quinn,* to celebrate the event. The two sisters fuse Haitian rhythms with jazz and soul while their themes deal with self-acceptance and healing.

"They sing in Creole, English and French. Their 2023 album *Donte Sann yo* was nominated for Global Music Album of the year at the JUNO Awards. Their music is anything but dark. It's lively, upbeat and joyous."

Prepare for country music star Jason McCoy to return to the Arden with *The Great Canadian Road Trip 2.0.* This time, he's touring March 9 with Chad Brownlee and Jason Blaine.

"I'm really excited to present this one. Jason McCoy has been in country music for 25 years. Chad Brownlee, a former hockey player, got a start after a shoulder injury sidelined him. And Jason Blaine has had 13 Top 10 singles. They are the next generation of country icons and we're happy to shine a light on them."

Blue Moon Marquee, winners of the 2024 JUNO Award for Blues Album of the Year drop by April 5. The self-styled duo, A. W. Cardinal (vocals/guitar) and Jasmine Collette, a.k.a. Badlands Jass, (vocals/bass/drums) are everywhere: jazz clubs, dance halls, folk venues, blues haunts, hospitals, prisons, markets, motorcycle joints, dive bars and renowned festivals. For their Arden gig, the duo is backed by the cool vibes of Darcy Phillips on Hammond B3 and Rhodes.

In a closeup and personal performance, Grammy Award winning Alex Cuba is back on April 24. A prolific songwriter, he boasts nine full-length albums as well as *Voces De Mi Familia*, a mini documentary celebrating his family and roots.

"He's incredibly charismatic. I first met Alex at the Juno Awards, and we had a great chat. I recorded Alex for a CKUA broadcast, and it was very memorable. He brings that same charisma and energy to the stage," Garnier said.

Closing the Arden's professional programming presenter series on April 26 is *The Alphabet of Awesome Science*, an Australian-based international touring show. In this family show, Lexi Con and Noel Edge come up with big chewy words and mind-blowing science-based surprises.

Lexi Con has a collection of favourite words – one for each letter of the alphabet. And her collection inspires Professor Edge to demonstrate 26 quirky science experiments that squirt, float, fly, erupt and explode.

"It's gross. It's messy but lots of fun."

Garnier said the upcoming events have something for everyone.

"The second part of the season has blues, swing, jazz, Celtic, country, world music, children's entertainment and world-class dance. There's a mix of audience favourites and fresh perspectives and what I hope will be future audience favourites."

For tickets call the Arden box office at 780-459-1542 or online at tickets.stalbert.ca. ■



BJOERN FRIEDRICH/Photo

▶ **The Paperboys bring their eclectic vibe to the Arden Theatre on March 7.**



EMILY CARVER/Photo

▼ **The Black Opry brings the history of Black country music to the Arden Theatre on Feb. 7.**





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▲ **Australia's The Alphabet of Awesome Science makes its debut Arden Theatre performance on April 26.**

NATALIE JANE/Photo

◀ **Laila Biali sings Joni Mitchell & the Canadian Songbook Reimagined on Feb. 1 at the Arden Theatre.**