

TORONTO STAR SUNDAY, AUGUST 26, 2012 SECTION E

# GREAT SCOTT

Back to the Future is a blast from the past for star Christopher Lloyd, in town for Fan Expo, E5

# ENTERTAINMENT



## ALEXANDER NEEF GENERAL DIRECTOR OF THE CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY



BOHJIANG.CA PHOTO

# Hiding in plain sight

The COC's Alexander Neef may appear shy and retiring, even as he attends rock concerts, top restaurants and dive bars with friends

**TRISH CRAWFORD**  
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

He doesn't own a car or a television but Alexander Neef is no caveman.

The elegant German-born general director of the Canadian Opera Company is a globetrotting, arts-loving, multilingual, Boss-dressed gent.

He eats almost entirely in restaurants — the Drake Hotel for breakfast, and upscale eatery Nota Bene for dinner — and regularly tweets throughout his busy days running the country's premier opera house.

Yet for all this public activity, Neef, who recently had his four-year contract extended for another eight years, remains a mystery to most Toronto culture vultures.

The low profile baffles COC board member Trinity Jackman.

"I don't understand it," says Jackman, who blames "his

understated personality. This is a person at the top of his game."

Sitting in the Drake's outdoor patio sipping his second coffee of the day, Neef agrees that he is reserved.

"I'm a dead-serious German," he says. "I am not known for my sense of humour."

He arrived in Toronto in 2008 at the age of 34, a virtual unknown in this city.

He had only been in Canada once before on an inauspicious trip from London to Toronto to Montreal to Quebec City.

In February.

NEEF continued on E3

After four years with the Canadian Opera Company, Alexander Neef, remains a bit of a mystery. He is as comfortable in flip-flops as his beautifully tailored Boss suits, and can find time to bake a dessert for a dinner party, even as he jet sets to opera houses around the world. "I am the general director of the COC about 90 per cent of the time," he says.

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# Arrived in Toronto virtually unknown

NEEF from E1

"It just got colder and colder and colder," recalls Neef, who nevertheless decided to give us a second chance.

Yes, he's disciplined, exquisitely dressed, courteous and soft-spoken but that isn't the entire picture, say his eclectic group of friends here. He lets his hair down when off duty, has a lively curiosity about all things artsy, is no culture snob, has friends of all ages and walks of life and a zest for new adventures.

There are frequent cigars-and-scotch gatherings at Neef's midtown condo and, says artist Mitchell Chan, 29, Neef has been known to get informal away from the job: "It is so scandalous, I'm not sure I should be on the record saying this... I have seen him in shorts and flip flops. It was a bit of a shock," says Chan. "He does a good job of dividing the two sectors of his life."

Chan works in new media and is an installation artist. The two met through mutual friends and Chan cherishes the support he's received from Neef, who can point art lovers in Chan's direction.

"He's a huge supporter of all different kinds of art and I appreciate it," says Chan, who recently introduced Neef to the music of the budding hip-hop R&B star Frank Ocean.

For many years Neef would only listen to classical music, then about 10 years ago he became interested in jazz. Lately, he's expanded into popular music; Neef jokes that he is widening his tastes chronologically.

If there's any deficit in his arts interests, it would be pop culture. Recognizing this, he recently signed up for Netflix to do his homework, devouring *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*.

He chose them based on recommendations and constant Twitter references to the two shows, he says. As well, his interest was piqued by *Mad Men*'s dapper Don Draper — Neef's crisp white shirts, serious grey suits, highly polished black shoes and side-parted hairstyle garnered many comparisons. (He's also been referred to as Clark Kent.)

Currently reading Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, he says that downtime to read for pleasure is rare in the swirl of opera and arts-related activities in Toronto and elsewhere.

"I am the general director of the COC about 90 per cent of the time," he says, preparing for a trip to Buenos Aires to view opera there and audition singers. Still, he shows interest in and finds time to support emerging Toronto artists in a wide variety of fields — and it's greatly appreciated.

The members of Against the Grain Theatre collective were thrilled when he attended their production of *La Bohème* at the Tranzac Club and the supportive tweet he sent after the performance.

"Alexander seemed to get a huge kick out of our *Bohème*, even when



ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

After four years with the Canadian Opera Company, Alexander Neef, at the Drake Hotel, remains a mystery.

he got hit with water in the riotous bar scene of Act II," says member Caitlin Coull. "That night he tweeted, 'Opera will never die.'"

Neef points out that many people breaking new trails in opera are graduates of the COC's training programs.

"The least I can do is go and see them," says Neef, who also enthusiastically tweets about soprano Ashleigh Semkiw's soul and R&B local performances and online album.

Semkiw, who also sings opera, is one of his closest friends in Toronto. They met at the Chicago Opera Theatre where director general Brian Dickie introduced them and pointed out they were both heading to the same city. Semkiw's family and friends quickly made Neef comfortable in Canada, including buying him his first plaid shirt (from Roots).

When Neef's parents came for a visit this summer — their second trip to Toronto — Semkiw and a

bunch of friends arranged for a day trip to Aurora for a rib fest celebration. Neef dug right in.

**"I am the general director of the COC about 90 per cent of the time."**

**ALEXANDER NEEF**  
GENERAL DIRECTOR, CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY

"You could take him to the diviet bar or the best restaurant and he is comfortable," says Semkiw.

(Despite his restaurant-going habits, he nevertheless cuts a lean figure. The first year he arrived in Toronto, he noticed his face was getting fuller so Neef, who has no idea what he weighs, "spent the summer eating salad and fish.")

Jeffrey Remedios, president and co-founder of artist management and record publishing Arts & Crafts, agrees that Neef is more

easygoing than some might think. The representative of Feist and Broken Social Scene was contacted by Neef about creating a program of music designed to appeal to young people attending a COC fundraiser.

Remedios, 37, asked Neef to attend a seven-hour contemporary music festival he was running on Toronto Islands that featured Broken Social Scene and others.

"He came and he stayed all day," says Remedios, adding that he approached the rock music festival "with open arms."

The two often see concerts together and Neef is a one-on-one conversationalist, says Remedios, adding, "he doesn't need to take over the room."

Neef has a different style from his predecessor, British-born Richard Bradshaw, who was a charismatic musician and leader who relentlessly sought a permanent home for the opera. Neef's skills are in administration.

He grew up in a small town near Stuttgart and received a masters of arts degree (he studied Latin and modern history). Opera was something he did in his spare time and holidays, but soon turned into a full-blown passion.

He founded an opera company as a student and worked in the administration of the Salzburg Festival. He was in artistic administration of the Ruhr-Triennale, then served as director of casting for Opéra National de Paris, then Toronto came calling.

"At first, I said 'Do you have the right person,'" recalls Neef, now 38, because he is not a musician. (Semkiw says he has a "musician's heart.")

He visited and was impressed with the spanking-new, sparkly Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, the well-established chorus under Sandra Horst and the highly respected orchestra that awaited him. Without the new opera house, "I wouldn't have come," he says, adding that, in many ways, all the heavy lifting had been done and the COC was ready to take its place as a major opera house drawing international stars.

Board member Trinity Jackman, 36, says Neef has brought a "lot of energy" to the COC.

"He has an understated personality but he will tell you what he thinks, never rudely. He doesn't pander." Together with music director Johannes Debus, whom Neef hired mere weeks into his new job, "they are bringing an energy and youthfulness and are blazing ahead," Jackman says.

Debus was also 34 when he came on board the TSO and he admits it's ironic the two Germans, born the same year and near each other, "had to cross the Atlantic to meet."

He described Neef as someone "who enjoys the beauty of life" including good whisky, wine and cigars — and baking.

"We were going to dinner and he said he was bringing a German dessert, raspberry roll. I wasn't aware of his talent," says Debus. "It was really fantastic."

(Neef says that while he doesn't cook, he does like to bake using his mother's recipes.)

Neef's efforts to draw in younger audiences with discounted tickets for students and special programming have transformed the experience of attending opera, says Pia Kleber, 70, a University of Toronto drama professor.

The Four Seasons "has a completely different atmosphere when it is filled with young people," says Kleber, a hard-core opera fan.

Kleber, who sits near Neef at the opera, says: "His whole body is conducting. He's totally engaged in it."

Neef's explanation: "I can't sit still." Maybe that's why he's always on the go — but in spite of all that globe-hopping, Toronto is now his home.

"At this point, I wouldn't live anywhere else."