

Vancouver's sunnier West End

CTV's *Robson Arms* hopes to dispel the city's TV images of hookers and dead bodies

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You will not find any corpses or cops on the set of *Robson Arms*, a new Vancouver-based, half-hour series airing on CTV next season. There are no prostitutes fellating johns inside the fictional West End apartment building, where most of the action takes place. No heroin addicts shooting up in the back alley, either.

"The West End is a really beautiful part of Vancouver," says Susin Nielsen, creator of the 13-episode series, a co-production between Omni Film Productions and Creative Atlantic Communications. "It's been a long time since we've had a series that has showcased some of the prettier aspects of our city."

Indeed. In recent years, Vancouver has become a favourite location for TV shows about sci-fi spaceships and forensic investigations. If one of the aliens from *Andromeda* based its perceptions of the city on the TV shows that have been filmed here, it might very well think Vancouver is run by a coroner.

Well, in actual fact, Mayor Larry Campbell is the former body-bagger who inspired the CBC series *Da Vinci's Inquest*. But I'm sure even he would agree that Vancouver's rollerbladers outnumber its criminals.

But now that CTV has replaced *Cold Squad* with *Robson Arms*, *Da Vinci's Inquest* is the only other Canadian network drama being filmed in Vancouver (not counting *The Collector*, a series about the supernatural that begins airing on The Space Channel next month). Both *Robson Arms* and *Da Vinci's Inquest* are set in real Vancouver neighbourhoods, locales that couldn't be more different. Or are they?

Where *Da Vinci* strolls the mean streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the residents of *Robson Arms* tiptoe behind their closed doors and through the cherry blossom-strewn parks of the picturesque West End.

A forest of high-rises on the edge of the ocean, the West End is bounded by Burrard Street on the east, Stanley Park on the west, Robson Street to the north and English Bay to the south. It is famous for being Canada's most densely populated neighbourhood, with 49,940 residents living on 204 hectares, according to the 1996 census.

Almost everyone who's ever drifted into the city has lived here, including most of the producers, directors, writers and cast members working on the series. Even Margot Kidder.

"I lived in a rooming house on Pacific Avenue when I was 17," recalls the Canadian actress, now 55 and perhaps best known for her film portrayal of *Superman's* Lois Lane. In *Robson Arms*, she plays Elaine Wainwright, a doctor's wife who has an affair with a much younger man living down the hall.

"It was 6-by-9 feet, cost 30 bucks a month, and my boyfriend had the double room next door. Of course, my mother didn't know about that," she laughs.

"Those were the days," she sighs, recalling how she and her friends smoked pot on the beach and searched for magic mushrooms in Stanley Park. "We were all into free love and brown rice."

Kidder's former rooming house doesn't exist any more. When she lived here, in 1966, the West End was on the cusp of a building boom. Carefully overseen by city planners, it created what many still consider an urban miracle - blocks and blocks of affordable rental housing, with the most gorgeous views in the city, and only steps away from downtown.

Unfortunately, with the exception of a few outdoor scenes, *Robson Arms* isn't being shot on site.

The set is located 20 minutes away, in a vacant former seniors home on Boundary Road, at the edge of Burnaby.

"We searched and searched the West End, but couldn't [find] any available buildings," explains executive producer Gary Harvey. "Then we found Taylor Manor. It had the bones of an old apartment," he says, referring to the low-rise heritage building that has been upgraded with decorative Tudor elements. On screen, the building will be enhanced with visual effects to make it look as if it is set against the backdrop of skyscrapers in the real West End.

Walking up the driveway in front of the building, I agree that Taylor Manor, or Robson Arms, as it's now called, does look like one of the (very rare) prewar brick buildings in the West End. The rhododendron bushes out front and the mom and pop five-and-dime on the main floor are familiar.

Inside, the sagging wood floors and peeling paint do accurately reflect the neighbourhood's decaying infrastructure. In the *Robson Arms* press release, they call it "fading grandeur."

Something's missing, nonetheless. It smells too pleasant. Try as I might, I cannot detect the stench of unwashed bodies that lingers in the car parks and flower beds of so many West End buildings, even after the homeless panhandlers and young crystal-meth addicts who camp there overnight have shuffled off for the day.

Where are the dumpster divers? The Strata council notices warning of the latest burglary in the storage room? The proliferation of vacancy signs now sprouting faster than pansies, as young professionals take advantage of record low mortgage rates and bolt for Yaletown's shiny condos?

Unlike *Da Vinci's Inquest*, which dramatizes the Eastside's murders, drug problems and political machinations with such true-to-life realism, it can sometimes be eerie, *Robson Arms* will not be addressing the West End's real estate woes or increasing crime rate.

Instead, the revolving cast of characters who dwell in Robson Arms's 13 apartments will explore universal issues about big-city living. A divorced mom (Megan Follows) will face a romantic dilemma with a neighbour down the hall (Mark McKinney); a young newlywed couple (Tobias Mehler and Gabrielle Miller) will tango with their superintendent (John Cassini); a chain-smoking migrant from Toronto (Alisen Down) will struggle to find public places where she can indulge her habit; a young karaoke singer (Jim Tai) will argue with his parents (Gabrielle Rose, Colin Foo); and an elderly Chinese woman (Helena Yea) will make an unlikely alliance with a couple of pot heads (Fred Ewanuick and Zak Santiago).

Harvey makes no apologies for the show's bright take on Vancouver. "One of the writers did say 'Shouldn't we be showing the seedier side?' That is not what this show is about. We're not a travelogue, but at the same time, we do want to show some of this beautiful stuff because nobody else is doing it."

Echoing several other actors, Kidder says she took the part because she was struck by the show's rich cast of characters, not any nostalgic attachment to the West End or concern about its current issues.

"Does the show remind me of the West End? No. I could bullshit and draw comparisons, but I had blinders on then. I was much too ambitious to be a full-fledged hippie. I was always preparing for auditions."

Elaine Wainwright, on the other hand, is "outrageous," says Kidder. "I love my character. She drinks too much, takes too many prescription drugs, she shoplifts and sleeps with young men. And does this all with a great sense of cheer. How could you not love her?"

For all the loveable quirks of its characters and witty dialogue (the episodes were all written in advance of shooting, many by emerging screenwriters), there is one significant real-life element missing from this show that West End residents might have trouble excusing.

The West End is Vancouver's gay village. In *Robson Arms*, only one of the 13 households swings that way.

"There were no strategic reasons," for not including more gay characters, Nielsen says.

"At this point, we only have one gay couple whose door we go behind. It's my belief, though, that there are many other people who live in this building. In season two, for example, we could definitely revisit our favourite tenants, but we would also go behind doors we haven't gone before."



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