

THE WIZARD OF OSSINGTON

Renowned for his vague accent, restless résumé and tomcat smile, Michael King made his name as a magazine publisher and squire of fancy women. But these days, David Hayes finds, he's a burlesque-club owner, out to conquer Toronto's hottest street

By David Hayes The Globe and Mail August 8, 2009

Michael King, the new "king of Ossington," is sitting at a café table at Semolina Bakery with a tray of espressos and a diminutive architect named Guido Constantino. There's a meeting scheduled at Jezebel, the neo-burlesque bar across the street that is above The Saint, his gastro-pub set to open the first week of September. King has invested in both these businesses on the Ossington strip, Toronto's newest boho hot spot, and he's playing his customary role of charismatic front man.

King graciously credits Constantino for translating his ideas into a coherent design and his partners in Jezebel and The Saint with bringing the management talent to the table. "The spotlight tends to fall on me," says King. "But I become the face for projects that are no more mine than everybody else involved. I'm just part of a team."

Still, perhaps the most important element is articulating the dream and the dream is a new-age Ossington: hip but still welcoming to the masses; mainstream without being Starbucks and the Gap; Little Italy without the unhappy locals; the downtown club district without hooliganism and puking kids; Queen West before it lost its soul.

The guy for the job is handsome, seductive and stylish in a way that, according to his friend, Jeanne Beker, makes both men and women fall in love - I think she meant *lust* - with him. Imagine a cross between George Michael's tomcat look and fashion designer Tom Ford's charm, with a New Zealand drawl. Today he's wearing a black linen jacket, black T-shirt and indigo-blue designer jeans.

We're upstairs at Jezebel now, sitting around a table in a private room with the team that's running both it and The Saint. Referring to the one-year moratorium on restaurants and bars imposed by the city in May to slow the gentrification of Ossington, King says, "It's a good thing. There's a chance some big-box club was going to open with 2,000 capacity and there wasn't anything to prevent that from happening..."

Which left hanging in the air, unsaid, the fact that The Saint's application was filed just in time to be exempt from the moratorium. So King turns, arches an eyebrow and adds, "I know, it's easy for us to say because we're on the right side of the moratorium."

Everyone has opinions on the future of Ossington, but only a few people can turn their opinions on, say, what is desirably chic versus tacky, into taste-making. And that's a valuable talent in a Richard Florida-influenced world that believes the creative ecosystem is the answer to every city's dreams. In Toronto, King's idea of transforming a sleazy strip joint into a stylish burlesque house is an example.

"What I love, what I'm passionate about," he says, "is looking at the world we live in and figuring out where it's going, what's next."

In keeping with his Gatsby-esque persona, King handles his investments through a holding company called Luxury Group International. In addition to The Saint, Jezebel and other ventures, he launched (and is editorial director of) Scene Advisor (<http://www.sceneadvisor.com>), an online guide for globetrotters and business travellers. On the site, he is described (did he write it himself?) as a "cultural connoisseur, social arbiter and charitable crusader" and "the new generation jet setter." To *National Post* gossip columnist Shinan Govani, he's a "chandelier-swinging man-about-town."

He's also among the team of investors behind swanky King Street nightspots Atelier and Brant House. And he was, until cashing out his 50-per-cent investment a year ago, the chief executive officer and group creative director of sales whiz Geoffrey Dawe's start-up, Kontent Publishing, whose stable of magazines included *FQ*, *Sir* and *Inside Entertainment*. (Whether an example of King's sense of timing or his good luck, rumoured tensions with Dawe led to his exit shortly before Kontent became a victim of the recession. Dawe suspended operations two months ago and is looking for a buyer.)

To most people, even his friends, his past is mysterious, a series of dots that never quite connect. He grew up in Cambridge, a town on the North Island of New Zealand, to an entrepreneur father and a stay-at-home mother (they're both retired now). According to King, he ran cross-country competitions, played trumpet in the municipal band, acted in local productions of *Tom Sawyer* and *Oliver Twist*, was exhibiting in art shows as a teenager. He studied graphic arts and ended up working for an ad agency in Australia, specializing in direct marketing. (Along the way, he had a short-lived marriage to an English girl.) One of the agency's clients was Zurich Financial Services, which offered him a job. He eventually moved to Switzerland and he's fond of saying that he ended up the youngest strategic-business-unit head in the company's history. In 1996, he was promoted to senior vice-president of the newly formed Zurich Canada, which meant frequent business trips to Toronto.

"I fell in love with Toronto," he says. "It had all the capitalist drivers of North American culture but it was also a gentle, tolerant culture. So, it had all the stuff I loved about America and all the stuff I loved about my Commonwealth upbringing, with a healthy dose of cosmopolitanism."

But King never felt comfortable in a financial-services box so, in 1999, he accepted a job as president and managing partner with one of Zurich's clients, MaxWorldwide Inc., an Internet advertising and marketing company, then based in Washington, D.C., that operated call centres in Virginia and Toronto. Once again, was it luck or uncannily good timing that led to King receiving a generous payout less than two years later when the giant Convergys bought MaxWorldwide and the company's fortunes began a downward slide? (King will only say that while the payout wasn't the \$5-million it's been rumoured to be, "it certainly gave me independence, so I was truly blessed.") "He's smart and strategic at personal positioning," says one former colleague. Adds another, "And he has horseshoes up his butt. A powerful combination."

He had met Geoffrey Dawe through a Zurich business client and, while at MaxWorldwide, had purchased content from him for one of the company's largest clients, BellSouth Corp. When he returned to Toronto, he joined Dawe as co-founder of Kontent's fashion and lifestyle magazines.

In his new role, King placed himself at the centre of a glamorous social world that included lavish parties and celebrity-studded events. According to one tart observer of Toronto's social world, "He was always seen on the arms of Carla Collins, Suzanne Boyd or Jeanne Beker. He was the quintessential walker of micro-celebrities."

Last year, he became chair of Fashion Cares, the AIDS Committee of Toronto fundraiser that sits at the intersection of fashion, culture and the city's queer community. The event had fallen on hard times and King is credited with revitalizing it after he orchestrated a hugely successful 2008 show hosted by Elton John's partner, Toronto native David Furnish. In a controversial move, King cancelled this year's event because, as he puts it, the recession makes charitable dollars scarce and "there have been lots of direct donations without the hoopla and expense of Fashion Cares."

Next year, Fashion Cares will be co-chaired by King and Furnish. "I can pick up the phone and most people will return my calls," he says. "But David can call everybody and everybody will return his calls. So, between his Rolodex and mine, we'll make 2010 a really spectacular fundraiser."

It's hard to pinpoint King's talent, what it is he actually *does*. Jeanne Beker says it's the almost magical connections he makes with people. The way he can get everyone on the same page, especially when the page is his own. "He learns very quickly and he's very new age in the way he understands how everything is inter-connected," she says. "But he always comes prepared and he doesn't suffer fools easily. I can't speak about whether he's always the best businessman, but he has a wily streak and he does well by that. And he's courageous enough to dream big. He'd always say to me, 'Let's go dream the dream...'"

Although King says that he hopes Geoffrey Dawe can save Kontent, he also offers his opinion that "Geoffrey is carrying around a briefcase of broken dreams." And he adds that he and some other investors are looking at Kontent themselves and, no, Geoffrey is not involved. (Dawe declined to comment on King or Kontent.)

But for the moment, the "dream" is the transformation of Ossington. About The Saint, he says, "There's nothing in the neighbourhood with its kind of diversity. You can come and have a glass of wine with your boyfriend or girlfriend at the oyster bar or have dinner at one of the banquettes in the dining area or sit at the bar near the front window and have a drink while waiting for a table at another restaurant. And Saturday morning at 10 there will be parents here for brunch with kids and strollers."

As lovely as King's vision of the neighbourhood sounds, King himself divides his time between his condo on Lombard Street, near St. James Cathedral, a home in Bermuda belonging to his boyfriend, whose family owns a string of private hotels, and travelling. He's a self-made man with a self-created aura whose business interests are considered by some to be smoke and mirrors (branding and the magic of creating buzz) and ephemeral (glamour and celebrity). But his instinct for turning personality and image into marketable commodities is a hallmark of the 21st century. And, really, isn't that as substantial as any dream?