

Shakespeare is alive and well by the sea

Rumours of the demise, due to the beetle, of Shakespeare by the Sea are greatly exaggerated.

by Chris LePan

Though Shakespeare by the Sea is used to tragedies in Point Pleasant Park, the theatre company isn't used to them happening off-stage. But artistic director Patrick Christopher says the negative perception of the park created by the brown longhorn spruce beetle has contributed to a 40 percent decline in ticket sales this summer.

"The use of the terms 'prohibition of movement' and 'quarantined area' to describe the state of the park gives the perception that there is no performing going on," Christopher says. "People are using the park less and less in general."

The company's performances at Cambridge Battery, which is close to the quarantined area, have suffered the most. "Many potential guests have seen the signs or the guard and assumed our shows were cancelled."

"People are not visiting the park because the government is sending the wrong message. Through the whole debacle Shakespeare by the Sea has been ignored, even forgotten. With a business to sustain and actors to pay, we have had no choice but to try and put a positive spin on

something negative."

The company—which should find things easier now that the cutting has been halted—has vigorously promoted its season passes and raised the suggested donation for some of its shows from five to eight dollars. Performances have met with critical and popular acclaim this year, despite all of SBTS's bad luck.

Beyond beetle mania, SBTS has faced a 15 percent cut to the Nova Scotia Arts Council, and competition for corporate sponsorship with Tall Ships 2000. These factors contribute to what Christopher calls "chronic under-funding."

In addition, the provincial government has just given the Neptune Theatre \$550,000 for "financial restructuring." Christopher finds this unfair. "Our problem is with government funding. How do you fund success? We are successful but we have no funding. They are a theatre company in trouble, well, so are we."

Cultural affairs director Peggy Walt says the province allocates money according to need, the province's ability to help and the organization's importance to the community.



My kingdom for a sawhorse Patrick Christopher says SBTS's audiences have been supplanted by beetle-eradicators photo Mark Bears

In Neptune's case "the funds came from the economic diversification agreement, which is a federal-provincial agreement. This money is outside the operating budget for tourism and culture," Walt says.

She says Shakespeare by the Sea has not asked for financial assistance from the province's tourism and culture department, but adds "we are willing to sit down and listen to any organization who needs help. However, we tend not to be involved with clients of the Arts Council, [like SBTS], because we respect the arm's length principle." The council is funded by the government,

but makes executive decisions independent of it.

Elizabeth Murphy, general manager at Shakespeare by the Sea, says rumours that the company is going out of business in the immediate future are unfounded. "We tend to be survivors. If we're going to go out, we are going to go kicking and screaming."

"We are just trying to exist within the framework of what is happening," Christopher says. "It would be a shame to see Shakespeare by the Sea go out of business, not just for our sake but for the people of Halifax as well. We have great potential to grow." ▀