

## Unkindest cut? Bard to run short on Common Shakespeare hit in budget crunch

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By Geoff Edgers, Globe Staff | July 22, 2007

In just a decade, it became a local summer tradition, with blankets spread across Boston Common, corks popped, and free Shakespeare for all performed on a massive stage. If it rained, no matter. There were more than three weeks of shows, plenty of time to catch a performance, as 100,000 people did last summer.

But this year, you'd better pay attention or you'll miss "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Struggling to break even, the Citi Performing Arts Center has slashed the budget for Shakespeare on the Common in half and shortened its run to less than a week. Instead of 20 performances, the Center will present seven, starting Tuesday, plus two open dress rehearsals. Even the stage has shrunk, to less than a third the size of last year's.

The changes have drawn widespread criticism of the Citi Center (formerly the Wang Center for the Performing Arts) and its longtime president, Josiah Spaulding Jr., who has been sharply scaling back activity at the center as he tries to balance its budget for the first time in years.

"I'm not surprised, because their mindset is all about money," said Nicholas Martin, artistic director of the Huntington Theatre Company. "Isn't Joe the guy who threw out 'The Nutcracker' and brought in the Rockettes?" The Wang Center in 2003 replaced Boston Ballet's popular Christmastime production with a more-lucrative touring version of the "Radio City Christmas Spectacular." "The Nutcracker" now plays at the Opera House.

In an interview, Spaulding said that he would love to lengthen the Shakespeare run in the future, but that the Citi Center can't afford to without more funding support. Over five years, the Center has lost about \$1.4 million on the free Shakespeare productions, he said. The Center has experienced an overall budget deficit every year since 2002.

The cuts to Shakespeare, combined with reductions in other center programming and an infusion of \$1.3 million from Citibank -- the New York-based corporation's first payment for its recent naming rights deal -- could mean the center will break even for the first time since 2002, Spaulding said.

"Rather than waiting until the days we had to shut the doors," he said, "we have begun a process to put us back in financial stability."

The reduced free Shakespeare season has civic leaders concerned. Mayor Thomas M. Menino said he wished the run were longer. "Would I like to have three weeks? I'd like to have six weeks," Menino said by phone. "But it's not a decision I have to make."

Valerie J. Burns, president of the Boston Natural Areas Network, a parks advocacy group, said she is distressed by the cuts. "Shakespeare on the Common had developed into one of the great events of the city. I thought of it like a First Night in July. It's a real loss, and I'm hoping that the city as a whole can really think about how we can better support outdoor theater."

The Center has produced Shakespeare on the Common since 2003, when the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company signed a deal to join the then-Wang Center. Steven Maler, the founding artistic director of the Commonwealth troupe, continued to direct the Common production, as he had since 1996, when the company first started doing the outdoor performances.

At first, following the merger, the theater programs at the Wang Center grew. An umbrella organization that includes the Wang and Shubert theaters, the Center installed Maler as vice president of artistic programming and increased his salary from \$45,000 a year to \$105,000 last year. The center launched a

play-reading series, "American Voices," and a family-show series, "Artropolis." It increased the budget of Shakespeare on the Common from \$570,414 in 2004 to nearly \$1 million last summer.

Maler said recently that after last season, he expected the Shakespeare funding to at least remain at the same level, and that his hopes were buoyed when Citibank agreed in November to pay the Center \$34 million, phased in over 15 years, for naming rights. But, in December, Spaulding told Maler that his management position had been eliminated and the theater programs he had developed were being canceled. Spaulding also cut the production budget for this summer's Common show to \$481,027.

Now, as Maler readies for the first performance on Tuesday, he's not even sure whether the Citi Center will rehire him after his current deal expires next month. His salary has been cut to \$50,000 over 33 weeks through the end of next month, and his hours from 40 to 24 a week. Meanwhile, Spaulding has approached the Lenox-based Shakespeare & Company to see if it can present a free production on the Common in the future. Mark W. Jones, the executive director at Shakespeare & Company, said he has not determined how much it would cost his company to put on the show.

"I'm troubled by the changes," Maler said, "and hopeful that there's a better solution to this on the horizon."

Spaulding said he will talk with Maler about his status after the run. The cuts, he said, are part of the Citi Center's efforts to balance its budget by scaling back programs and the number of arts events presented in its theaters.

The Center thrived in the 1990s, hosting popular touring shows such as "Phantom of the Opera." But it has suffered deficits in recent years in part because of competition from the renovated Opera House, which has presented many of the most-lucrative touring Broadway shows since it was reopened in 2004.

Since 2002, the Center has been forced to draw from its endowment, which has shrunk from \$19.5 million to \$10 million, according to a Citi Center spokeswoman.

Responding to the financial challenges, the Citi Center's board approved a new five-year strategic plan in June. The plan calls for, among other things, working with more local organizations on joint projects, using more new technology, and finding a way to recruit more donors and sponsors.

Former board members at the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company and the Citi Center say they are concerned about the Center's priorities.

Joan Parker, who resigned from the Commonwealth troupe's board over concerns about independence and control rather than become part of the Wang, said that she now feels bad for Maler and is unhappy about the Shakespeare cuts. Joan Moynagh, who helped found the Commonwealth company and continued to work with the organization after the merger with the Wang, said she had hoped, at the time, to model the relationship between the company and the Wang Center on those between Boston University and the Huntington Theatre and between Harvard University and the American Repertory Theatre. Moynagh, who is no longer involved with the Center, said she grew concerned when the "American Voices" and "Artropolis" programs were cut. She said she feels misled by Spaulding.

"The initial promise is [Spaulding] would be a champion of this program," Moynagh said. "And he has not been."

The cuts also have alienated some Citi Center trustees. "To me, [the free Shakespeare] was probably one of the only things the place had going for it," said Peg Golden, who decided not to return as a trustee when the Center reorganized its board in June. "Why don't you go out and increase the number of performances?"

Irwin Heller, a lawyer and playwright who had been on the Wang board since 1994, also left this summer. He particularly disagreed with the decision to cut "American Voices." "There were a lot of young people there, especially from drama programs around the city, and I think it could have been built into something."

Anyone who has seen free Shakespeare on the Common in the past will notice the smaller scale of the

production this year. Because of renovations at the Parade Grounds, the show is being moved to its former home on the Parkman Bandstand. The stage size has shrunk to 28 feet by 28 feet, a far cry from the 45- by- 60-foot stage for "The Taming of the Shrew" last year.

While Maler is disappointed with the cuts, he promised that even if this is his last production for the Citi Center, it will be good. "It is Shakespeare's greatest comedy, full of delight, surprise, mystery, passion and adventure. We have a spectacular cast, and I do feel the production is going to be fantastic. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think I could produce and direct a beautiful project."

Geoff Edgers can be reached at [gedgers@globe.com](mailto:gedgers@globe.com). For more on the arts, visit [boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts/exhibitionist](http://boston.com/ae/theater_arts/exhibitionist). ■