

Sponsorship Splash

By MATT J. SIMMONS

As the summer comes to an end, I've been thinking about all the great outdoor events, concerts and festivals this city has seen. Now, call me old-fashioned, but upon reflection, I don't think we should allow corporations to take the title role in our public events. Take Symphony Splash, for example—oh, sorry, make that the Bayview Residences' Annual Symphony Splash.

This year I took my daughter down to Symphony Splash for the first time, sharing with her one of Victoria's great traditions. The Splash has been around for 19 years now and I've always felt it to be an event that embodies a certain Victoria spirit: tourists, locals, young kids, pensioners, families and everyone in between all gather together to take in a little culture in the Inner Harbour. While my daughter bounced on my shoulders above the heads of the dense crowd of concert-goers and squealed excitedly at the musicians, I glanced at the program. Apparently, it told me, we were no longer attending simply the Victoria Symphony Splash but we were now enjoying the Bayview Residences' Annual Symphony Splash. Hey, wait a minute . . .

At least the sponsor's lettering was in a font-size smaller than the event title, but at what point do we collectively say, "Enough is enough!" Do we, for example, let sponsors share equal-sized fonts with the event? Or do we draw the line at a two-point difference? Me, I prefer to see the sponsors given their well-deserved kudos on the back page—that way they get their advertising dollars in,

but at least their sponsorship masquerades as public philanthropy and not just a marketing ploy. Put them on the bill as if they were performing themselves ("Let's hear it for the Bayview Residences, folks!") and the gig is up: it's just marketing.

If you need another example of this kind of aggressive advertising, how about the Save-On-Foods Memorial Centre? Why is it that, while so many of us are at least moderately outraged about this, it still continues?

Now, I'm not against sponsorship, advertising and corporations—entirely. I think that without corporate sponsorship of public events, we'd probably just end up having fewer events. As Marcus Handman, the Symphony's former executive director, pointed out to me before departing his position, "Bayview Residences is an extremely important part of Symphony Splash. Not only are they our title sponsor, providing us the necessary level of funding over a five-year period to sustain the event, but they are also an advocate of the event—and of the Victoria Symphony—across the country. They promote the event and the Symphony in advertising that appears in markets such as Toronto, Edmonton and Calgary and in their promotion of Victoria as a destination for homebuyers." Okay, fair enough. They clearly have their place—but I'd like to think we can do things more tastefully.

This trend is leading us toward a world where everything is labelled and logoed for a product of some kind, every centimetre of public space taken for ads. How far is that going to go? Public arenas, public

Belly-flopping on the hard waters of advertising



Welcome to CityCorp's Inner Harbour, where you can enjoy the Smith Group's Daily Sunset, seen here during the Bayview Residences' Symphony Splash

events... are public walkways next? Would you really want to walk down "Coca Cola's Government Street" or "Pandora Avenue by Bear Mountain Resort"? My guess would be a resounding no. But really, we're not that far off. It might start off subtly by, say, the sponsorship of a building or a causeway or a Galloping Goose-style trail, but then, insidiously, it would creep into all public areas. That's not a world I'd like to see myself—or my daughter, for that matter—living in.

I took a look at a couple of other free local events that occurred this past summer—the Fringe Fest (including FringeKids and the Block Party) and the Victoria Electronic Music Festival—to see if this really is a widespread trend among local arts groups and was reassured to find all of the sponsors listed at the bottom of each program/website/poster. The Symphony, however, isn't the only local institution to resort to front-page sponsorship to fund their events: the Victoria Ska Festival's program somewhat surprisingly opened with a full page of sponsor ads before even introducing the festival itself. But they remain simply the Victoria Ska Festival, not something like Shell Oil's Victoria Ska Festival.

I agree sponsor-event relationships are vital and without them our cultural landscape would be decidedly flatter, but when does the landscape change to advertising mountains and cultural valleys, as opposed to the reverse? "The relationship between the Victoria Symphony and Bayview Residences" is very much a partnership with a common goal of making Bayview Residences Victoria Symphony Splash a bigger and better event every year," says Handman.

Well, it's one of the Symphony's goals to see the event get better, sure, but can anyone truthfully say Bayview is in it for the festival? The company's goal of transforming the last of the Inner Harbour's developable land into high-rise, upscale condominiums seems hardly reflective of the spirit of offering free music in a public space.

I'm hopeful that this is one marketing trend from which we'll see the steam eventually evaporate—as has happened with other similar trends in the past—but I'm also afraid events like Symphony Splash will be taken down a peg in the process. **M**

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