



SHAPE of things to come

By Helena Bryan

Ten years after its creation, B.C.'s motion picture and performing arts industry association is a model for others.

Here's a challenge: make sure the carpenters, painters, camera operators, grips, spotlight operators, actors, dancers, stunt people, and others in B.C.'s performing arts and motion picture industries go home safe at the end of the

day. Keep in mind the range of potential hazards, from musculoskeletal injuries, falls, and burns, to heat exhaustion and hearing loss. Oh, and don't forget that the industry is divided into two distinct

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sectors: the resource-rich, technologically advanced motion picture sector, and the much more financially stretched, people-reliant performing arts sector.

Sound a little like mission impossible? It did 10 years ago when SHAPE (Safety and Health in Arts Production and Entertainment) was created as one of the first industry associations to work in partnership with WorkSafeBC to promote health and safety on the job. Today, the association's successes stack up as high as some of the stunt falls its actors perform. And with 10 years' experience behind it, SHAPE now serves as a model of best practices for other industry associations.

Facilitator, advocate

Of course it hasn't been easy. While its mandate is basic – to inform, educate, and train the industry on health and safety

issues – SHAPE staff have had to work hard to earn the trust of a group understandably anxious about the association's role.

One of the biggest challenges, according to general manager Dawn Brennan, has been “a fear on the part of the industry that new work practices might compromise creativity.” After all, she points out, these industries rely on creativity for their success, and health and safety concerns can seem directly opposed to that.

Paul Jordan, vice president of Environment, Health and Safety at Los Angeles-based NBC Universal Studios, puts it another way. He's been a member of SHAPE's motion picture standing committee since its inception and is responsible for health and safety on several locally filmed TV shows, including *Battlestar*

Galactica, Psych, Eureka, and Bionic Woman. “Most safety regulations,” he says, “are designed to prevent things from happening. When we're doing a show, we're often purposely making those things happen; we're setting people on fire, crashing cars, and getting people to fall from buildings.”

The performing arts sector had the same fears, says Miles Muir, technical director for Vancouver Civic Theatres and a member of SHAPE's performing arts standing committee. “If you looked at the old WorkSafeBC regulations, every actor would have to be wearing a hard hat and a safety harness.”

Brennan says the organization gradually overcame such fears through a light hand. “We're not in the business of enforcement; we carry a very soft stick and focus on the

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benefits of health and safety. We also act as facilitators, making sure that neither health and safety nor creativity is compromised.”

SHAPE’s role as facilitator recently came into sharp focus when the association, WorkSafeBC, and stunt workers got together to hammer out new fall protection guidelines to come into effect in February 2008. Jordan was involved in those sessions and attests to the thorniness of the issue.

“We were aiming to get the same level of protection as the industrial standard provides, but the industrial-standard equipment, which is big and bulky, just doesn’t work for us,” he says. “Our equipment wasn’t approved by WorkSafeBC,

but together we came up with guidelines, such as testing the equipment before the stunt, that were eventually approved. SHAPE was instrumental in helping WorkSafeBC better understand the needs of our industry.”

Tester, trainer

To ensure SHAPE stays in tune with industry issues and responds accordingly, it operates through two standing committees, one for the motion picture industry, another for the performing arts sector, each with representation from workers and employers. “Our unofficial motto,” says Brennan, “is when our industry perceives a need, SHAPE responds.”

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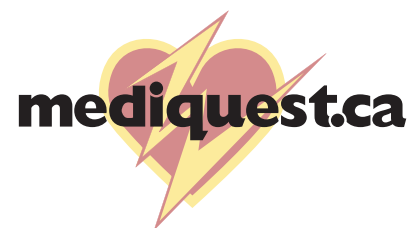
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The result is a host of relevant training and testing services, including free hearing testing, free respirator fit-testing, firearm training, transportation of dangerous goods, aerial lift training, forklift training, occupational first aid, and supervisor safety.

An especially successful result is the award-winning Safety Passport Program (SPP), which addresses the high mobility of motion picture workers and the challenge this poses for employers. Essentially, SPP is a clearinghouse of employee training and certification information, which potential employers can check to ensure they're getting the right training and experience for the job. It also reminds workers when they need recertification.

Researcher, educator

At times, responding to industry needs has meant SHAPE has had to do its own research. "Our fields aren't commonly studied," says Brennan. In 2003, for example, SHAPE conducted a study on the atmospheric affects of theatrical smoke and fog effects. And, in response to industry electricians who noted that the incidence of electrical shocks rose in the winter, SHAPE is working with the University of B.C.'s School of Occupational Health to study the electrical conductivity of ice-melt products mixed with water.

One result of such knowledge is an impressive resource library on a wide range of subjects targeting diverse and specialized audiences – everything from the musculoskeletal resources guide for dancers and musicians to guides on vocal health, paint safety, and coping with stage fright, as well as a hearing conservation manual for the performing arts.

What's next?

"Because the needs were so much greater in the motion picture industry, we've tended to focus on that industry," says Brennan. "They've come a long way in the past 10 years, but now we see a real opportunity in the performing arts sector."

The wheels have already started turning with last November's launch of the Performing Arts Safety (PAS) program. It provides companies in the performing arts sector, whether they have one employee or 100, with the services of a consultant to help them develop a customized health and safety program, free of charge (see contact information at the end of the article).

Says Brennan: "For these smaller companies [94 percent of the industry is classified as small business], which are often strapped for cash and resources, the idea of creating a health and safety program is daunting. They recognize the need for such programs, but just don't know where to start. We get them started, then walk them through the whole process."

Based on SHAPE's track record, the performing arts sector will soon catch up to the motion picture industry – without hard hats and bulky harnesses. After all, SHAPE has been making the impossible entirely possible for 10 years.

For more information or to enroll in SHAPE's PAS program, contact Brent Rossington at brentr@shape.bc.ca or 604 733-4682, extension 223.

Association must-haves

While every industry is different, there are some common must-haves for a successful association. Dawn Brennan, general manager of SHAPE, recommends the following:

- Build in a mechanism to ensure that all stakeholders – employers, employees, the various sectors – have a voice.
- Be responsive to those voices. If your constituents come to you with a concern, they have to see that you're doing something about it.
- Keep the lines of communication open.
- Focus on being viewed as a resource and support, not as an enforcer.



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