

No more Calabash

The high of its 10th anniversary celebration last year in Treasure Beach, St Elizabeth, has proven to be the final page for the Calabash International Literary Festival.

Kwame Dawes, programming director of the festival since its inception, with a few literature faithfuls under a small tent through to its swan song before an audience of thousands, said "there is definitely no festival. No two ways about it."

Calabash - which was free and open to the public - has normally been staged on the final weekend in May, which last year turned out to be four days after the Tivoli incursion and during the limited State of Emergency imposed in Kingston, St Andrew and St Catherine.

There was a hiccup previously, in 2008, when a cancellation was announced due to lack of funding before the Jamaica Tourist Board (JTB) increased its support and the festival was held.

This time around though, Dawes said, "We have come to the conclusion that the Festival in its entirety is over." Colin Channer has been the Festival's artistic director and Justine Henzell the producer.

"The festival as people know it, the literary festival, its over. Last year was the final year."

Standard set

He clarified, however, that the Calabash International Literary Festival Trust will continue to operate, with its mandate to develop the arts in Jamaica, the intention being "to find ways that are more tenable and more effective".

"We are going to continue with our writers' workshops and seminars for writers. We are going to have a big event for Jamaica's 50th anniversary celebration and it will be a literary event and we are discussing the ways in which we can do that," Dawes said.

He also said, "We have set a standard for the arts in Jamaica, in terms of what can be done."

Dawes said the festival's cessation "is really to do with the economic situation. The funding has always been hit and miss. It has always been a struggle to find funding. While we appreciate our sponsors, it has just been increasingly difficult".

Dawes said on average it cost about US\$110,000 each year to stage the Calabash International Literary Festival, last

year's price tag dipping to US\$70,000.

Dawes identified bringing in the writers, tent rental, publicity, the Calabash website among the main costs, with airfare for the overseas writers the major area of expenditure.

However, Dawes also said, "When we started the festival, we committed ourselves to running it for that period of time - 10 years. We expected it to keep growing over the years and it did."

The festival has brought a deluge of visitors to Treasure Beach and Dawes said from a community tourism perspective, "that is probably the most difficult part of the decision".

Disappointment

Then there is also the fact that "the people who come every year will be disappointed because they have built expectations around it".

However, there is a downside to the persons attending as well. Despite consistent appeals for voluntary contributions, Dawes said, "The patrons, with very few exceptions, were not that up front and supportive."

"It has been 10 very good, very challenging years," Dawes said, adding that when Calabash International Literary Festival was started, "we did not know if it would work. We had 300-400 people and we knew there was an audience". He said that there have been some "great readings" over the years and the festival-ending Calabash acoustic ensemble's performances were always something to be cherished.

"It is difficult for people to accept that something which is growing is ending," Dawes said. However, he said, "We look forward to 2012 because we should have a very exciting celebration of 50 years of Jamaican literature."