

Ruth & James Ewing Arts Awards



2015

Arts Alive!

THE KEENE SENTINEL

The Monadnock love affair with the arts

BY STEVE GILBERT / PHOTO BY JEFFREY NEWCOMER

Alice Fuld remembers sitting in The Colonial Theatre in downtown Keene when water from the leaking roof ran down the aisles. Her face scrunches into a frown as she recalls its seedy nature, its 1920s grandeur crumbling into oblivion, a downtown disfigurement that pierced the heart of the region's arts scene.

The nearby Latchis Theater was in similar shape, built in 1923 by Demetrius P. Latchis, one year earlier than The Colonial. It too was a wreck of a building by the early 1980s, but its fate didn't parallel The Colonial's. The Latchis would continue to deteriorate through the 1990s and into the 2000s before its 700-seat auditorium was mercifully taken apart in 2012, replaced by a few dozen parking spaces.

Today, thanks to a grass roots push by a group of local citizens that started about 25 years ago, the Colonial is a regional hub of the arts in the Monadnock Region, a thriving symbol of a city's downtown revitalization. Every year thousands flock to downtown Keene for its offerings, from live entertainment to independent movies that nourish not only its patrons but the coffers of area businesses.

"You had a derelict theater, and now you have a terrific theater in the middle of downtown, and that changed everything," Fuld says. "What the Colonial has done is put the spotlight on the arts and that extends far beyond (downtown)."

It's similar in Peterborough, where the restoration of its 1904 Town House opened its doors to concerts, dances and other community gatherings. As in Keene, the effects are widespread, with people coming into town for these events, eating in local restaurants, browsing in and buying from local shops, and infusing the local economy with money.

Reagan Messer, executive director and artistic director of dance at MoCo Arts in Keene, borrows an aphorism to describe this symbiotic relationship, saying, "A rising tide floats all boats." The phrase, generally attributed to John F. Kennedy, clearly applies to the Keene-area arts scene, Messer says.

"How the community cares about and supports the arts here is just mind-blowing for a small community," Messer says. "They support the arts here like you see in the major cities, and they fund the arts like in the major cities."

Messer is a native of Atlanta and former Boston Ballet soloist with a storied resume; he has performed around the world. He moved here 13 years ago with his wife, Melissa, a for-

mer professional dancer and Peterborough native. They decided this is where they wanted to raise their family. It's easy to see why - the arts are flourishing in southwestern New Hampshire, and signs of their vitality are everywhere.

Professional theater and music have long been anchored in the area by companies, such as the renowned Peterborough Players and Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music in Nelson. Yet, that's merely the beginning. Community groups are prevalent throughout the area, with companies turning local meetinghouses into theaters for a variety of year-round productions, from the Edge Ensemble Theatre Company in Keene to the Peterborough Community Theatre.

Many small-town companies, such as the Branch River Theatre and Small Pond Productions in Marlborough, and the Actors Theatre Playhouse in Chesterfield, have their own loyal audiences. The Colonial itself hosts perhaps the largest amateur production when the Keene Lions Club stages its annual extravaganza every February.

Music resonates in the area, with Mount Monadnock providing the inspiration for a plethora of tastes. While the area lacks a large concert hall venue beyond the 888-seat Colonial, rustic settings provide dramatic backdrops and acoustics, starting with the intimate performance "barns" touted by both the Peterborough Players and Apple Hill.

Classical music also sweeps through the hills via the Monadnock Music concert series and Electric Earth Summer concert series. If modern fare is more desirable, the popular Keene Music Festival blankets downtown Keene with up to 10 stages every Saturday of Labor Day Weekend. And it happens to be a short walk to Ashuelot River Park for the annual Art in the Park that same weekend.

Scattered throughout the nooks and crannies of the picturesque Monadnock Region are indie artists, some of whom attract audiences on their back porches. Hunt Smith and Allison Aldrich of Nelson are roster artists for the Arts in Education program in the N.H. Council on the Arts, collaborating with the Keene Heritage Commission and Parks and Recreation Department for their Sunday Social Series.

Translated, they play their fiddles, guitars, mandolins and accordions for audiences in the backyards of historic houses in the Monadnock Region. Aldrich is director of the

Animaterra Women's Chorus in Keene; Smith handcrafts violins and violas.

The visual arts are well-represented in downtown Keene and Peterborough, with several galleries, traditional and non-traditional, enticing browsers and serious shoppers alike to stop in. The weeklong downtown Keene Art Walk has introduced the arts to thousands of schoolchildren, who come by the bus-load in the spring.

For a more formal exploration of art, the Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery at Keene State College carries acclaimed national and international exhibits, as well as the works of local artists.

Art groups such as Arts Live! and the Monadnock Area Arts Association have proliferated, springing up in the last two decades to promote the region's cultural and artistic organizations. Paintings and photography exhibits decorate several area coffee shops, and even a furniture store - Syd's Carpet & Snooze Room of Keene on St. James Street - houses a 140-piece art gallery that rotates works year-round. It was selected by readers as the best art gallery in the recent Keene Sentinel Readers' Choice Awards.

Area children have their own specialized classrooms to hone their talents through MoCo Arts. Thousands of young children start their journeys there through music, dance and theater, replenishing the local arts community as they reach adulthood. Its headquarters on Railroad Street could use more space.

Augmenting the local scene is Keene State College and its acclaimed Redfern Arts Center, perhaps one of the unsung theaters in all of New Hampshire. Its 2015-16 season kicks off Sept. 25 with Symphony NH celebrating the works of Gershwin, Copland and Bernstein; two days later the first of several faculty recitals over the season take over the stage.

Yes, Fuld says, the last two decades have been an artistic windfall in the Monadnock Region.

When she first arrived here from her native New York City, she had been schooled in the world's finest performing arts centers: the Philharmonic at Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Opera and, of course, Broadway. She joined The Keene Sentinel as its arts critic in the early 1970s, and was arts editor from 1987-98. Though she retired from full-time journalism after that, she remains close to the local arts scene.

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Robin Bigaj as Puck in MoCo's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

MoCo Arts

BY NICOLE S. COLSON / PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL GNADE

The building that houses MoCo Arts on Railroad Street is modest, but the organization within makes big, bold dreams happen.

Established in November 1991 by choreographer Catherine Skove as The Moving Company Dance Center, the family-centered, non-profit has a mission "to transform lives through movement and creative expression."

It's been a mission fulfilled.

Granted, it's a tall order to offer arts education programs (dance, theater and multi-arts camps) that are not only accessible to people of all ages and levels of ability, but is of a high caliber.

With the help of a dedicated faculty, staff and parent volunteers, it has succeeded and continues to grow and expand.

MoCo Arts is a winner of a Ruth and James Ewing Arts Award this year.

The organization provides professional performances for audiences at the arts center's Black Box Theater on Railroad Street, at Keene State College's Redfern Arts Center and at The Colonial Theatre.

This spring, 250 students in MoCo Arts theater program performed in the spring production of William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which required 565 costumes alone. Last year, the company taught more than 2,000 children and adults in dance, theater, visual arts, music, creative writing and wellness.

A focus of the organization is arts education for young people, but MoCo Arts also offers classes for adults in the community.

Martha ("Marty") Hennum, artistic and program director and instructor of MoCo's theater program, came to MoCo Arts about 10 years ago from the Boston area, where for more than 20 years she

worked as a professional actress, a founding member of an improvisation troupe and international arts program and directed plays and musicals.

She developed MoCo's 18-week theater program, which offers classes in musical theater and acting technique and culminates in a fully-produced performance that casts each student in a role. The program has grown from 15 children when she started to 100.

When she arrived, she said there was an acting scene study class at MoCo Arts but no summer program for older children.

"I wondered what kids were doing in the summer if they were not into sports," said Hennum.

She created CAKE (Creative Arts at Keene), which she based on the Charles River Creative Arts Program in Dover, Mass. It's a multi-arts, month-long summer day camp. For children ages 4 through 7, the camp introduces them to fine and performing arts; for children 8 and older the program offers classes in art, creative writing, dance, drama, music, photography, technical theater and video production.

This year's camp has some prestigious faculty - Richard Smith, for instance, who will lead the vocal music program, is a Grammy Award-nominated composer.

Also this summer, Hennum is leading a theater class that will end with a production of the musical "Fame." She also is working on adding an acting technique class for students who enjoy acting but not singing or dancing, and an in-depth technical theater class for those who enjoy working behind-the-scenes.

In its infancy, CAKE was designed for participants to attend a full month. Now, children can attend whenever they choose.

"We offer every combo you can imagine," said Hennum. "Because of that change, now camp is a bigger, more diverse group demographically."

Three of her students at camp are earning their equity acting points, she said. She also has alumni serving in all branches of the military and others attending graduate school.

The benefits of attending CAKE, for Hennum, are too many to list.

"Some of the kids who leave our program say the experience made them a better person," she said, "and they made life-long friendships and gained skills to stand in front of a group of people and speak confidently."

Hennum said, "The kid who sat in the corner at camp 10 years later might be leading a warm-up exercise here."

Ensuring advanced and novice students have appropriate material is what Hennum sees as a unique component of MoCo Arts programs.

"Anyone who wants to be involved can be," she said.

Dance instructor Danielle Fitzpatrick works with children in the earliest stages of development as the director of MoCo's Young Arts program. She's also been on staff at MoCo the longest - 16 years.

Her goal is to help families understand the role of dance in young people's lives - physically, cognitively and socially. She starts with what she describes as "a gentle introduction to performing" for students from 18 months to first-graders. These children develop creativity, cooperation skills and self-awareness through play and imagination.

"They learn technique and naturalistic movements and discover how their bodies move," said Fitzpatrick.

The young children are then ready for the creative dance class for 4- to 8-year-olds, which is performance-based. Children in this class put on a 45-minute production with costumes, sets and lighting - the same quality of artistic presentation given to older MoCo students' productions. That high quality makes for improved visibility.

"A lot of people in the community are supporting our programs," she said. "We want to make their experience as professional as possible so they'll invest in the children."

Children in the class are allowed more time to settle into the on-stage experience, learning everything from dancing using props to what it feels like to receive audience applause.

"It's fun to see the growth and development that happens," she said.

"It serves not only the child, but also the family, because it brings the arts into the home environment. Parents watch their children learn



and dance together. They are engaged because they read a script to their child each night and help them practice lines and songs. It really becomes a family experience and creates a family that supports the arts."

Fitzpatrick writes all of the plays and rewrites lyrics to classic songs in the plays' musical score. "I have to make sure the script embraces all 35 kids in the class," she said. "I make sure all the characters have names so children take ownership over their character because they feel their character is important."

She feels very young children are underestimated in terms of their level of passion and ability.

"I don't think people do written scripts that address the needs of the young population," she said. "I haven't seen any curriculum out there like that."

A recent production her students put on was "Dick Whittington and His Cat," based on an 18th-century British folk tale (and true story) about a poor, homeless man in London who made a fortune with his pet cat. People hired him to bring his cat to their home and get rid of their pest mouse problems. He became so wealthy off his "mouser," he had enough money to campaign for mayor - and win.

"The lead character in the play did 45 minutes with a British accent," she said.

Participants also have a broadened world view because they learned about social issues. "We talked about what it means to bring about your own fortune and learn to appreciate your blessings."

The support from staff and volunteers at MoCo Arts is unparalleled, she said.

"You usually only see a school like MoCo Arts in a big city," Fitzpatrick said.

Improving children's confidence, facilitating their growth and helping them be better citizens by teaching them how to be respectful audience members are significant benefits of MoCo Arts programs, and Hennum offers a few more.

"If young people feel connected to an organization or group or athletic team and feel they matter, that they make a difference and people care about them (besides their families) - that's really important," she said. "Plus the joy it can give, the natural high of singing songs at the top of your lungs and giving 100 percent to dance moves - it makes them feel better than anything else they might do." ■

