



The energy of talented teens is contagious as MoCo Arts Teen Musical Theatre Group students dance artfully in choreographed patterns and sing harmonies at a recent rehearsal. It was a flowing musical feast for the eyes and ears as the group rehearsed their upcoming production of Disney's "Beauty and the Beast Jr." that will come to the Redfern Arts Center at Keene State College on Saturday, January 16.

The performance will feature a cast of 55 (ages 12 – 17), as Marty Hennem, artistic director at MoCo Arts, makes room for all students who want to participate. Katie Day, communications and marketing manager, explains. "I don't know how she (Hennem) does it – She's amazing!"

Hennem works closely with the students and other staff members throughout the production process from preparations to performance. Other members of the production staff for the Teen Musical Theatre are Choreographer Kristin Leach, Vocal Coach Joanne Mead, Musical Director Kate Butterfield, Technical Director Alex Trombly, Stage Managing and Props Design by Shannon Martin and Costume Director Jazmine Carroll. Some students are also involved in making the costumes, which for this show, are quite impressive. Among them are a sizable wardrobe and a life-size teapot and candelabra students will adorn while singing and dancing.

Olivia Guerriero, a Keene High senior, brings con-

fidence and a well-trained voice to the role of Belle. She has participated for at least four years of MoCo Art's C.A.K.E. (Creative Arts at Keene), along with theatre productions and dance.

"I think we all bring something pretty interesting to the show," Guerriero says.

Gabe Jackson, a junior from the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School (PVPA) in Barre, MA travels weekly to Keene to play the part of the Beast. He has helped with vocal teaching for more than six years of MoCo Art's C.A.K.E. summer programs.

"At my school and in previous MoCo shows, I've been cast as more "goofy" characters," Jackson says. "In this one, it's a more serious, different role for me."

Keene High senior Michael Varno's deep, rich voice and sure posture are well suited to his role of Gaston. Varno joined MoCo Arts last spring when he played the lead role in Shrek. "I'm glad I don't have to play a bald guy," Varno jokes, citing the past few hairless charac-

ters that he played, including Shrek, Charlie Brown and Fester from The Addams Family musical.

The students realize that MoCo offers them more than just opportunities to sing, dance, and perform. They appreciate being mentored and mentoring, an advantage among the varied ages and experience levels. They gain experience in promoting themselves and learning to speak with poise at other venues and with the media, Day says. Hennem and the rest of the staff emphasize



Top photo, the end of a dance scene. Above, Belle and Gaston (rehearsing) look at their waltz positions in the mirror.



A fight scene between Gaston (second from left), Belle and wolves that have attacked them.

the educational component of what students learn at MoCo Arts. Hennem, who grew up in the Boston area and studied theatre, psychology and intercultural arts, came to MoCo Arts 15 years ago, initiating the musical theatre program. She looks at theatre arts as a great vehicle for education.

"These are life skills they'll be able to use whatever they do," says Hennem. "They are getting body education, confidence building, problem-solving and team collaboration. It's amazing how much intellectual activity is involved; it's a lot more than the fluff it appears to be."

Day agrees that "It goes beyond the dance steps and learning lines...and they welcome the challenges that are different and exciting," she adds. "It's kind of cool to see kids with tiny speaking voices step on stage and have this large presence."

"Beauty and the Beast Jr." will be at the Redfern Arts Center at Keene State College at 2:00 and 7:00 p.m on January 16. Tickets are \$20 for general audience/\$14 for youth and senior and are available by visiting or calling the Redfern Arts Center Box Office at 603-358-2168. A "Meet and Greet" following the afternoon show will give audience members an opportunity to meet the performers.



A dance scene.

ELF - *Enjoy life to the Fullest!*

Thursday, January 7, 2016