



Primed for flight

CECILY WEISBURGH / Sentinel Staff

Brooklynn Goller, playing the title role of Peter Pan, flies through the air during a rehearsal of the MoCo Arts Teen Musical Theatre production of "Peter Pan." The play will be performed today at the Redfern Arts Center at Keene State College.

MoCo Arts' 'Peter Pan' is pure magic

Theater ensembles are familiar with acting, singing and dancing on stage, all staples of the performing arts. But flying? Performers in Keene's MoCo Arts, the nonprofit organiza-

tion that offers theater, dance and arts classes to area students, will experience another dimension today when they fly above the stage in their version of "Peter Pan." Directed by Marty Hennem, it's one of two major productions per year put on by MoCo's Teens Musical Theatre program. And its run is limited: Shows are scheduled today only, at 2 and 7 p.m. at Keene State College's Redfern Arts Center. Tickets are available at the box office. The teenage actors first took to the air in rehearsals Wednesday

See LOCAL on Page A10



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Photos by CECILY WEISBURGH / Sentinel Staff

Brooklynn Goller, playing the title role of Peter Pan, flies through the air during a rehearsal of the MoCo Arts Teen Musical Theatre production of "Peter Pan." At bottom, Captain Hook, at right, played by Sean Haefner, strikes a pose in front of the pirates during a rehearsal. The play will be performed today at the Redfern Arts Center at Keene State College.

Local performers go airborne in 'Peter Pan'

(Continued from Page A1)

when Stu Cox of ZFX Flying Effects of Louisville, Ky., hooked up their harnesses and taught them how to fly, in character. Four local volunteers, including MoCo Executive Director Reagan Messer, operate the rigging, under Cox's supervision.

"It was super scary and super fun," Camie Goodwin of Fitzwilliam said of her first flight in rehearsals. She plays Liza, the servant of the Darling family in the popular children's play; six characters in all fly in the production.

"The first time it was really startling because they brought me up really fast, but I enjoyed it," added Isaac Sylvern, 13, a student at Keene Middle School who plays Michael Darling.

Isaac's father, Craig Sylvern, is a professional saxophonist and music professor at Keene State; he'll play clarinet in the orchestra, led by Keene State students. Interestingly, the pit is hidden behind the stage, with the orchestra taking its cues from a video feed of the live show.

All these elements had to mesh in just a matter of days, and Hennem says it poses a unique challenge. MoCo's building on Railroad Street doesn't have an auditorium that can handle a lavish production with 50-plus performers and the stylish Redfern is the only theater around equipped for rigging harnesses.

While rehearsals have been ongoing for weeks, pulling the production together — set, markings, dress rehearsals, surprise last-minute details — has to be accomplished in three days in the main theater.

"I get a lot of gray hairs," Hennem says with a laugh. "I dream about the day MoCo Arts has a dedicated arts (performing) space. We would love to have a tech

week process (where we could) add in lights, then orchestra, then costumes. But it is what it is."

Hennem is unflappable. Having moved to Keene 15 years ago, she quickly integrated herself into MoCo, and has been teaching theater much of her life. She's also artistic director of the summer CAKE program (Creative Arts for Keene) for area kids. Hennem was quick to praise the actors for their patience at Thursday's unusually long six-hour rehearsal.

"I'm so proud of the kids for their resiliency and adaptability," said Hennem, who added that, technically, it's one of the hardest shows she's ever put together.

"Boy, these kids could go on tour for a Broadway production because they're doing what professionals do."

Brooklynn Goller, 16, plays Peter Pan after three years in MoCo. A junior at Keene High, she says she loves performing — and flying is a bonus.

"I didn't even think I was going to get the role of Peter Pan. I was shocked and excited. I'm enjoying every second of it," she said between spins in the air.

Messer, MoCo's executive director and a native of Atlanta, has a rich theatrical background. He is a former Boston Ballet soloist, who has performed across the U.S. in many of ballet's classics, from Swan Lake to The Nutcracker. He has also worked with several renowned artists — musician Smokey Robinson, actor David Hasselhoff, film director John Landis to name a few — and was even once a dancer at Disney World in Florida.

He met his wife, who is from Peterborough, at Boston Ballet and the couple decided to put down roots in Keene 13 years ago. He joined MoCo as a teacher in 2002, and has worked his

way up to executive director. Messer stresses diversity, encouraging students to explore various components in the arts.

"They may start in ballet, then maybe they'll do hip-hop, modern, musical theater. No matter what they choose, the arts gives them tools they can use for life," Messer said.

"No pun intended, but they're going to fly — not only the ones intended to fly, but the whole cast."

For example, Teah Bell, 12, of Keene (Jane Darling) started at MoCo in dance last year and gravitated to theater. Maude Warshaw of Sullivan (Tinkerbell) followed her older sister into the arts.

"I was like, sure I'll try it. And now I love it."

A new lease on life
Founded in 1991 as the Moving Company Dance Center, MoCo went through some financial struggles a few years ago, but Messer says it has recovered. Last year its teachers logged more than 50,000 hours of student instruction time and its productions drew more than 10,000 audience goers.

"We are at a point where we have a wonderful building on Railroad Street, but we're starting to see our classes get maxed out and our building maxed out. What does that hold for the future, we don't know. But we promise ourselves that we'll do everything that is financially sustainable," he said.

MoCo's classes attract an array of students, 2nd grade through high school, and hosts a young arts program for those in 1st grade and younger. Its "twins" program is for ages 8 to 12 and also includes two productions per year. Students come from all around the Monadnock Region, people such as Sean Haefner who moved to Alstead in May

from the Finger Lakes Region of New York.

Haefner, 18, plays Captain Hook — with relish.

"I had never played a villain before and I really wanted a chance to play the bad guy," Haefner said. Although he's not one of the flying cast members, he grinned and added, "But I have a hook for a hand."

Cox, the rigging expert from Louisville, has put the kids at ease and his own "attire" (he's a dead ringer

for Robin Williams in "Jumanji") always includes a kilt. Cox is a former Eagle Scout, lives in a cabin in the woods and has traveled the country as an expert in set design and rigging.

"Any time we can expose our Keene kids to professional people out in the real world is just a real positive," Hennem said.

Hennem says she had considered doing "Peter Pan" for a few years, but it's a major undertaking and

expensive, especially with the rigging.

As always, the cast is sprinkled with veterans and newcomers alike. No one gets cut and everyone has a part. "Some are terrified, first time on stage. Others are drooling and itching to go to Broadway," Hennem said.

And some are eager to fly.

Steve Gilbert is a columnist for *The Sentinel*.

