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MoCo on the move



BILL GNADE / Sentinel Staff

During the first act of the MoCo Arts School of Dance's Sunday presentation of "The Jungle Book" at the Redfern Arts Center, a streak of tigers, led by dancer Rebecca Redfield playing Shere Khan, performs a hip-hop piece choreographed by MoCo Arts teaching artist Kristen

Performance arts nonprofit begins public phase of fundraising for its new

By Callie Ginter Sentinel Staff

When the curtains closed after MoCo Arts' performance of "The Jungle Book" Saturday afternoon, about 450 people cheered with excitement. When the curtains reopened, there was a second roar of cheers, and it wasn't because there was an encore.

MoCo Arts had an announcement to make.

"It's a special weekend for us," said Reagan Messer, MoCo Arts' executive director and artistic director of dance.

"And it's no secret we're bursting at the seams on Railroad Street," he continued, referencing the building's location.

MoCo Moves: Building MoCo Arts' Future Capital Campaign kicked off Saturday after one of three of MoCo's performances of "The Jungle Book" at the Redfern Arts Center at Keene State College this past weekend. The campaign is the public phase of fundraising, which will end Nov. 9. The date marks the 25th anniversary of MoCo Arts' first class.

MoCo Arts' new home will be at 38 Roxbury St. in Keene, the site where the former Keene Family YMCA building stood. The new building will be 17,000 square feet, compared to MoCo Arts' current 7,700 square feet. And not only will the new space be bigger, but also the current site on Roxbury Street will no longer be an eyesore, Messer said.

He said he hopes to move to the new location by the summer of 2018, and the goal is to raise the \$5 million needed for the new building by November. Ground breaking is scheduled for September. A year ago, MoCo Arts did its first official ask for donations, and has already raised nearly \$4.1 million, according to Messer.

MoCo Arts is a nonprofit organization that provides arts education to children ranging from 18 months to 18 years old, and serves more than 2,300 kids a year. MoCo Arts offers dance programs, in styles such as ballet, tap and hip-hop; a variety of theater programs and a slew of camps.

Messer and other MoCo Arts leaders emphasize that they're not moving to a new building just because it's bigger — although that is a prominent reason.

"It's for the kids. Everything we do is for them," Messer said, pointing at the MoCo performers who sat onstage in costume after their show.



Moving to a brand-new, two-story building with three full studios, a dedicated 200-seat black box theater, parking, office space, a lobby and more will also expand opportunities for the performers, MoCo Arts officials said.

Straight theater plays (non-musical plays), comedies and technical theater classes are some new programs that will be offered thanks to the increase in space, according to Marty Hennum, the artistic director of theater.

Hennum explained that often classes that are rehearsing need to be moved or canceled because of the space crunch.

“We’re limited for what we’ve been able to do. ... This opens up new content and curriculum,” she said.

The current building has two full-size studios and a smaller studio. One of the full-size studios turns into the black box theater. As a result, Friday and Saturday classes lose studio space on black box performance weekends, according to Katie Day, MoCo Arts’ communications and marketing manager.

Sometimes classes have waiting lists, Day said, because there are limits to how many students can take a class at a time, and classes fill quickly.

“The room is only so big,” Day explained.

“The new studio space will relieve that pressure.”

Day laughed as she said she’s looking forward to her office not doubling as a costume/fitting room, and also having dedicated staff bathrooms.

Most importantly, the kids are looking forward to moving, too.

“I’m excited about it,” said Maggie Cahoon, who played King Louie, the monkey, in “The Jungle Book.”

Cahoon won’t use the new building because her senior year in high school next year will be MoCo Arts’ last year on Railroad Street. But she said she’s grateful the younger students will be able to use it.

“I’m excited for the little ones ... I think it’s such a good opportunity for the community,” she said.

Rebecca Redfield, who played the villainous tiger Shere Khan, agreed.

“Right now, they put 25 little kids in one small studio, so it’s going to be amazing for people to fully move,” Redfield said.

Elizabeth Cardine of Swanzey — a mother of three boys who participate in MoCo Arts — said right now, scheduling classes is logistically crazy because of the limited space.

“It will be so much better. It will make it so they can do more than they do now,” she said.

She also highlighted that the pick-up and drop-off will be much easier, since the new building will have dedicated lanes where 27 cars can be parked, as well as 23 parking spots. The building on Railroad Street has no parking.

Messer emphasized that not all of MoCo Arts’ shows will be put on in the new black box theater, and MoCo will still be part of the community.

“We’ll still be going to our partners for big shows. ... We wanted to stay downtown for a reason,” Messer said.

“It’s not so big that we lose that family-friendly feel,” he said.

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