

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Historic Portland ballroom could get new life with Naked Shakespeare productions



Troy R. Bennett | BDN

Michael Levine of Acorn Productions stands in the massive third floor ballroom in Mechanics Hall on Congress Street in Portland on Friday. The Maine Charitable Mechanics Association, the non-profit organization that owns and operates Mechanics Hall, is partnering with Acorn Productions in completing renovations to the third floor ballroom space so the venue can be licensed for public performances. *Buy Photo*

By [Seth Koenig](#), BDN Staff

Posted Aug. 18, 2014, at 12:53 p.m.

PORTLAND, Maine — An area theater group and one of the country's oldest trade societies are teaming up to bring new life to a historic downtown Portland space.

It's been decades since the spacious third-story ballroom of the Maine Charitable Mechanics

Association's 1859 headquarters has been used for public events.

Now, Acorn Productions, a theater group that has been looking for a permanent home since giving up its lease in Westbrook's Dana Warp Mill in the spring, is planning to campaign for donations to raise the \$25,000 necessary to upgrade the ballroom.

"A lot of our programs are in suspended animation because of a lack of space. This is a great space for us, because we don't like traditional theater spaces," said Acorn co-founder Michael Levine.

"They've been looking for a home, and we feel there's a synergy between their goals and our goals," said Tom Blackburn, a member of the board of the mechanics association.

Levine said he's anxious to begin staging the organization's popular Naked Shakespeare productions — performed without sets, lights or heavy props, but fully clothed — in the iconic 519 Congress St. building.

But before he or any other performer or lecturer can address a crowd in the majestic, but in recent years hidden, 3,000-square-foot ballroom, a number of upgrades must be made.

Blackburn said the groups must modernize fire alarms and fire escapes, and add emergency lights and automated door closers, among other smaller projects, in order to gain city approval as a public assembly space with a capacity of 160.

The push to revive the ballroom — where the association once hosted travel lectures, dances and other events into the 1950s — comes in concert with a larger effort to revitalize the nearly 200-year-old organization overall.

"The building is really a jewel inside," Blackburn said. "It's really been underutilized for a long time and there are significant deferred maintenance issues."

When the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association was launched in 1815, it was open to "anyone who used tools," such as bakers, bookbinders, carpenters and artisans, Blackburn said.

The association held fairs to showcase members' products and inventions, offered educational opportunities for those seeking to advance their careers, donated money to widows' and orphans' charities, and established a library that still exists on the second floor of the Congress Street headquarters.

During the Civil War, the mechanics hall was used as a place to check in and process Union army soldiers before they went off to war.

After Portland's Great Fire of 1866 — which the mechanics hall survived but 1,800 other structures, including City Hall, did not — the association's building was used for three years as Portland's temporary city hall.

“At one time there were a lot of these mechanics institutes around the country,” Blackburn said.

Now, the Maine organization’s membership numbers around 300, with about 100 of those being what Blackburn called “active members.”

“We’ve survived, just kind of bumping along,” he said. “Not many people really know we exist.”

Blackburn and Levine each said he hopes that’s about to change.

“The goal is to get that [public assembly space] license, so they can move forward with their goals and we can move forward with ours,” Levine said. “It’s a great partnership for us, because it puts us right where we want to be, in the downtown.”

Blackburn said the association has launched a study of where it might find its next generation of members, and what kinds of events to plan in order to regain the public eye — events that highlight the inventors and thinkers of the day, like the organization did when it got started nearly two centuries ago.

Blackburn said the group may begin to reach out more aggressively to entrepreneurs and workers in technology fields.

“The mechanics of 1815 were innovators, and we think that’s who the mechanics of today are — the innovators,” he said.

<http://bangordailynews.com/2014/08/18/living/historic-portland-ballroom-could-get-new-life-with-naked-shakespeare-productions/> printed on October 27, 2014