

Theater company coming to historic Mechanics Hall

Acorn Productions is joining forces with the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association, raising funds to convert the third-floor ballroom of historic Mechanics Hall into a performance space.

Acorn Productions, the 501(c)3 organization that operates the Naked Shakespeare series, has entered into a collaborative agreement with the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association, the nonprofit organization that owns and operates Mechanics Hall, located at 519 Congress St., to complete the final stages of renovations to the third-floor ballroom space so that the venue can be licensed for public performances.



"It's a new home for Naked Shakespeare," said Michael Levine, Acorn's founder and Naked Shakespeare's director. "Once the place is up and licensed, we'll be doing shows there on First Fridays."

Levine knows that Naked Shakespeare has a pretty devoted following, and a familiar brand name, "so once we get up and running, we'll get a crowd," he said. "The question is what sort of amenities we can offer (e.g. food and wine)."



Under the terms of the agreement, Acorn plans to begin weekly private workshops at Mechanics Hall this fall for professional actors wishing to deepen their ability to work with William Shakespeare's text, while working with MCMA to raise the funds needed to meet required fire and safety codes in order to receive a public assembly license for the space.

"There won't be risers or seats or a stage," Levine said. "It's more designed for uses where you need a large floor space. Some of the things I've been thinking about — workshops, yoga classes, dramatic readings, staged readings, a lecture series, maybe movies — any type of interactive workshop presentation, maybe some classes in collaboration with MECA."

Acorn is moving from their theater at the old Dana Warp Mill in Westbrook.

"We loved our space, but there weren't many collaborative opportunities out there, not nearly as much as the space on Congress Street," Levine said.

Over the past year, MCMA has been working behind the scenes to make improvements to the Mechanics Hall ballroom space in order to make the space as flexible and accommodating as possible to a wide variety of uses and patrons. The nonprofit organization has narrowed down a list of work needed to receive a public

assembly license to the point where a final push should allow the venue to open sometime during the 2014-15 arts season.

"Portland finds itself in the enviable position of being a city long on arts organizations but short on venues, and the location of Mechanics Hall in the arts district means that the proposed 50 to 300-person affordable and classy space should find many users," Levine said in a press release. "Over time, MCMA's ballroom venue will become a cultural, social, and educational center for its members and the community."

The folks at Mechanics Hall are excited about their newest tenants.

Thomas Blackburn, a board member of MCMA, said the third-floor Ballroom, with its 20-foot high ceilings and 3,000 square feet of floor space, is ideal for the acting troupe. Originally built in 1859, the building initially housed the library on the first floor. The ballroom, then on the second floor, had a 33-foot ceiling.

At the turn of the century, famed architect John Calvin Stevens, a member of the MCMA, recommended moving the library to the second floor, and adding a third floor for the ballroom.

"They have held the Mechanics lecture series here for more than 100 years," Blackburn said, "as well as dances and social events." The building served as City Hall in 1866, with the city burned and offices had to be relocated there for three years.

Blackburn said Acorn and MCMA would need to raise about \$25,000 for life safety code updates in order to make the space a public assembly venue.

"These upgrades include renovations to the fire escape, upgrading the fire alarm system, adding some exit signs and emergency lights, putting automatic door closers on the doors to the hall — once we've done those things, and are licensed for public use — we will host our own travel lectures," he said of the series held this year at the Woodfords' Club and previously at Catherine McAuley High School.

"It's a great opportunity for the Mechanics to form an alliance with a well-known and respected theater company," Blackburn said of Acorn's move there. "It assists them in providing a venue, and it helps us in bringing this space back to life."

Anyone interested in more information about MCMA and Acorn's renovation campaign, or actors interested in participating in Naked Shakespeare's fall workshop series, should contact Acorn Productions at www.acorn-productions.org or acornacting@gmail.com.