

Taking center stage

Acorn bounces from Westbrook to Portland

By **MEGAN GRUMBLING** | September 3, 2014



INCREASE YOUR ART RATE The 1859 building sits in the heart of the arts district.

“I’ve always loved hidden treasures,” says Michael Levine, founding artistic director of Acorn Productions, as he climbs the stairs to the third-floor ballroom of Mechanics Hall, a gem of a historic space concealed in plain sight right on Congress Street. The ballroom of this nearly two hundred year-old institution, the last grand functions of which took place in the 1930’s, is now slated for renovation, thanks to a collaboration between Acorn Productions, the nearly 20-year old theater group, and the Maine Charitable Mechanic Association, the nearly 200-year old professional organization that began and maintains Mechanics Hall.

Acorn and the MCMA recently announced a plan to raise \$25,000 for renovations to bring the 3000-square-foot ballroom of the hall (the first floor of which now houses the new Art Mart) up to code, making it available for flexible public performances with audiences up to 300. Levine and MCMA board member Tom Blackburn say that they expect to open the ballroom’s doors to public performances—by both Acorn and other organizations seeking to rent performance space—by early winter. It’s a move that they hope will be a boon to the causes of both historic preservation and cultivating accessible performance space in a creative city in which, as Levine notes, “every

performance space in town is usually being used.”

Founded in 1815, the Maine Charitable Mechanic Association was part of a global movement to start mechanic guilds that offered support, education, and lending libraries to a wide range of skilled trade practitioners of the day’s “mechanic arts,” which is to say, anyone who used tools—the original founders included shipwrights, bakers, hatters, tailors, saddlers, and other workers (and today anyone may become a member for a mere \$25 a year). The building at 519 Congress was completed in 1859, when it opened what is now the eighth oldest membership library in the country. Its ballroom was later redesigned by John Calvin Stevens at the turn of the twentieth century, and the hall, was added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1973. Today, the library is housed on the second floor, in what was the original, 33-foot ceilinged ballroom, and a second-floor room serves as a rentable classroom and gallery space, which the MCMA opens for First Fridays.

But the third-floor ballroom is the jewel of the building, with high ceilings, smooth hardwood floors perfect for dancers, and twin balconies. MCMA board member Reggie Osborn says that between the 1860’s and the late 1930’s, the hall saw wide public attendance of ballroom dance classes, slide-show lectures, and orchestras, with public dancing every Saturday night through the ‘30s. The ballroom closed to the public in 1943, on account of code issues, and went unused until the 1950’s, when a series of photographers used it as a studio space.

Now, the funds raised by the Acorn-MCMA partnership will largely go toward two stages of bringing the room up to safety code for its public assembly license, including electrical upgrades and improvements to doors and fire alarms. Levine says they will also remove a secondary wall in the ballroom to square it off, and open it up into a wide-open space that will be ideal for myriad uses and configurations. Returning the ballroom to wide public use will be the next phase of a series of the building’s transformations and reinventions that characterize so many downtown buildings of a certain age.