



Ballantyne's Morrison YMCA offers a venue for the arts

Ballantyne Arts Center preparing for future performances

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Hannah Seiler, left, and Emma Ryan perform in "Jungalbook," an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book," at the Morrison Family YMCA. COURTESY OF ANDREA ST. CLAIR.

Andrea St. Clair wants Ballantyne residents to know: The Morrison Family YMCA isn't just about sports anymore.

St. Clair serves as the Morrison Y's senior arts director and is based in the Ballantyne Arts Center, a separate facility from the main campus, which teaches youths about everything from dance to visual art to theater.

"We're offering high-quality arts-education programs at the Y in the safe and family friendly environment that everyone knows the Y to be," St. Clair said. "One of the challenges is to get people to think of the Y and the arts together."

The Morrison Y leases about 80 percent of the Ballantyne Arts Center, at 11318 N. Community House Road, while the Ballantyne School of Music, a private company, leases the rest.

Among other amenities, the facility includes two dance studios, three preschool rooms, a multipurpose room and a roughly 60-seat black box theater.

This past year, the center expanded to bring live performances to the community – and to provide an opportunity for young actors to build their resume.

Youth Theatre Productions, which began its season in fall with a run of “You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown,” will hold its fifth and final performance of the season when it presents “Peter Pan Junior,” said St. Clair.

She said Youth Theatre already is planning next year’s performances, which will include “Charlotte’s Web” and “Honk Jr.”

“The Y knows that every kid doesn’t learn and grow through sports,” said St. Clair, hired as arts director in January 2014.

St. Clair said that since launching last summer, the theater program has seen more youths audition for each successive play. The first had about 15 youths audition, while the last drew more than 50, she said.

St. Clair said plays generally are capped at 12-20 performers per show, with each show doing four one-hour performances. There typically are about eight adults who are part of the production as well, including the director and production team.

Auditions are held for second- through 12th-graders, and all actors chosen pay \$325-\$350 to participate, St. Clair said.

The weekend of April 18, the center held auditions for “Peter Pan Junior,” which will begin its run in early June.

White Oak resident Kim Meltzer said her 10-year-old daughter, Isabella, has been in most of the plays this year, including the most recent: “Jungalbook,” an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s “The Jungle Book” set on a children’s playground.

Meltzer said she’s been pleased with how her daughter’s acting skills have developed.

“She’s never been shy, so I can’t say she’s come out of her shell, but I’ve seen other children who were very quiet become very outgoing and very confident in themselves,” she said.

Steven James, director of past plays including “James and the Giant Peach” and the upcoming “Peter Pan Junior,” said he also has enjoyed watching youths develop.

“I’m getting to watch the kids grow and develop and change as actors,” he said. “That’s really the best part of the job.”

James said he’s noticed that many children might come to their first audition “terrified, nervous and shaking,” only to return to the next audition “a completely different child.”

“They’re more comfortable, they’re more confident,” James said. “I feel like it carries over in their day-to-day as well. It gives you the ability to stand and be you, and not be afraid to be you.”

St. Clair said it’s not just the actors who benefit. After all, she said, the Arts & Science Council has recognized Ballantyne as being a “culturally under-served area of Charlotte.”

“There was definitely a gap there,” she said, adding that the center sells close to 240 tickets at \$10 apiece per show run. “To be able to have those services right next door to them is big.”

Meltzer said the new programming at the YMCA also has made it easier for Ballantyne parents to offer their children quality enrichment programs without having to drive all over town.

“It gives them activities that foster all the things that you as a parent want you to be, whether it’s acting or gymnastics or dance,” Meltzer said. “The Morrison Y is a hidden gem in that we’re lucky to have it here in our community.”

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