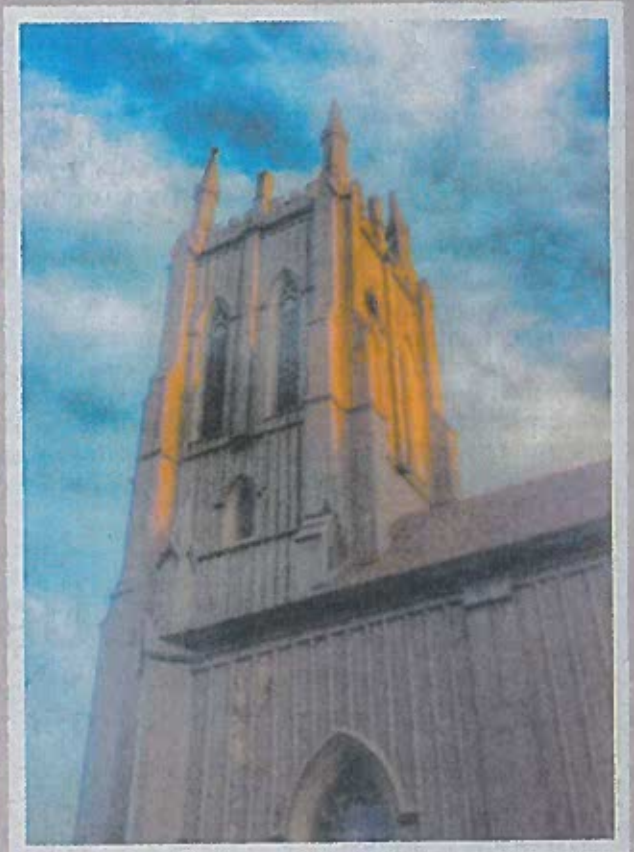


Chocolate Church Arts Center

Bath nonprofit celebrates 40 years of community



BY JULIETTE LAAKA
The Times Record
BATH

The Chocolate Church Arts Center, a Bath nonprofit celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, is looking to boost support for local and regional talent as part of its mission.

The arts center was founded in 1977 when New York City theatrical designer Jack Doepp bought the former Congregational Church — which had gone unused for years and was slated for demolition — from Sagadahoc Preservation Inc. The arts center hosted strictly theater at first, but soon added live music to its repertoire, which was its chief draw for years.

When Executive Director Jennifer DeChant was hired in 2012, the center was in jeopardy of closing. DeChant implemented a new business model to help connect the center with the Bath community and now, five years later, finances are stable.

"It's difficult to be an arts organization," DeChant said, adding that the church is in the preliminary stages of developing a new capital campaign. "Funding is scarce, but we operate by the philosophy we rise and expand to the level of community support."

The center now hosts a variety of concerts, plays and art shows.

"We wanted to utilize the campus more fully," DeChant said in a previous interview. "We now produce our own theater ... and are diversifying in many ways."

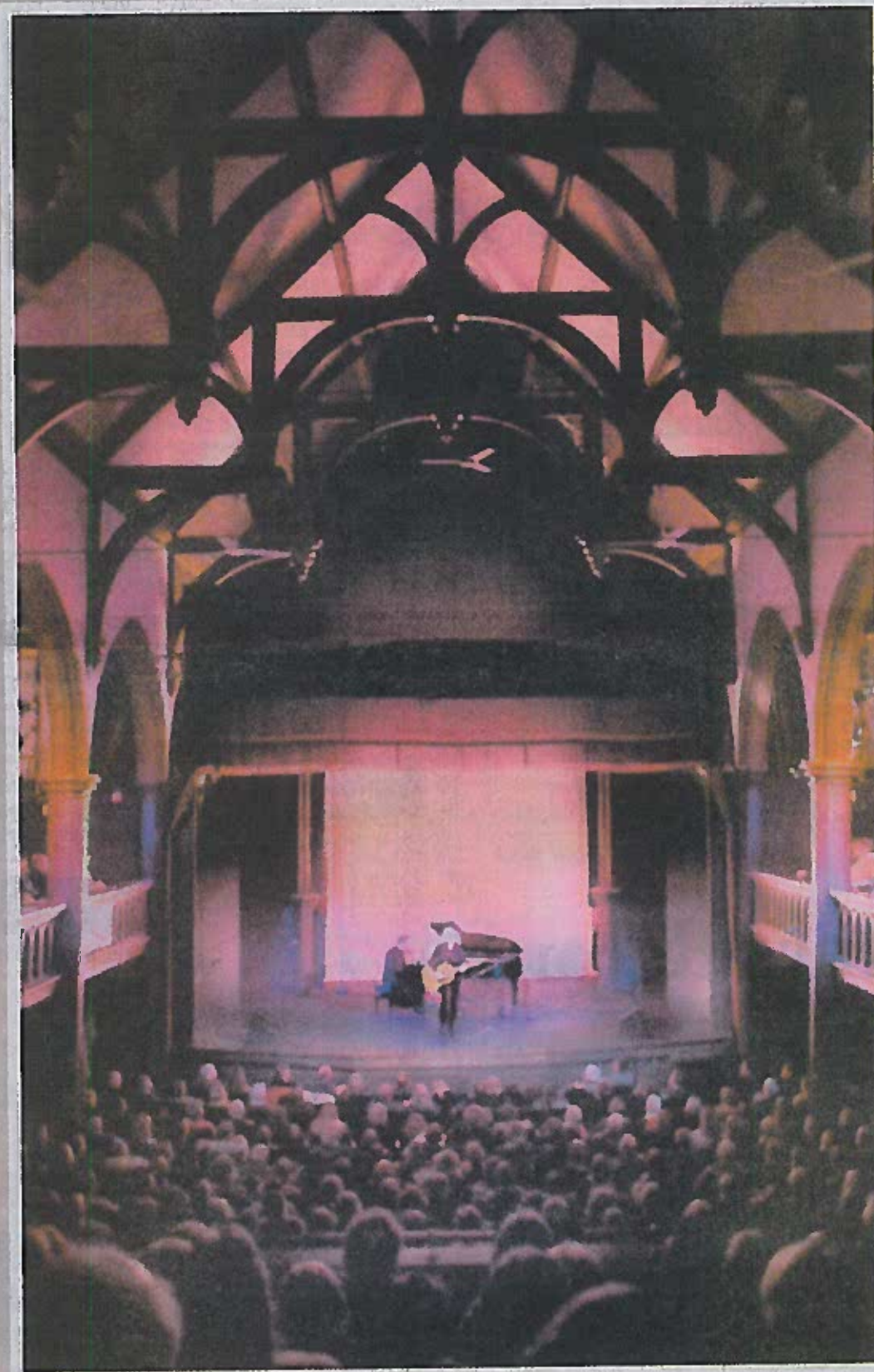
The CCAC campus includes a main stage with 277 seats; a smaller, more intimate stage that seats around 80 people, and an art gallery.

"We entertain 7,000 people from September to June, we are an economic driver and a part of the creative economy in town," DeChant said.

Recently, she said, the center had great success in a play written and produced by Bath couple Peter Alexander and Johanna Harkness — "A One Way Ticket to Mars," a rock opera. Additionally, resident Tim Goad and his band performed a sold-out show in January. DeChant said Goad is now playing gigs throughout the region.

"That's what a community arts center is supposed to do," DeChant said. "Foster and propel talent."

DeChant said the board of directors has worked hard to create ways to be a sustainable presence in Bath, and added their volunteer staff of 100



JUDY COLLINS performs at The Chocolate Church Arts Center.

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makes putting on 57 performances in 41 weeks possible.

"There are always people here rehearsing for theater productions, getting ready for music performances, meeting or auditioning or just hanging out in the art gallery. It's about the connectivity and the relevancy to the community and the region," DeChant said. "I think that's an emphasis that we have picked up on in the last four or five years."

Although singers and actors from Maine make up CCAC's chief group of performers, the arts center welcomes national performers, too. Acts like Joan Osborne and Suzanne Vega took the stage in 2016.

Volunteers and collaborations

The CCAC is volunteer-based, an aspect that DeChant said is at the heart of its continued

success.

"Most of what we do is possible because of the volunteers who are involved," said DeChant. "We have a very small staff here, and we would never have gotten this far without our hardworking, committed volunteers. They stand side by side and do the heavy lifting."

Volunteer jobs range from show coordinators, art gallery staffing, groundskeeping and maintenance.

Upcoming CCAC performances

Sept. 8

Goig (Celtic)

"These talented and enthusiastic musicians easily shift between century-old tunes of past generations to original and contemporary compositions, featuring the band's range of over a dozen instruments," said the description of the band on the center's website.

Sept. 15-24

Rodger's & Hammerstein's Oklahoma! (musical theatre)

Set in a Western Indian territory just after the turn of the century, there is the high-spirited rivalry between the local farmers and cowboys. Under the direction of Thom Watson, music direction of Teresa Henderson and choreography of Ashley Steeves, said the center's website.

Sept. 26

Pint & Dale (maritime folk)

William Pint & Felicia Dale have won an ardent following across the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands with their recordings and appearances at festivals and concerts. They gather together material from many locales and cultures including the West Indies, Wales and Brittany, said the center's website.

CCAC's future

DeChant envisions further developments in CCAC's evolution in the next few years, including tuition based educational lectures, musician residencies and a capital campaign.

"Our goal is to become a more programmatic experience for this community," said DeChant. "That's quite a difference from ticketing for live music, theater and dance, but it's not a radical revolution. It's more of an evolution," she said this Spring.

"Donors, sponsors and local businesses have been stepping up and supporting us," said DeChant.

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