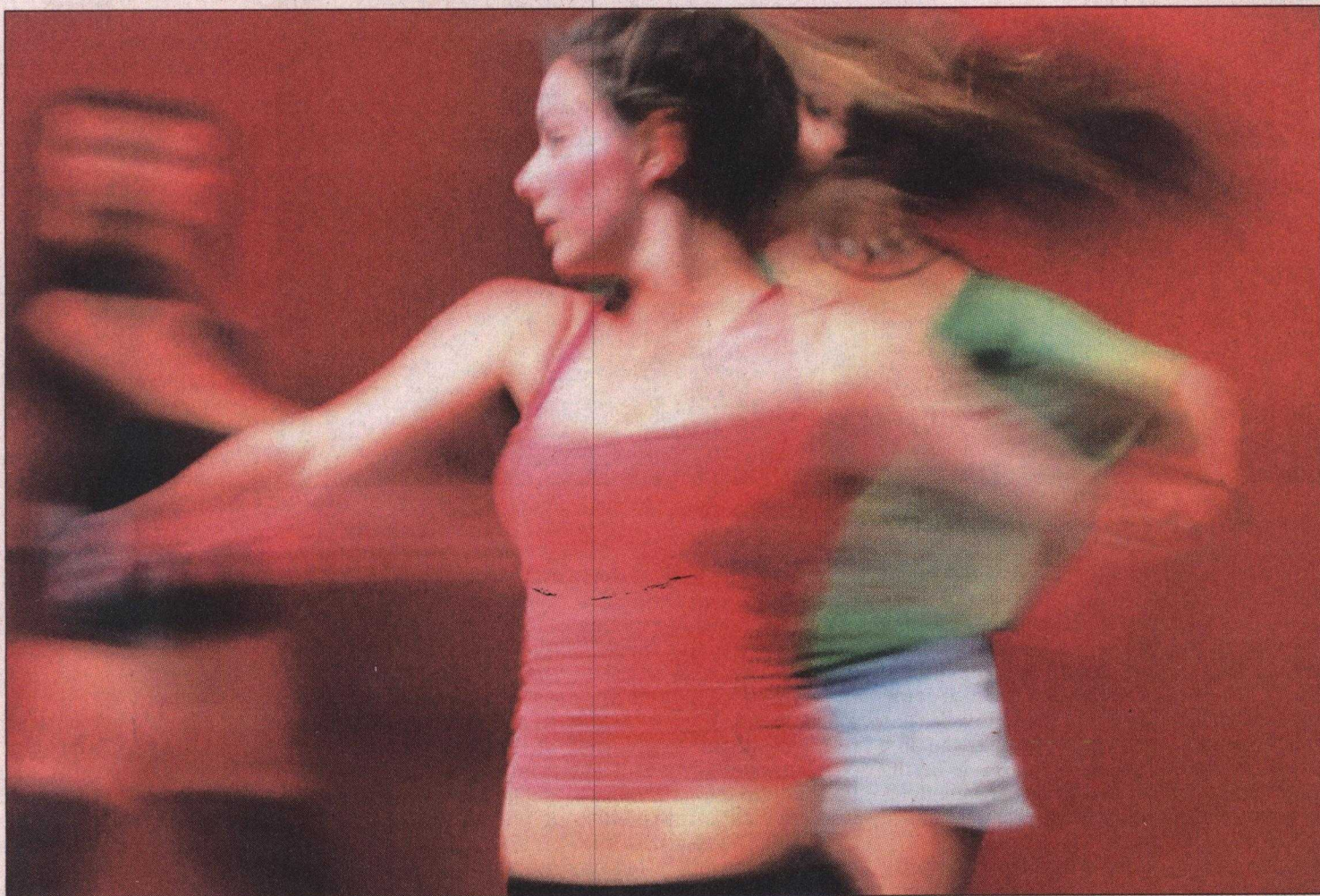


After a 3-month hiatus, Santa Cruz's Motion Pacific dance studio is reborn in a bright new space



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Student Annie Hubbard is poetry in motion as she participates in a Motion Pacific class at the dance studio's new location.

RESUME MOTION

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By WALLACE BAINE

wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com

Two years ago, Molly Heaster Valera called up her friend Abra Allan and, with one line, rocked her world.

"She just said it point blank," said Allan of that conversation. "She said, 'I want to give you Motion Pacific. I know you could do an amazing job with it.'"

At the time, the popular downtown dance studio was housed in the Art Center building on Center Street, near the former Actors' Theatre. Valera had just taken on another huge business commitment and, rather than closing Motion Pacific, she decided to bequeath it to someone who would run it with the sense of devotion and commitment with which she had run it.

"I actually thought she was going to say no," said Valera. "She really considered it and took her time with it, and I really felt a lot better that she did take some time with it. She understood that running a business was a 24/7 thing."

Allan agreed to take on the business and, from the beginning, she decided that Motion Pacific could not survive in its cramped space in the Art Center. This month, the rebirth of the studio, which



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Motion Pacific students dance in the light and airy former home of the Mill Gallery.

began with that gift from one dancer to another, culminates when Motion Pacific hosts a grand opening of its capacious new space in the former Mill Gallery on the south end of Front Street.

"It's been an incredible journey for me," for Allan as she stood in the vast Studio A. "But I've loved every minute

SEE MOTION ON D2



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Ballet instructor Leslie Guzman warms up at the barre before her students arrive for a class at Motion Pacific.

MOTION

Continued from D1

of it. Every day, from Day One that I took the business, I've either been looking for a new space or building a new space."

The new space has a large main studio downstairs, just under 1,800 square feet, and a smaller studio up a flight of stairs. Before she took on Motion Pacific, Allan was already running Santa Cruz Dance, a presenter of dance performances that brought in performers from in and around the Bay Area to various venues around Santa Cruz County. Her plan is now to combine Motion Pacific — with its classes for kids and adults in a wide variety of dance styles in the daytime — with Santa Cruz Dance — transforming the studio space into a performance theater for shows and concerts in the evenings.

"It was just so clearly what had to happen," she said. "With my work with Santa Cruz Dance, I was always challenged by having a venue where I could consistently present performers and where I knew what to expect. It's so nice to have a space where I know what's going on all the time and I can get the dates that I want."

It is, in fact, Allan's ambi-

tion to turn her new space into a dance hub for downtown Santa Cruz where dance lovers can go to enjoy dance as both participants and observers.

Motion Pacific originally opened in January 1998 in a building on Front Street that was once home to Kinko's. By embracing as many dance styles as possible, from contemporary and jazz to samba and hip-hop, Motion Pacific quickly became a busy center of dance and dance-related activities. Nine years later, squeezed by rising rents, Valera moved the studio to the Art Center in a space about the half the size of Front Street.

Allan had danced at Motion Pacific on Front Street as a student and, years later, she had worked with Valera in publicity and graphic design.

"I had a few people in mind," said Valera of her decision to turn over Motion Pacific. "I really wanted to find someone young and energetic and open. And that's Abra."

Allan took on the challenge but saw that she needed to find a new place to move immediately. "We were always very restricted in that building. We couldn't run classes at certain times. We couldn't use live music. We were always hushing our students. I got so tired of doing that."

Later, Allan embraced the idea of transforming the

recently closed Mill Gallery, once the hub of a promising visual arts culture emerging in the old Santa Cruz Taxi building in the transitional neighborhood between downtown and Main Beach. The renovations involved building a reception area and laying down a marley sprung floor, a must for a serious dance space.

She brought in an advisory board to help her with everything from decision-making to fundraising. The board included Cabrillo dance instructors David King and Cid Pearlman and veteran dancers and arts administrators Julia Chiapella and Virginia Wright.

"We had a capital campaign," said Pearlman, an accomplished choreographer who will bring her show "Looking Left" to the new studio on May 7-8. "We were raising memberships, we helped as consultants and in programming, what an artist-in-residence program would look like, fundraising, outreach. It's all about creating a culture of dance."

Construction delays caused a squeeze on Motion Pacific's schedule and Allan had to close the old space on Center Street before the new space was ready for occupation.

"We were closed for three months, and we felt every day of it too," said Allan.

Meanwhile, Allan's partner Chip, the executive director of the Downtown Association who had extensive theater-tech experience, helped refit the new space as a performance arena.

The resulting entity, the coming together of Motion Pacific and Santa Cruz Dance, has been rechristened Motion at the Mill. The new space soft-opened at the end of March offering classes in tap, hip-hop, ballet, jazz, contempo-

rary, bellydancing, Afro-Brazilian, even Pilates.

The new Motion at the Mill will host a grand opening event on April 22.

"What I really want," said Allan, "is for people to come in the door so they can be reminded of what an amazing program Motion Pacific is, and has been for 13 years. And, so far, for the most part, everybody that walks in is really happy with what they see here."