

# New mini-center for the performing arts

By JAMIE MARKS

"This," says Thatcher Clarke standing in the foyer of his recently opened performing arts center in Santa Cruz, "is the place I've been looking for for 10 years."

Thatcher's — which opened May 23 with performances by dancer Clarke and a theater improvisation group, among others — is housed in the former High Country nightclub at 931 Pacific Ave. on the mall in Santa Cruz. Clarke claims it's "what the community wants and needs for a small performing arts center." Everything from ballet and modern dance to drama, comedy, music and an art gallery is offered in Thatcher's three rooms.

Oil paintings and collages by artist Eugene Siegal adorn the walls of Thatcher's cafe, which serves brunches with drop-in entertainment Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Diners can catch just about any kind of show at these affairs for they are designed to provide the neophyte performer with a relaxed setting for his or her debut.

Clarke is a strong supporter of local talent. He says without qualification that "there's more (talent) in this community than I've ever seen in any other town in this country. And this center is designed for them. It's affordable for small groups and individuals."

"I'm promoting the small theater, dance troupes and musicians in the county regardless of their ability to draw an audience," Clarke says. "This is the place where they can build a following. I'll put on some shows on a percentage basis (of what's taken in at the door from ticket sales). No money in advance, no pressure to perform to only large audiences."

This generosity is the foundation of Thatcher's. With a volunteer group of about a dozen like-minded art aficionados, Clarke and his merry-makers have cleaned up, re-designed, painted and re-equipped the dilapidated building in just 14 weeks.

"It's a work-in-progress, and will constantly be changing, growing and re-defining itself," Clarke says. "But the beginnings are here for individuals and groups of quality who want to perform in an intimate setting."

Quality, he says, is the key. Clarke, who was the first ballet dancer with the San Francisco Ballet Company in the '60s and who has also toured with Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyne, screens the various acts that come through his doors.

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but they can be moved depending on the whim of the performers.

The venture is admittedly ambitious given the economic state of the country, Clarke allows. But, nevertheless, he says "the time is perfect."

"I've been in and out of dancing myself for 10 years now, and in that time I've often wondered what to do with myself," says the compact, lithe dancer. "It occurred to me a few years ago that I wanted to have a place to showcase the talent I've seen since moving here a few years ago. I just didn't know where to put it."

In mid-February, Clarke heard that the old High Country was going up for grabs. "When I saw the place I jumped," he recalls. "I knew this was what I'd been looking for."

Sheer energy and stamina have been the backbone behind getting Thatcher's started. What will sustain it is another matter.

Financial support has not been forthcoming, Clarke admits. He says he's approached "the wealthier people in the area, but I keep getting the same line: 'I just don't have the cash available to help now.'" This lack of funding is frustrating, but not impossible.

"I've had tremendous support from Bob Hanson, owner of Mr. Toot's in Capitola. One day Bob and I were talking and he gave me \$1,000 on the spot."

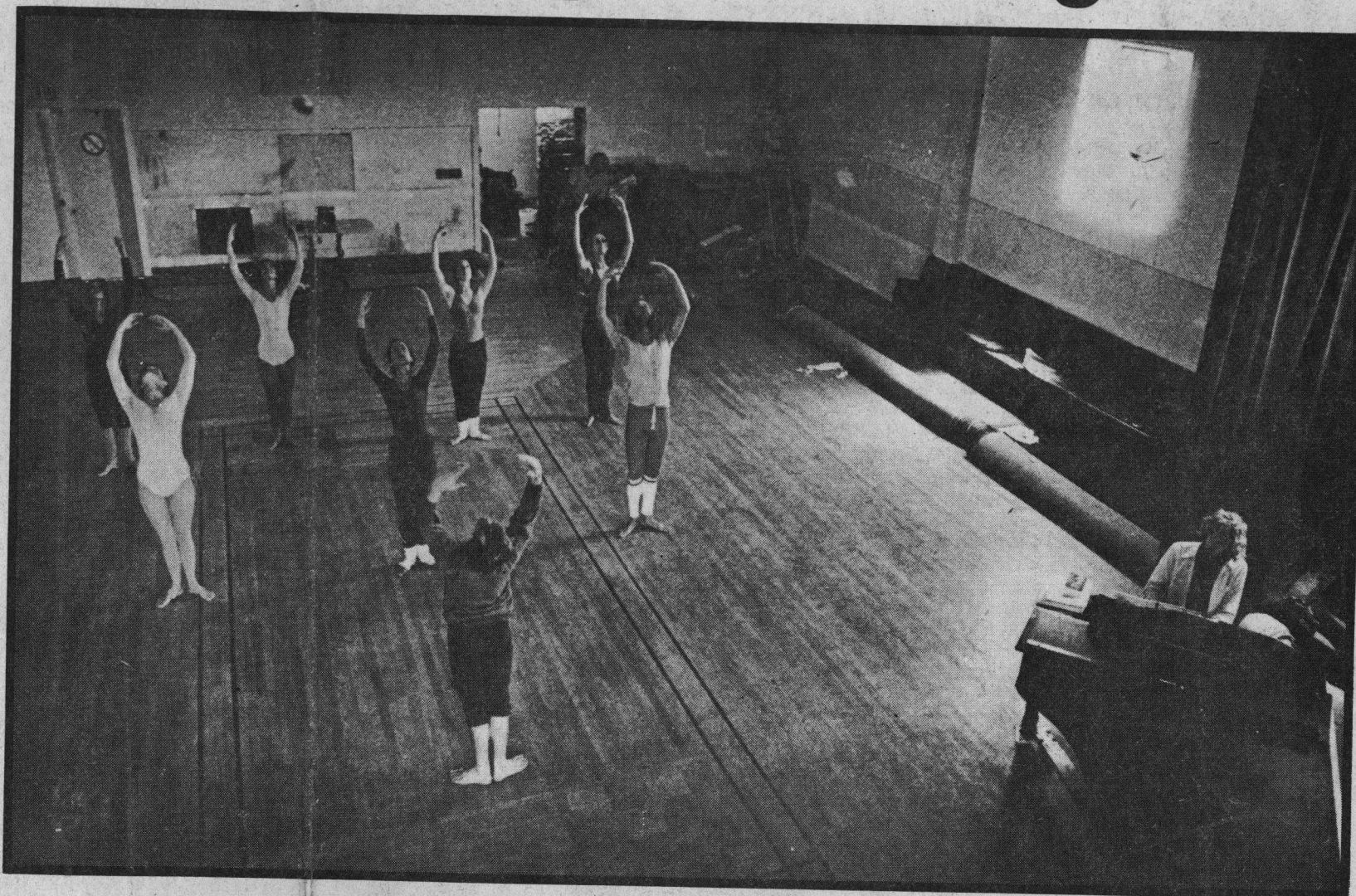
Until Clarke can find more generous souls like Hanson, he's relying on savings, loans and subscription sales to support and operate the center.

The subscriptions work as cash in advance for shows. A subscriber can buy a pass for any dollar amount he or she is willing to put up front. As performances arise, the pass is used as a ticket, and is deducted from the amount of the subscription until the subscription is used up.

Another sustaining venture of Thatcher's will be dance and music classes. Clarke himself teaches the ballet classes, which range from beginning to advanced levels. The advanced class meets every weekday and eventually Clarke hopes to take the 10 or so dancers in the class on tour.

"They have a decent command of the technical aspects of dance to facilitate the beginning of a company," he says. In return for the instruction, the class helps Clarke renovate and operate the building.

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Photos by Kurt Ellison

Thatcher Clarke (above, foreground), an ex-ballet dancer, teaches an advanced dance class in the newly renovated Thatcher's dance hall in Santa Cruz; at right, Clarke backstage: "There's more (talent) in this community than I've seen in any town in this country. And this center is for them."





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"If it's something I like, I'll go all-out," he claims. That, of course, doesn't exclude big-name performers. Clarke says he's getting calls from all over the state and has already booked South American singer Flora Purim and Airto for mid-June.

The high-ceilinged performance area is light, airy and outfitted with high-tech lighting and sound equipment. A cluster of folding chairs is usually set up in front of the large wooden dance/theater area,

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"This is all trial and error," Clarke says, "It's the kind of environment that encourages some of the shy talent in Santa Cruz to actually perform."

A newsletter is in the works, but until one is published, a schedule of performances can be obtained by calling Thatcher's at 425-1762, or by dropping in for a visit.

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