

Artists in Residence boosts theater in P.V.

By **NANCY REDWINE**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Peel back the layers of the Henry J. Mello Center for the Performing Arts — the birth after an earthquake, the fabulous architecture, its roots in the community — and there, in its heart, are the artists.

"It's always been my feeling that the Mello Center is nothing without the artists that give it life," said Pamela Mason, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Performing Arts Association (PVPAA) —

the Center's engine.

This month, five artists were selected as Artists in Residence by the PVPAA to nurture the life of local art with performances, workshops, lectures, classes and alliances with schools and social services.

Three are returning for a second year:

TANDY BEAL: dancer, choreographer and director.

JANET JOHNS: founder and artistic director of Esperanza del Valle.

IKUYO CONANT: composer and artistic director of

Watsonville Taiko.

And two are new to the program:

KARL SCHAFFER: dancer, mathematician and co-director of Dr. Schaffer and Mr. Stern Dance Ensemble.

MESUT OZGEN: classical guitarist and UC Santa Cruz lecturer in music.

The benefit for the artists is an annual stipend and rent-free use of the Mello Center for rehearsals, collaborations, photo shoots and public events.

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The Mello Center for a big win

By **WALLACE J. ...**
Sentinel staff writer

After 10 years, you would think the Mello Center would get out.

But still, it seems, most agree that the finest venue for the performing arts in Santa Cruz County is in Watsonville.

The Henry J. Mello Center for the Performing Arts celebrates the decade mark this week, hoping to attract audiences who might not be aware of its many charms.

Back in 1994, the Mello Center was still just a

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The benefit to the community is immeasurable.

Over the years, the stage at the Mello Center has been used by students, local groups and professional performers. The goal of the Artists in Residence Program is to expand the audience for the jewel of Santa Cruz County's performance venues.

The potential for community — and economic — change from a program like Artists in Residence is clear in a community just over the Gabilan Mountains.

"San Juan Bautista is a classic example of the impact arts can have on a community," Mason said. "The El Teatro Campesino warehouse/playhouse is such a part of that community that all they have to do was turn the porch light on and people know it's time to come and participate."

Before El Teatro Campesino began its annual winter performances, restaurants in the sleepy valley community often closed for the season. Now San Juan Bautista is a wintertime tourist destination.

"We're looking for more interaction with the residents of the Pajaro Valley," Mason

said. "A theater roots art in a community, which is where art comes from."

One of the most obvious ways to build audiences is to start them young, and all of the Artists in Residence are planning events that expose kids to the experience of being inside a theater like the Mello Center.

"One thing that's really missing in many communities is performing arts series for children," said Schaffer, who performs mathematically inspired dance at the Mello Center with his collaborator Eric Stern on Feb. 27 and 28.

"Often they see performances in their multi-purpose rooms at school. We want to get children accustomed to being in the theater."

One of last year's most successful endeavors by the Artists in Residence was called "Welcome to the Wonderful World of the Mello Center." Inviting children and their families, artists gave what they call an "informance" (an introduction to what they do) and then invited children onto the stage.

"The Mello Center can seem a little formal to people," Mason said. "But with a casual setting and permission to move around and get up on stage, people really relax."

Taiko drummer Ikuyo Conant had 30 kids on drums.

"The adults were as excited as the kids," Mason said. "We could hardly keep the

parents off the stage."

With the Mello Center sharing its walls with Watsonville High School, many of the artists hope to create alliances with teachers there to blend artistic disciplines with daily curriculum.

"My first call will be to introduce classical guitar to the high school students and the Watsonville community," said Mesut Ozgen, who practiced medicine in Turkey — where music education is mandatory — until 1991.

Ozgen's commitment to making classical guitar accessible to a wider audience — with video imagery, lighting and choreography — will be demonstrated at an upcoming Arts and Lectures performance at the Mello Center on March 13.

In her second year as an Artist in Residence, Ikuyo Conant hopes to create more opportunities for young people to perform on the Mello Center stage.

"If children have a chance to do more art and be seen, I think it can change their lives," said the drummer and teacher. "The process of developing discipline in art creates relationships based on trust."

"Art, I believe, breaks down our isolation from each other."

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