

YTN getting ready to pack, move



The Wizard of Oz was one of Youth Theatre Northwest's first productions. — Image Credit: Contributed Photo

by [CELINA KAREIVA](#), Mercer Island Reporter News Reporter
Feb 26, 2014 at 8:00AM

Earlier this week, Youth Theatre Northwest (YTN) announced plans to move out of North Mercer campus, a space it's called home for the last 30 years. A letter addressed to families and long-time supporters called it a "bittersweet moment," though YTN has anticipated the move for a while now. The theatre's lease ends in August and the passage of the school bond and levy last week cemented its exit.

"We're at a similar crossroads in some way—a challenging crossroads," says executive director Manuel Cawaling, recounting his first production in 1999 when the space was undergoing a renovation. "This isn't just another makeover. We're losing our home, but as far as the opportunity before us, it's within reach. For Mercer Island to have its own performing arts center, that's tangible and possible. So I feel like we're coming full circle again."

YTN is pushing a new plan, the Mercer Island Center for the Arts (MICA), for which it would be an anchor tenant. The space would ideally be located on a corner of city property where a recycling facility used to be located near Mercedale Park. But taking into account a construction window, YTN likely wouldn't move into a permanent spot for another three to five years. Cawaling anticipates a formal announcement of their interim location at their 30th Anniversary Red Carpet Gala, Mar. 1.

"This is a huge change and several months from now we'll probably still be trying to figure this out," says Cawaling. "Negotiations and details are being worked out every day...It's kind of a dizzying experience. There are so many moving parts."

Sarah Tobis, communications manager for SJCC, which recently hosted the grand opening of its new performance hall acknowledges that the two Island organizations have been in talks. YTN has some flexibility as to its move-out date. Though its lease ends in August, Cawaling approximates a window of between June and October, a decision they'll make further down the line when they determine how best to taper off programming at its current site and shift operations to another location.

"We did wrestle with the idea of moving off Island for a while," he says. "But we just couldn't."

Support, concern and well-wishes have been pouring in from all directions, says Cawaling. While grocery shopping earlier in the week, he ran into the mother of a student he'd directed in one of his

first productions. Now a professional artist in L.A., news of YTN's departure had even made its way to him.

Plans for MICA are still percolating, but early talks have generated \$105,000 in seed money. During a planning session presentation in late January John Gordon Hill, Chair of MICA, referenced Bellevue's Tateuchi Center, a pending performing arts facility in downtown Bellevue which launched with a promising \$60 million donation. Design plans and fundraising efforts ramped up on the brink of the recession and the project has been unable to regain momentum or raise the remaining \$100 million it needs to break ground. The project has called into question the viability of an Eastside arts center, despite the region's many donors and audience members east of the lake.

"Full praise to the Tateuchi Center, but they have a very ambitious project. The scope of the building is tremendous and we're building, we envision something more appropriate for Mercer Island," reassures Cawaling. "We're not saying we want the community to write a blank check. We're thoughtful people approaching planning for this facility and we really want to create meaningful ties to the community as much as we can."

Cawaling says over the next few months YTN will dedicate space for its students and alumni to say goodbye to the current structure. Theatre programming serves about 2,000 kids a year. Summer registration is already well underway and Cawaling notes that the good turnout early on is a promising show of the Island's faith.

"I'm no stranger to the concerns of how we'll pay for this, how it will work and what's the impact on parking... But the reality is, history has played out the story before. Nobody is wishing Benaroya Hall wasn't in the heart of downtown. No one thinks that Seattle Children's Theater is a poor use of space. No one talks about a world-class opera house, McCaw Hall, and how it was a poor choice of community. Even on the busiest day in downtown Issaquah, no one begrudges Village Theater. The world's greatest buildings bring vitality and vibrancy. Yes these projects are challenging but at the end of the day, really these buildings are the gathering spaces that identify a community."

YTN's Red Carpet Gala, hosted by comedian and theatre alumni Joel McHale, is scheduled for Mar. 1. To learn more about the event visit youththeatre.org.



CELINA KAREIVA, Mercer Island Reporter News Reporter
ckareiva@mi-reporter.com or 206-384-8904