



ANTONIO FRANCO

MUSIC INSTRUCTOR KATHLEEN SAFFAS encourages community chorus members during a rehearsal at the Better World School of Music and Dance in Hayward. The chorus is preparing for a show that debuts in late October.

Music, dance school aims to entertain whole family

■ Students young and old work in genres ranging from hip-hop to ballet

By Aaron Morrison
STAFF WRITER

HAYWARD — It's a family affair for students at a local performing arts school that sits inconspicuously behind a white-colored home on Russell Way.

About 15 chorus members rehearsed on Wednesday for their upcoming show, "Sounds of the Century: Singin' and Dancin' Thru Decades of Pop."

The show, which won't debut until October, is just one of many shows that have been produced by the Better World School of Music and Dance since its creation in 2001.

The school's owner, Kathleen Saffas, says her goal is to offer clean, family-oriented entertainment for the performers and the audience.

"It's what they call 'age appropriate,'" Saffas said. "My criterion is that every show should be rated G or it doesn't happen."

Saffas, 53, said contemporary forms of entertainment partly inspired the name for the school.

Please see **DANCE**, Local 3

Families learning song, dance

► **DANCE**, from Local 1

"It's surprising how degrading entertainment has become and how it's enforcing that degradation at a very young age," Saffas said.

She recalled being disgusted by some of the performance costumes that are marketed for children in catalogues.

"My goal is to reverse that. I'm trying to be up-to-date, but in a clean manner," Saffas said.

Not only is the school a local hit with children, but parents and others who might normally be embarrassed to attend a music and dance school in their later years feel welcome.

"You get personal, upbeat attention here," said Heidi Lam of San Lorenzo. "They are non-judgmental about how old you are."

Lam, 57, and her husband Joe, 61, both sing in the school's community chorus, which has about 19 members.

Hayward residents Leanne Jones, 51, David Jones, 55, and their daughter Sarah have been attending the school for five years. Sarah recently became engaged to Will Smith of Hayward, and the two of them, along with Sarah's parents, sing in the school's community chorus.

Will and Sarah are to be married Aug. 16.

"There's a whole lot of genres of music done here," Sarah said. "It's very family-driven, wholesome, and brings everyone together."

Leanne and David got their daughter interested after the two were in a few productions, and Leanne has taken private lessons with Saffas.

"It feels good singing, even though I'm not as confident as some of the others," Leanne said.

Along with professional recording equipment and instruments, the school has a studio

with a raised wooden floor and full-length mirrors for classes in the jazz, hip-hop, tap, ballet and Bhangra styles of dance.

The school was first known as the Andre School of Dance, owned by Andre and Beverly Ashour, who were famous for their French Apache dance comedy act in the 1940s.

Saffas originally gave music lessons and performances in her living room, until the performance audience outgrew her home.

Beverly, who was putting the studio up for sale, agreed to rent the space to Saffas, and it became the permanent home for the Better World school.

Performances have been held in rented theater spaces in Hayward and elsewhere.

For information on classes, schedules and fees at the Better World School of Music and Dance, visit www.bwmusicanddance.com or call (510) 856-6922.

SIDEBAR:

Better World lucked out in finding location

■ Audience outgrew venue by 2001

By Aaron Morrison

STAFF WRITER

HAYWARD — The Better World School of Music and Dance found its home almost by accident, according to the school's owner and music instructor Kathleen Saffas.

Saffas, 53, who had been running the school out of her home, realized she needed a new space after she could no longer fit the almost 100 people that would show up for performances.

"I remembered this place from years ago," Saffas said of the school's current home. "I had remembered seeing it when it was the Andre School of Dance."

In 2001, Saffas had begun a search for space

Please see **SCHOOL**, Local 3

Lucky location for school's founders

► **SCHOOL**, from Local 1

to rent and arrived at 1341 Russell Way to inquire about renting the studio. The owner, Beverly Ashour, was standing outside as Saffas drove up, without an appointment.

Saffas asked if Ashour would consider renting space to the music school.

"She looked so surprised," Saffas said. "She had decided that morning to put that place up for sale. There was not even a 'for sale' sign yet."

The building used to belong to Ashour and her late husband, Andre, for the Andre School of Dance.

The Ashours opened the school in 1963 after becoming famous for their French apache dance act in the 1940s, according to an informal history by Beverly.

The dance school sat behind their home on Russell Way, where they raised three daughters

and managed the dance school successfully for 27 years.

Andre died in his sleep Jan. 10, 1991. Beverly moved to Castro Valley to retire, after selling the house and studio to a new owner in 2001, Saffas said.

Saffas's school has been renting the studio for six years now and has produced more than five shows, the latest being "Rock and Roll Nifties from the '50s & '60s" in 2006.

Saffas has been directing musical productions since 1976 and teaching music since 1990. She graduated with a B.A. in music from California State University, Hayward, in 1979.

The Better World School has offered music and dance lessons for all age groups, from small children to retired seniors.

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