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SoBe Arts was thrust upon him

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MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

The *Twelfth Night* cast includes, from left, Ken Clement, Glen Lawrence, Jody Owen, Andres Lefevre and, sitting, Merry Jo Cortada.

You could call the SoBe Institute of the Arts, which is getting ready to open a music-saturated production of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* on Saturday, the (almost) accidental arts organization.

Carson Kievman, the group's executive artistic director, had been a composer in residence with the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra before moving to the New York area in 1994, where he earned a Ph.D. at Princeton University and juggled teaching jobs at four universities. He moved back to South Florida in 2005, intending to concentrate on a composing career that had already produced operas, symphonies and numerous music-theater pieces,

including several that were done at New York's Public Theater during the Joseph Papp era. Then a friend asked him to recommend a good violin teacher.

"I said, 'Use my living room to teach,'" Kievman recalls. "Three months later, we had a dozen teachers and 40 students, so we rented a studio. The demand for high-level arts education was clearly there."

Five years later, SoBe Arts is a fledgling version of Kievman's grander vision: creating a high-level institute of the arts -- think Manhattan's Juilliard School or the California Institute of the Arts -- that could become the cornerstone of a vibrant South Beach/ South Florida cultural scene.

"This wasn't a planned process," says Kievman, now 60. "But when I spent five years here at the Florida Philharmonic, I knew this wouldn't become a cultural center without high-level arts education."

Many of the pieces of Kievman's dream are falling into place, albeit on the modest scale that a \$250,000 annual budget allows. The not-for-profit SoBe Arts, based in the quaint 1916-era Carl Fisher Clubhouse just north of the Miami Beach Convention Center on Washington Avenue, employs professional musicians, actors, dancers and others who teach students of all ages, some 200 over the course of a year. Concerts, many of them free, are held there. And after 10 dormant years and \$35,000 in renovations, the adjacent Little Stage Theater reopened with an original cabaret in January.

This weekend, Kievman debuts yet another facet of SoBe's programming with *Twelfth Night*, the first in a planned annual Music & Shakespeare series. The production, which runs through April 4, was preceded last weekend by a free SoBe Arts Chamber Ensemble concert conducted by faculty member Robert Chumbley. Chumbley will join Kievman in a free discussion of the music-and-Shakespeare topic at 6:30 p.m. in the Fisher Clubhouse before Friday's final *Twelfth Night* preview at 8.

Incorporating music written for the 1602 first production of *Twelfth Night* ("I know how to find things," Kievman says), the romantic comedy about misplaced love and mistaken identity features an array of South Florida acting talent.

Amy McKenna plays the haughty Olivia, Carbonell Award winner Ken Clement is the larger-than-life Sir Toby Belch, Merry Jo Cortada is Maria, Jody Owen is the scheming Malvolio, Andres Lefevre is the jester Feste, Joshua Ritter is the dashing duke Orsino, Glen Lawrence is foolish Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Elena Sanchez plays Viola, the shipwrecked lady who disguises herself as a boy, falls for Orsino and attracts the unwelcome attentions of Olivia.

McKenna says Kievman's directing style comes from "a musical point of view." Clement, who describes Shakespeare's language as "normal, except you're talking like Yoda and the jokes are 500 years old," finds Kievman's approach "straightforward, without a 'concept.'" "All the actors are itching to get the show up and running.

"Doing this is very freeing," says Cortada, who has now played all three women in *Twelfth Night*. "We don't have to follow anyone's example. We're free to experiment."

"The potential feels great. Something is nascent here," says Lawrence, who also teaches at SoBe Arts.

Kievman has definite views about the state of the arts in South Florida. He doesn't believe that the kind of arts conservatory he's trying to create exists south of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, and he includes the college program at Miami's New World School of the Arts in that assessment. He thinks South Florida "doesn't have access to as many great performers as in other cities." While he thinks he found "a lot of great actors" for *Twelfth Night*, he calls the acting talent in the area "sparse."

Still, although he has sacrificed the composing time he came to South Florida to reclaim, he's full of excitement about SoBe Arts' future. He sees it as an incubator of projects, a place where rarely done work *does* get done, a interdisciplinary complex where all the arts can thrive.

"I feel," he says, "I'm the right person at the right time to do this."