



Hot Gamm

Pawtucket, Rhode Island's feisty, funky theater

by PHILIP EIL

There's little debate about the center of Rhode Island's theater universe. It's located at 201 Washington Street, in downtown Providence—home of the Tony Award-winning Trinity Repertory Company, which employs over 100 people, shares a set designer with *Saturday Night Live*, and was recently named the State Theater of Rhode Island.

So it can be hard to avoid describing the state's other stage offerings in terms of their relation to Trinity; and, in the case of The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, it's damn near impossible. Seven Trinity Repertory Conservatory alumni founded The Gamm with a midnight performance in an old Providence mill on Halloween in 1984. The Gamm's current artistic director, Tony Estrella, is also a TRC alum. And The Gamm's resident director, Fred Sullivan Jr., is a veteran Trinity actor who frequently shuttles between rehearsals and performances at the two theaters.

But all of this doesn't make The Gamm simply a mini Trinity. Sullivan describes it as an acorn that has grown into its own "very, very different" tree. Trinity, for example, has inhabited the same Beaux-Arts theater since 1973, while The Gamm has hopped from a former mill; to another mill; to a garage in Providence where dogs could be heard howling at a nearby pound during matinees; to its current home: a 135-seat theater (in another former garage) in Pawtucket, a city of around 71,000 northeast of Providence. It's the kind of space in which audience members in the back row are only about 15 feet from the stage—close enough to feel a jolt from the grenade blasts in the recently staged *The House of Blue Leaves* by John Guare.

Perhaps it's useful to think of The Gamm as Trinity's younger, funky, feisty sibling—a sibling that, as Estrella explains, is particularly drawn to "hot-button topics that other people might find controversial." The Gamm's 2006–2007 season included the play *Sin* (A Cardinal Deposed) (based on real-life testimony from the Catholic Church's sex-abuse scandal in Boston) and a group of torture-themed one-act shows called *Enhanced Interrogation Techniques*. The company kicked off its 2014–2015 season with *Grounded*, a new play about an ace fighter pilot who is assigned to fly remote-control drones over Afghanistan from a windowless trailer in Nevada after becoming pregnant. Estrella says these shows have filled his mailbox with

his "fair share of interesting letters." But he's gotten his share of praise too. In 2010 the Boston Theater Critics Association called The Gamm "firmly established . . . as a theatrical jewel in our region."

After celebrating its 30th anniversary last year, the company shows no signs of mellowing. The 2015–2016 season is bookended by classics—Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*—but in between the company dips its ladle into the molten vat of contemporary American life. In November, The Gamm will present *The Rant*, a drama about a police shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Brooklyn told through monologues from police officers, the teenager's grieving mother, a journalist, and

others. The 2008 play, which was partly inspired by playwright Andrew Case's time on New York City's Civilian Complaint Review Board, feels like it was written in direct response to recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland.

Then, in January, it's on to *Grizzly Mama*, a dark comedy about a suburban mom who plots the assassination of a pro-life, gun-loving presidential candidate with an uncanny resemblance to a certain real-life former governor of Alaska. (When the show debuted in Cleveland in 2011, one critic mock-accidentally referred to the character as "Palin" throughout his review.) *Grizzly Mama* is timed to hit The Gamm's stage just as the 2016 election run-up is "probably

driving us all mad with banalities and absurdity," Estrella says.

Yes, The Gamm's 2015–2016 season may feature lust, murder, police violence, and a scene from Martin McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara* in which a gravedigger smashes bones onstage. But it all sounds hopeful when you talk to Tony Estrella. "I think if we're ever going to make any strides in addressing [our issues] truly as a society, then we have to be able to have a space for these honest conversations," he says.

In Rhode Island, that space just happens to be a converted garage in Pawtucket. ●

gammtheatre.org

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Liz Hayes in The Gamm's
2014 production of
Grounded

RIGHT:
(Left to right) Director
Judith Swift, Resident
Director Fred Sullivan Jr.,
and Artistic Director Tony
Estrella have seen the Gamm
in Pawtucket, Rhode Island,
become a "theatrical jewel."

