

sandra feinstein- Gamm theatre

30 DRAMATIC YEARS

10 reasons why the Gamm Theatre is still going strong after three decades

by John Taraborelli

This year, Pawtucket's **Gamm Theatre** celebrates its 30th season, and will mark the occasion on March 30 with Gamm Gala 2015: The Gamm Turns 30. The company began as Alias State in 1984 at Olneyville's Atlantic Mills. It was a small offshoot of Trinity Rep that developed a core of theatre artists and actors, along with a reputation for producing challenging, innovative works by emerging playwrights and incisive, topical reinterpretations of classics. It eventually moved to the Jewelry District, and was rechristened the Sandra Feinstein Gamm Theatre. Now known simply as The Gamm, it moved to its current home in Pawtucket 12 years ago, and has continued to grow. As the curtain goes up on the fourth production of season 30 (John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*), we caught up with some of the key players who have contributed to its success and asked them to reflect on the Gamm's place in the Rhode Island theatre scene.

1 It continues to challenge itself...

"You set a bar and either keep raising it each year or quit. When you lose the energy and ambition to challenge yourself, the artists and your audience, you start to wither on the vine. So, we consciously look to pick plays and projects that seem just beyond our grasp and go about the hard work of stretching and growing the muscles to reach them." *-Tony Estrella, Artistic Director, and actor since 1996*

2 ...And that status quo

"The Gamm presents plays that challenge systems of government, systems of religion and systems of ideology that affect individual and community lifestyles here in United States and abroad. We get to be a part of plays that at times enable people to reconfigure their preconceived notions about those systems and as such, play a part in social change. In so doing, we become changed when exposed to these important and vibrant works of art that bravely critique and criticize the status quo." *-Steve Kidd, Resident Actor and former Education Director*

3 Its small size provides a special theatre experience...

"The intimate nature of the theatre and indeed the space itself are always a draw for me. You can feel the molecules in the air change when a particularly dramatic or moving event happens on stage, and the energy between audience and actor can be truly electric. The audience is close to you." *-Jeanine Kane, Resident Actor*

4 ...But it continues to grow

"The Gamm is almost filled to capacity each and every performance. However, our space is small and needs to be expanded. While we would certainly like to increase our seating capacity somewhat, it is equally, if not more, important to have suitable space that allows our Artistic Director more freedom in selecting and directing plays. Our actors also deserve more accommodating space. We feel ready to

explore opportunities to expand." *-Leon Boghossian, President of the Board of Directors*

5 It grew out of Trinity Rep, and continues to be a great counterpart

"The Gamm could not have come into being without Trinity's generosity and support; many of us received our training there. I am deeply grateful for that every year. For 19 years, both theatres have allowed me to schedule a double life. What they share are professionalism, vitality, intelligence, a love of collaboration and rigorous exploration of text, loyalty to artists and genuine care for and involvement with audiences. How they differ is, of course, size and budget, and perhaps that creates very different pressures on the individual theatres. But what I celebrate is the mutual respect and fondness Rhode Island's professional theatres share." *-Fred Sullivan, Jr., Resident Director since 1996, and Resident Actor at Trinity Rep*

6 It provides an experience you just can't get at home

"Theatre is one of the few art forms that cannot be reproduced on a computer or iPhone. Audiences must leave the comforts of home and gather for a shared, unique artistic experience. I say unique because each performance is unique unto itself and when it is over, it will never happen again exactly the same way. The

audience is a key participant in that artistic experience; without them, it does not exist." *-Oliver Dow, Managing Director*

7 You never know what to expect

"The Gamm elects to produce plays with often unknown outcomes. Will the topic resonate with the audience? How will they react? The steps toward opening night are loaded with trial and error. Creating the production is like solving a mystery - and not



an Agatha Christie mystery with a clever scattering of breadcrumbs that lead us to the solution. No, Gamm plays are more elusive in style and there is no blatantly obvious safe path to a satisfying production. This makes for an exciting process in which the audience is critical to determining the meaning of the landscape.” –*Judith Swift, Resident Director*

8 It maintains a veteran core of actors and artists, but continues to nurture new talent

“The fact that I am able to work with actors, directors, technicians and other designers that I have known for many years and with whom I have developed a rapport and a solid working relationship is gratifying. The other side of the coin is that there is always a new actor, technician, director or designer coming through the door, and I enjoy getting to know and work with them as well. It keeps me on my toes.” –*Marilyn Salvatore, Costume Designer and one of the Gamm’s longest tenured artists, since 1987*

9 Its educational programs give back to the community

“The education department helped to establish links between what was going on stage and the academic community of Pawtucket, as well as subscribers and ticket holders. Through study guides, talkbacks and on-site visits, the education department sends the roots of our productions deeper into the soil of the community and helps make connections between the production and the world in which we live. Additionally, the education department helps to train young actors in the craft of acting and theatrical art. Our current Education Director,

Susie Schutt, is now taking on that responsibility with incredible vision and gusto.” –*Steve Kidd, former Education Director*

10 It is a distinct voice among New England theatres

“The Gamm has focused its identity so that there’s no mistaking us with any other company in the area. By doing so, we’ve been able to extend our reach outside Rhode Island and garner attention regionally and beyond. In a time when conventional thinking seemed to favor broadening your organization’s mission to weather tough times, we have doubled down on what makes us individual. Everything follows from that.” –*Tony Estrella, Artistic Director*

The House of Blue Leaves runs March 5-April 5, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket. 723-4266, gammtheatre.org **PM**



Gamm Artistic Director Tony Estrella

Celebrate with the Gamm

The theatre is marking its 30th anniversary with a big party

What’s the point of a big anniversary if you’re not going to celebrate it in a big way? **Gamm Gala 2015: The Gamm Turns 30** will do just that on March 30 at the Center by the Blackstone. Artistic Director and MC for the evening Tony Estrella will host a celebration of 30 years of fearless theatre, with a particular focus on the dozen years the Gamm has called Pawtucket home. Members of the original casts will recreate highlights from some of favorite Gamm productions of the past 12 years, and recently retired Managing Director David M. Wax will be honored. There will also be an open bar cocktail hour with hors d’oeuvres, and a three-course sit-down dinner by Russell Morin Fine Catering, as well as a silent auction. Tickets are \$175 per person, and proceeds will support the theatre’s productions and educational programs. *The event begins at 6pm at the Center by the Blackstone, 175 Main St., Pawtucket. 723-4266, gammtheatre.org*