

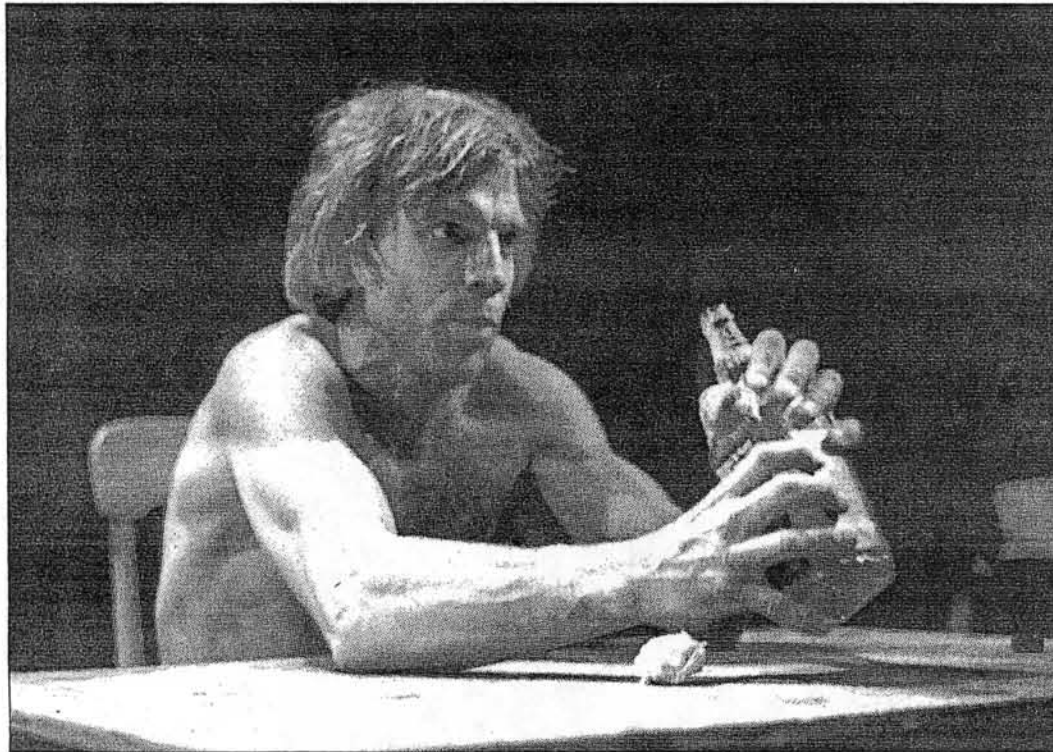
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GAMM THEATRE IS THRIVING AT 25



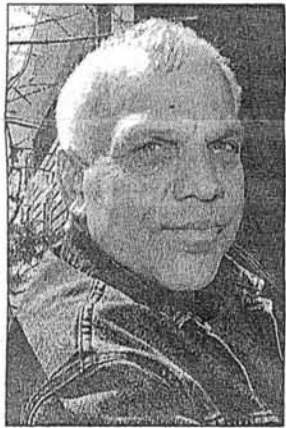
"They weren't heavy on boards of directors, they were heavy on everybody doing everything"

Sam Babbitt, Gamm actor and former board chairman



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANDRA FEINSTEIN-GAMM THEATRE

Richard Donelly performs in Bertolt Brecht's *Baal*, directed by George Marcincavage at Alias Stage in 1989.



"It does what theater is supposed to do. You see something there and it makes you think."

Richard Donelly, an actor at the Gamm Theatre



Alias Stage was known for cutting-edge theater, with such shows as *The Bride of Olneyville Square*.

It's been a long, arduous journey from Alias Stage

BY CHANNING GRAY
JOURNAL ARTS WRITER

It has survived a fire, several moves and times when it looked like it might go under. But as it turns 25, the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, which opens its season Thursday, is thriving.

The theater, in a former garage next to the Pawtucket Armory on Exchange Street, has just picked up its second Elliot Norton Award, bestowed by the Boston Theater Critics Association. And it continues to stage some of the most compelling theater around.

But it wasn't always that way.

In its early days, the Gamm was known as Alias Stage, a somewhat mysterious sounding name that suggested an alternative to Trinity Rep, a place where actors assumed different identities. It was founded by a group of graduates from the Trinity Rep Conservatory, seven actors who felt they could make a difference.

Alias Stage was an artists' collective back then, a company where actors picked the season and made all manner of decisions. Founder George Marcincavage, a skilled carpenter, not only acted in productions, but directed and designed sets.

"They weren't heavy on boards of directors," said Sam Babbitt, long-time Gamm actor and former board chairman. "They were heavy on everybody doing everything."

Alias made its debut on Halloween 1984 with a night of one-acts, said founder Steve Sookikian, who now works for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in Waltham, Mass.

It at first used space in the old School One building in Fox Point, as it looked for a home of its own. Not long afterward, the company moved to Olneyville, to the Riverside Mill complex.

Sookikian recalls long hours and small audiences back then, sometimes fewer

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In 2003, Gamm moved to new digs in Pawtucket

Continued from Page E1

than a dozen patrons. There was one night, he said, when no one showed up and the cast was thinking about heading home. That's when a car roared into the parking lot and a couple jumped out. Were they too late?

The troupe went ahead with the performance, recalls Sookikian, and when it was over, the man gave the actors a standing ovation, he was so thankful for a private showing.

Back then, the company would put on a play about every six months. There was no board of directors, no advance ticket sales, just a group of idealistic actors plying what they had learned a Trinity: in-your-face theater propagated by Adrian Hall.

But a disastrous 1989 fire forced the company to move again. The theater lost all its props and sets in the blaze.

It soon ended up at nearby Atlantic Mills, where it mounted *The Dragon*, a 1943 work written during the 900-day German siege of Leningrad.

The space was bigger and there was more parking, but there were other problems to be concerned with, like inadequate electrical service.

One night a fuse blew and left the stage dark, said Sookikian. Someone had to shine a floodlight on the actors for the show to continue. Babbitt recalls rats scurrying about the bathroom area when he joined the company in 1992.

Despite its real estate problems, the theater was gaining a reputation for cutting-edge, often provocative theater, with shows like *The Bride of Olneyville Square*, a look at the denizens of that gritty Providence neighborhood by playwright Edward Allan Baker.

At the same time, the founding group, all of whom worked odd jobs to survive, was running out of steam. Work and family were tugging at them and there were internal struggles as to how the theater should be run.

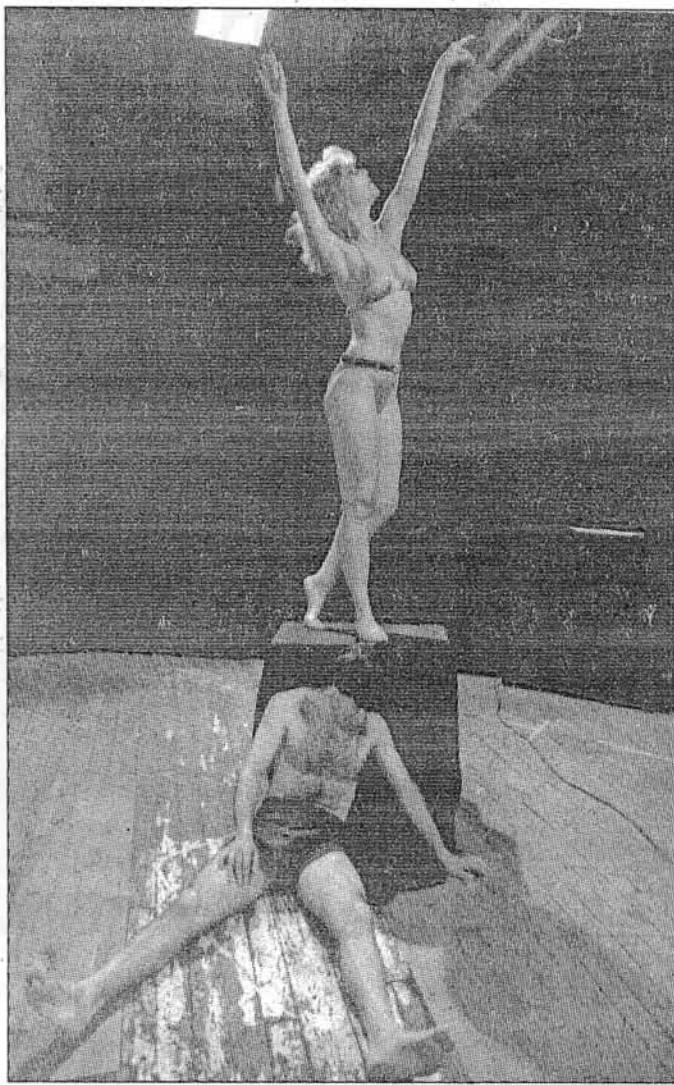
"It was like a rock band that came together and did great things," said Sookikian, "but couldn't keep the bonds together."

From the beginning, Alias Stage set out to carve a distinct niche for itself, doing lesser known plays and dramas with a political edge.

"They wanted to differentiate themselves from community theater," said Babbitt. "These were people who had professional training for whom theater wasn't an avocation. They looked more seriously at the material. They were somewhat experimental."

Sookikian said in those early days the theater gravitated toward plays that dealt with the "individual's responsibility to society."

"It's always been an interesting and intriguing theater no matter what incarnation it has taken," said Bill Gale, former Journal theater critic who now reports on the performing arts for WRNI radio. "It's still the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANDRA FEINSTEIN-GAMM THEATRE

Pamela Powers and Steve Sookikian in a scene from *Relationships?* by Daniel H. Devine at Alias Stage in 1986.

cutting-edge theater in Rhode Island."

In its quest for a more suitable home the company moved to a garage on Elbow Street in Providence's Jewelry District, a building where the rent was high and the roof leaked.

The move almost killed the theater. The concept of an actors' collective by that point was "shot to hell," said Babbitt. The board had dissolved and there was just a handful of stalwarts who wanted to see the theater go forward.

"It would take us the rest of the decade to get our act together," said Babbitt. He said a new board was formed of actors and people who loved theater, but it would take a long time to get influential "uptown" board members.

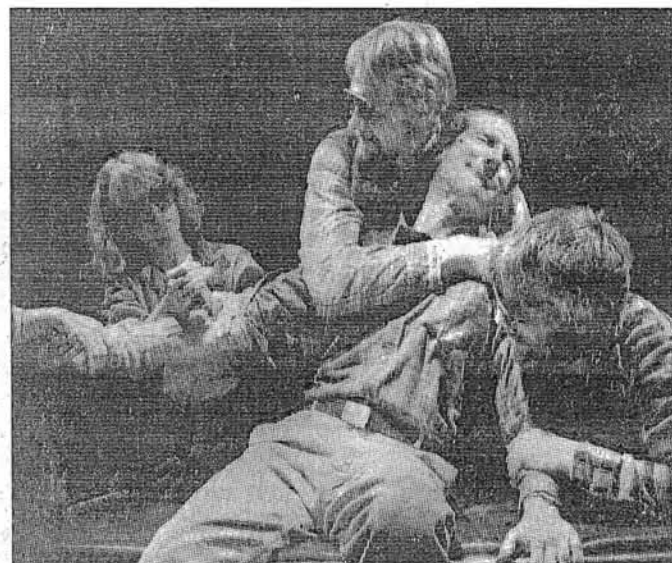
Even at Elbow Street, the theater was run in a haphazard

fashion. You might call for tickets and find no one answering the phone.

But from an artistic vantage point, Alias Stage was putting on exciting work. When it staged *Macbeth*, garage doors flew open and a sedan backed into the theater. The cast loaded a lifeless body into the trunk, like a mafia hit, and the vehicle roared off.

Audiences watched all this from bleachers that could be wheeled about to follow the action, which was spread throughout the space.

Things began looking up when in 1998, while strapped for cash, the theater accepted a \$100,000 gift from local philanthropist Alan Shawn Feinstein on condition that Alias be renamed to honor his late sister, Sandra Feinstein-Gamm, a theater lover.



In 1990, Alias Stage put on *Tales of the Lost Formicans* with, from left, Brenda Corwin, Don Jackson, George Marcincavage and Richard Donnelly.

The gift made a big difference in the financial health of the company, even though there were those who were sorry to see the name Alias Stage go.

But the big change came in the fall of 2003, when the Gamm moved to spiffy new digs in Pawtucket, in a former storage garage abutting the Armory. Estrella said there had been some concern the theater's Providence audience would not follow. But that proved not to be the case. When it left Providence, the Gamm had 96 subscribers. It now has 1,800.

That was when it decided to get serious about becoming a professional outfit. It cancelled its season and "hunkered down" as Gamm artistic director Tony Estrella put it.

"The only thing to do was to suspend the season," he said, "and get things right."

The theater then hired a managing director, Yvonne Seggerman, who had worked in the front office at Trinity Rep.

"That was one of the single most important decisions the board made," said Estrella.

Today, the theater still has a lot of the edge from the old days. Estrella is particularly drawn to plays that speak to the politics of the time, much like shows from before.

"It does what theater is supposed to do," said Gamm actor Richard Donnelly. "You see something there and it makes you think."

Now that it has its financial act together, plans call for the theater to move into the main Armory building, to the old 11,000-square-foot drill hall. There it would have a theater more than twice the size of the current space — 330 seats as opposed to 137. Seggerman said it will be about five years before that happens, though, three years to raise the money and 18 months of construction.

The trick with the larger space, said Estrella, will be to maintain the sense of intimacy that has been a hallmark of Gamm productions over the years.

"People call and ask whether their seats are close to the stage," said Estrella. "Our back row is like a lot of theaters' front row."

The Gamm kicks off its anniversary season Thursday with Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. That will run in repertory with *Romeo and Juliet* in November, and there will be times when you can see both plays in one day, with basically the same cast.

Shakespeare has been such a big part of the Gamm's history that Estrella said it was hard to resist doing back-to-back offerings from The Bard. "We wanted to do something big for the 25th," he said.

Much Ado About Nothing opens Thursday at the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket. Tickets are \$24-\$40. Call (401) 723-4266.