

**THEATER**

## Small stage, big vision

Pawtucket, R.I., native Estrella gives Gamm Theatre his all

BY DON AUCOIN | GLOBE STAFF

PAWTUCKET, R.I. —

**I**t's just minutes before the final performance of "Morality Play" at the sold-out Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, but Tony Estrella, the drama's star and author as well as the company's artistic director for the past 13 years, is roaming the aisles.

As he greets patrons and pauses for one-on-one chats — Estrella essentially views theater as conversation by another name — he is tricked out in a cap, leather vest, baggy black pants, and brown boots, the costume for his role in "Morality Play" as the daring, envelope-pushing leader of an adventurous troupe of performers.

Talk about typecasting.

Thanks in large part to Estrella's versatility, vision, and willingness to challenge audiences, the Gamm has emerged as one of the most dynamic theater companies in New England. At this particular moment, the 135-seat theater's ever-strengthening reputation as a destination for discerning playgoers and actors might provide at least a smidgen of sol-

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"Theater is a live thing. It requires human sweat," says Tony Estrella.

BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF



**ART**

## Kahlo and Rivera: power couple

By Sebastian Smees  
GLOBE STAFF

DETROIT — When Frida Kahlo came to the United States in 1931, she found the entire country "ugly and stupid," and longed to return home to Mexico.

Her husband Diego Rivera, on the other hand, was mightily stimulated. The charismatic, cow-eyed, fat-belted muralist was already an international art star, and he arrived in Detroit in 1932 ready to execute what he thought of as his life's masterpiece, the Detroit Industry murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Kahlo was barely an artist at this point. She had talent, she had dabbled, but her efforts had been sporadic. She and Rivera, both avowed communists, had met when she was an art student. By the time they came to America, he was not long returned from a nine-month stint in Soviet Russia, and their



DON ROSS

marriage was less than two years old. She was very much in his shadow.

Detroit changed everything for Kahlo — and, more obliquely, for Rivera, too. It was in that city — convulsed at the time by massive labor protests, murderous police responses, and a De-

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Frida Kahlo's 1931 work "Frieda and Diego Rivera."

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The actor dives into a new genre with 'The Gunman'

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**BOOKS**

## 'Master Thieves' is a treasure hunt

By William McKeen  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

If you're one of those readers who demand gift-wrapped endings to books, you might be frustrated by "Master Thieves."

The book does not solve the mystery of one of the world's biggest art heists — the theft of \$500 million worth of artwork from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. But it does offer a pretty good road map for the FBI to follow 25 years later and rewards readers with a compelling story about Boston's criminal underbelly.

Author Stephen Kurkjian, who won three Pulitzer Prizes as a Globe investigative reporter, has pulled together a cast of characters that would make Martin Scorsese swoon in admiration. There are so many crime-world figures with their fingers in this story that the book is like a "GoodFellas"/"The Departed" double feature.

It starts with a low-level thief who first began dreaming of robbing the museum while a child. Even as a kid,

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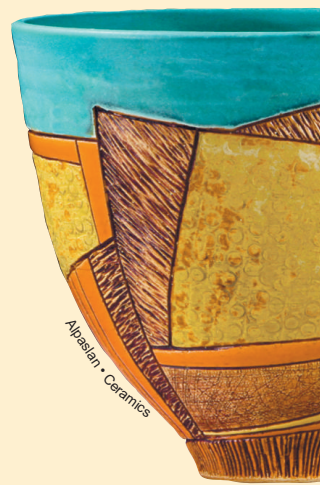
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## Theater

## Staging 'the epic in the intimate'

►ESTRELLA  
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ace to city officials reeling from the recent news that the new owners of the Pawtucket Red Sox plan to pull up stakes and move the team to Providence.

The Gamm isn't going anywhere. Pawtucket is where Estrella was born 44 years ago to a Portuguese-American family and lived until he was 10. His father drove a truck, and his mother cleaned houses. Today, both parents are regulars on opening nights at their son's theater, along with a couple of Estrella's aunts and one of his brothers. Until she died last year, his grandmother was also a fixture at Gamm performances.

But his place in his native city runs deeper than family ties. According to Pawtucket's mayor, Estrella and his buzz-generating theater are central to this city's hopes for a broader cultural revitalization. That's fine with Estrella. It fits with his belief that theater must embrace a public role if it hopes to remain vital.

"How do we live? That is the province of art," he says, adding: "Theater is a live thing. It requires human sweat."

Estrella certainly doesn't stint on the sweat. There are plenty of theater leaders whose dedication match his, but precious few wear as many hats as he does: artistic director, actor, play adapter, director.

"I don't know how he does it, and I don't know if he ever sleeps," says Jeanine Kane, an actress who has costarred with or been directed by Estrella in numerous productions at the Gamm. "We have a joke in the theater that he's the guy you'll see walking across the lobby with a plunger in his hand because the toilet needs to be unplugged. He'll be there greeting

audience members; he'll rip the tickets and show you to your seats."

Estrella's multifarious skill set, edgy aesthetic, and passionate notions about what theater can and should do are primary reasons that the Gamm consistently punches above its weight in terms of quality and impact. But Estrella faces the same budget constraints as do the leaders of most nonprofit theaters. "It's incredibly difficult and always will be," Estrella admits. "We're always penny-pinching."

He economizes by skimping on spectacle in favor of "the human factor" in the plays he produces and adapts, and sometimes by borrowing props and costumes from what Estrella calls "our big brother," Providence's Trinity Repertory Company. "They've always been incredibly generous," he says.

Within his budgetary limitations, Estrella's overarching aim, often achieved, is to stage what he calls "the epic in the intimate." That means plays that take big swings at cultural or political issues and that might feature sprawling casts. With its cast of 16, "Morality Play" told the story of a troupe that used theater to investigate a child's murder, underscoring the obligation of artists to engage in the world around them.

"It's the responsibility of small theaters to say: How can we make these big plays work?" says Estrella.

Apparently audiences respond to that ambitious approach: The Gamm has more than 2,000 subscribers, and the theater averages 90 percent of capacity. Small though it is, the Gamm has landed the rights to some New England premieres and even an occasional US premiere. "There's almost nothing I don't think we can pull off,



PETER GOLDBERG

with a little ingenuity," says Estrella.

Back at "Morality Play," it's suddenly showtime, so Estrella cuts short a conversation with a friend in the sixth row and bounds down the stairs, exclaiming "All right!" Once he's onstage, he makes brief remarks to the audience — "I never close a speech by saying 'Sit back and enjoy the show,'" he says later. "You should 'sit up and engage the show.'" — and then proceeds to give the kind of electric performance

that Gamm regulars have come to expect.

He is drawn to outsize roles and always has been: When he was 12, he taped the film "... And Justice for All" off the family TV, memorized Al Pacino's climactic "You're out of order!" courtroom tirade, then recited it over and over for weeks in the privacy of his bedroom.

Besotted with movies, Estrella didn't focus on theater until he attended the University of Rhode Island. After graduating from URI, he was trained in Trinity Rep's conservatory program. Now, theater is woven into every aspect of his life, even at home: He lives in Cranston with his partner of 14 years, Jennifer Madden, who is the Gamm's resident scholar and dramaturg.

Even if all he did was act, Estrella would be a consequential force in regional theater, given his memorable portrayals of, to name a few recent roles, the title figure in "Hamlet," the playwright Henry in Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing," and King James I, thick Scottish burr and all, in the US premiere of Howard Brenton's "Anne Boleyn." Estrella has acted in more than 30 productions at the Gamm. "Everything springs from the acting, that primal relationship with the audience," he says.

But Estrella's scope extends much further than acting: He has directed more than 20 productions at the Gamm. As artistic director, he handles administrative, fund-raising, season-planning, and producing duties, including casting. He writes smart, forceful adaptations that cast a fresh light on their subjects, such as an Americanized version of Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House" that Estrella updated to 1959 in order to set it during a period when television enforced a strict definition of family life and the nation was on the cusp of the women's movement.

"He wants to make art," says Mike Jones, a close friend. "He doesn't want to just provide a distraction. He's interested in doing work that has something to say and that resonates with people for a long time."

Estrella has lured such prominent Boston actors as Will Lyman and Liz Hayes to star in productions at the Gamm, and he's intent on attracting more. Indeed, Estrella specifically tailored his adaptation of Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" with Marianna Bassham, one of Boston's top actresses, in mind. Playing Hedda, Bassham gave one of her best performances at the Gamm last fall, and she is slated to portray Blanche DuBois next season in the company's production of Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire."

'It's the responsibility of small theaters to say: How can we make these big plays work? ... There's almost nothing I don't think we can pull off, with a little ingenuity.'

TONY ESTRELLA  
artistic director, actor (above performing in "Morality Play"), play adapter, and director of the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket, R.I.

Perhaps Estrella's take-nothing-for-granted approach can be traced back to the fact that the Gamm's existence has not always been a tranquil one. It began life in 1984 as the Providence-based Alias Stage, known for challenging work, and was renamed the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre in 1998. In October 2002, bedeviled by administrative instability and in need of a financial reorganization, the Gamm announced it would be going on a one-year hiatus.

About the same time, Estrella was hired as artistic director, and in November 2003 the Gamm moved to its current location in the annex of a one-time armory just off Interstate 95. Despite the upheaval of the previous few years, Estrella was determined from the moment he became the Gamm's artistic director to "do the provocative stuff, the stuff that other theaters wouldn't do."

In his first full season, the first two productions were pretty standard fare: Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" and Dylan Thomas's "A Child's Christmas in Wales." But then Estrella threw the audience a curve: "Aunt Dan and Lemon," Wallace Shawn's thorny and troubling drama about the insidious allure of monstrous political ideologies.

"I wanted to be sure that we did something like that in that first season," says Estrella. "That laid down a marker. That

said, 'This kind of thing is going to be coming at you.'"

And it has: Recent Gamm seasons have included productions of "4:48 Psychosis," Sarah Kane's shattering drama about a woman suffering from clinical depression, isolation, and thoughts of suicide; the US premiere of "Paul," Howard Brenton's skeptical examination of St. Paul's conversion and Jesus's divinity; "Why Torture is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them," Christopher Durrang's dark comedy about the American propensity toward violence; and "Festen," David Eldridge's drama about a son confronting his father with accusations that the father had molested him and his sister during childhood.

Even when the Gamm stages a classic like "Macbeth" (with Estrella in the title role) or a much-produced play like Tom Stoppard's "Rock 'n' Roll," Estrella and his colleagues have a way of making it feel new.

But playgoers and performers are not the only ones who have a stake in the work and sensibility of the Gamm's restless leader. So does Pawtucket, a gritty, blue-collar city of 71,000. Indeed, Mayor Donald R. Grebien says that Estrella's theater, located in the heart of what is known as the Armory Arts District, is "what kept it alive."

"The Gamm is definitely an integral part of Pawtucket," Grebien says in a telephone interview. "The politicians and the elected officials understand what it means to the community. It brings in the new folks, a younger audience, which we need. They're in the schools, teaching the children about the arts and theater. They're giving back to the community."

Kane, whom Estrella calls his "closest onstage collaborator," is pleased that the Gamm has been able to hang on to him for so long. "This guy could be working anywhere — and we've got him!" says Kane. "Having been born in Pawtucket, I think his heart is there."

It sounds that way when Estrella talks about how the city has "opened its arms to us." Though he keeps an eye out for film and TV acting opportunities, and he hopes his adaptation of "Morality Play" (from Barry Unsworth's novel) will be produced by other theaters, Estrella says he's happy at the Gamm and is not looking elsewhere. He plans to keep wearing those multiple hats.

"I love the relationship with the audience, to look them in the eye and say these things," he says. "I can talk to the audience about the things that are important to me."

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