

RI THEATER

Gamm Theatre looks to new executive director to ‘reinvigorate’ post pandemic

Jason Cabral believes theater is more important than ever. “We’re losing that sense of connection. We’re losing that sense of empathy and compassion, and theater grounds us in that opportunity ... to understand one another.”

By **Juliet Pennington** Updated September 1, 2023, 1:22 p.m.



Jason Cabral is the new executive director of the Gamm Theatre in Warwick, R.I. COURTESY OF THE GAMM THEATRE.

WARWICK, R.I. — He has worked in much bigger theaters in much larger cities (including New York and Los Angeles), but Jason Cabral, the new executive director of the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, said he has landed “exactly” where he wants to be.

And more importantly, Cabral, 37, is doing just what he wants to be doing.

The Fall River, Mass., native, held senior fund-raising roles in New York at The Public Theater and Jazz at Lincoln Center, and then at Center Theatre Group in LA, before shifting gears in recent years to spearhead strategic initiatives with national nonprofits including the

ASPCA and the NAACP, as well as Habitat for Humanity International.

“I’ve always wanted to come back to the arts,” Cabral said in a recent phone interview. “I just had to find the right opportunity to bring me back to the theater. My husband saw this job posted a while back and it got my wheels turning.”

Cabral, who succeeds former Gamm managing director Amy Gravell, lives in Providence with his husband, Jeffrey Cabral, a Burrillville native, and their rescue rat terriers, Coco and Presley.

The couple, who met 18 years ago while students at Rhode Island College, moved from LA to the Ocean State during COVID so they could be closer to family, and work remotely.

“We’ve been all over, including going to grad school in Michigan, and we are just really pleased to be back in Rhode Island,” Cabral said. “Once we got here, we knew we weren’t going back [to LA]. This is where we wanted to be. I don’t think we’ve found a community like we have here in any other city.”

As a child, Cabral was always good with numbers and wanted to pursue a career involving math or engineering. That all changed when he was in high school and attended national musical tours that came through Providence and Boston, and began acting in community theater and at B.M.C. Durfee High School where, as a senior, he was cast as Jesus in “Godspell.”

Cabral, who earned an undergraduate degree in theater performance from Rhode Island College and a master’s degree in acting from Wayne State University, said that while he was drawn to the artistic aspect of theater, he also felt “a sense of belonging.”

“I didn’t come out until college, really... but I knew as a senior in high school that I was gay, so seeing people like me, members of the LGBTQ community, made me feel like, oh, this is where I belong,” he said. “When I was growing up, we found community in church and the activities surrounding the church. Theater is what replaced that for me.”

Cabral’s parents are Portuguese immigrants who raised their three sons in the Roman Catholic Church. Despite their traditional religious background, Cabral said his parents are “very, very supportive” of him and another brother who is also gay.

“They essentially helped drive the narrative and the conversation/dialogue we had to have with the rest of the family,” he said. “My mother is one of 10 and my father is one of six, so we have a massive, massive family. The majority of them have been very supportive and were present for my wedding.”

Cabral said he is happy to have family and a strong community — as well as The Gamm organization and its supporters — in his corner as he navigates the challenges of his new position, including the economic realities that community theaters are facing.

He said his experience in the national and international nonprofit realm will be beneficial in his new role.

“With larger organizations, you have the resources to test out different strategies ... to get to that sophisticated level of operation,” Cabral said. “So now, coming to a smaller-scale, smaller-budget organization, yes, of course we need to test and find out what works here for The Gamm, but I have that Rolodex of strategies that can help us to cut through [the red tape] and work a little smarter ... to be strategic in envisioning our programs — including our educational programs and our community programs.”

Tony Estrella, The Gamm’s longtime artistic director, said Cabral’s experience on the stage and on the business side of things is a win-win for the regional theater and its patrons.

“You do a search and hope you get as many great candidates as possible and if you get one like Jason, you’re really, really lucky,” Estrella said in a recent phone conversation. “Any mission-driven work that you do — especially as a not-for-profit — you want to make sure it’s in service of something you know. And how lucky are we that his background is the whole kit and caboodle, really, since he has a passion for art first, and then has his background.”

Estrella said that The Gamm, which moved from Pawtucket to a larger space in Warwick in 2018, is, in the wake of the pandemic, “rebuilding our subscriber base.”

“Like everyone else, we’re looking at how to invigorate that after the pandemic. So many people dropped subscriptions... and getting them back has proven challenging,” he said. “We are trending ahead of last year in both subscriptions and in single-ticket sales, so that is very encouraging. Getting people back in is first and foremost, and seeing this uptick has made me optimistic, but what I am most optimistic about is Jason. I’m looking forward to everybody getting to know him, getting inspired by him, and feeling the kind of energy he’s bringing to us... that’s going to help us come back and is going to reinvigorate us.”

And while that may be a lot of pressure to put on one person, Cabral is up for the challenge and eager to make a difference.

“My work as the executive director is largely going to be [spearheading] a strategic plan to make sure that we are making strides in terms of being financially sustainable and making sure the education and community programs are scaling in size and impact. We will also be figuring out the connection between those programs and the programming that happens on our stages,” Cabral said. “You know, there’s so much to look into and unpack and I think the great thing with the partner that I have in [Estrella] is that he is so in tune and in touch with the creative [side] that the dialogue with him regarding those connection points — to make sure that we can scale into the future — is going to be so easy.”

Cabral said he believes that theater is more important now than ever.

“For me, and I suspect for many, it builds those traits of compassion and empathy which I think are so critical in connecting with other humans,” he said. “At times we feel so disconnected looking at our phone screens and watching TV. We’re losing that sense of connection; we’re losing that sense of empathy and compassion and theater grounds us in that opportunity to find depth in one another and to understand one another.”

“I think that’s what I’m most excited about,” he added. “And that’s because of the quality of work and the sometimes controversial plays that are produced here. We’re ripe for that dialogue and we’re ripe with the space and the stage to figure out what it is we can really take on here at this theater in this region in Rhode Island.”

Learn more about The Gamm’s 2023-24 season, which starts Sept. 7, at gammtheatre.org.

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