

New CATF managing director looks to strengthen W.Va. festival

SHEPHERDSTOWN, W.Va. — It was a lucky break when Ed Herendeen found Gabriel Zucker, a former professional stage actor who happened to have a strong background in marketing and promoting arts organizations, to be managing director of the Contemporary American Theater Festival.

Herendeen, founder and producing director of the festival based at Shepherd University, was looking to replace James McNeel, who left in January for a similar position at the City Theater in Pittsburgh.

Zucker, 44, who began his duties with CATF on April 1, was an equity actor for seven years in the Washington/Baltimore region, and worked as a senior manager for five years for Smart, a Chicago-based telemarketing and telefunding company. The firm's clients included small and mid-sized arts organizations similar to the CATF's clients.

"I was impressed with Gabriel's combination of strong business and theater background," Herendeen said.

Zucker, who applied for the position last fall, was hired from a field of 10 applicants, Herendeen said.

According to Smart's website, all of the company's managers and calling staff members have backgrounds in the arts.

"We grew audiences around the country by increasing subscription bases and donor pools through telemarketing," Zucker said. "We did work for nonprofit theater companies, operas, ballets and symphonies."

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Zucker never saw himself working as a telemarketer, "but I needed a job. I found I had a real flair for it. My experience with theater gave me the sensitivity I needed to understand the product, and the product is art."

"I hired and trained people who were the right fit for the work because they understood the culture acquired through an arts background," he said.

Government funds were being cut back and sponsorships were drying up.

"We helped a lot of groups that were in trouble," Zucker said.

As CATF's managing director, Zucker is responsible for its \$1.3 million budget, administration operations, fundraising, marketing, publicity, personnel and box-office growth.

Tickets, which were sold to about 14,000 people last year, account for about half of the budget.

The festival's 25th-anniversary season runs from July 10 to Aug. 2. Rehearsals for its five shows, including four world premieres, begin in June.

Zucker said he was aware of the CATF, but he never saw a show.

"I did work with actors who performed here," he said.

Zucker grew up in southeast Ohio, earned a bachelor's degree in English and philosophy from the College of Wooster (Ohio), and earned a master's degree in performing arts from Emerson College in Boston.

He led a writing program at McGraw-Hill, and worked in the theater and as an assistant brewmaster before joining Smart five years ago.

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