

# CENTER STAGE NEWS!

June, 2023

## LGBTQIA+ in Theatre : Leadership, Representation, PRIDE



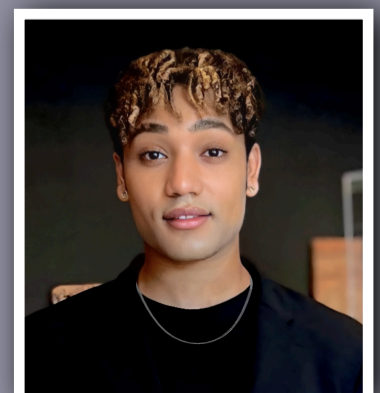
*Pictured: LGBTQIA+ identifying Dean, Chair, Professors, and Adjunct Professors from the Western Connecticut State University Department of Theatre Arts. (Top Rows) Dept. Chair Dr. Justin P. Cowan, Events Coordinator Eric Gomez, and Adjunct Professor Jeremy Powell, (Middle Rows) Adjunct Professor Jen Turey, and Musical Theatre Coordinator Tim Howard. (Bottom Rows) Professor Dr. Donald Gagnon, Dean of the School of Visual and Performing Arts Brian Vernon, and Adjunct Professor Michael Bartoli*

When asked why representation is important, actress Viola Davis said, “[we] need to see a physical representation of our dreams.” For LGBTQIA+ students attending the WCSU Department of Theatre Arts, whom make up more than half of its community, being educated by openly queer faculty is that very physical representation Mrs. Davis alludes to. I’m Donovan Shaw, Co-President of CenterStage, Westconn’s first established theatre club. Being a queer artist of color, I know all too well the provocations of homophobia and I am observant in the fact that there has been an uptick in anti-queer rhetoric and legislation within our country. However, within our artistic bubble here at WestConn, the environment remains a safe, nurturing, and a loving queer-positive space, unbreakably and unwaveringly so.

Unfortunately, this our safe space up on a hill in Danbury, CT is not a reality for many our LGBTQIA+ siblings around in parts of the country and certainly around the world. The current state of the human race, in many ways, falls short of the commitment to human rights and open-mindedness to progress. Far too often our rainbows are faded by the shade of intolerance and bigotry... but one thing about a rainbow- there will always be one at the end of every storm. Rainbows will never go away. In the footsteps and security of our wonderful queer staff, in the examples and representations of our thriving queer alumni, and the talent and drive of our queer student body, our love is not only here to stay, but here to be celebrated through the art we create *together*.

My team and I have worked especially hard to comprise an article that showcases our beloved queer faculty’s leadership. We hope you enjoy our compilation of personal stories, words of wisdom, and an indulgence of fabulosity. On behalf of myself, my team, and the entire WCSU student body- we wish you all a thriving pride month!

**Co-President Donovan L. Shaw (he/they)**  
BFA Musical Theatre



In this year's article, we will be celebrating the leadership and accomplishments of all the queer people who have called the WCSU Theatre department home. We begin with our faculty. The following are quotes from them as well as commentaries from LGBTQIA+ identifying students who've been impacted by them. Leading the pack, we welcome to his 2nd full year as dept. Chair, Dr. Justin P. Cowan.

"As a gay kid growing up in the south, it's taken a long time for me to truly understand what it means to take "pride" in my identity. Even as an adult no longer living in the south, I still struggle with internalized homophobia and regularly find myself code-switching in an effort to mask my authentic self in certain surroundings.

To truly take "pride" in oneself is a beautiful thing. It means not having to hide the things that make you unique. Today, I try to live my life as authentically as possible. I think about the kind of queer person I wish I could have seen growing up...and I try to be that person. I hope it encourages students to embrace their authentic selves, and not feel like they have to dim or damper the things that are intrinsic to them. At the end of the day, life is so much better when you can love yourself and live your life with "pride". Shine bright, Alien Superstars!"



Dr. Justin P. Cowan alongside his husband, Jason.

**Dr. Justin P. Cowan (he/him)**  
**Department of Theatre Arts Chair**

"Justin is motha. He is also a virgo. You know who else is a virgo? Beyoncé (beehive's rise up). Subsequently, Justin P. Cowan = Beyoncé.

Working with him in the theater office has been a transformative experience. I am very grateful for all of the opportunities he has given me as a queer artist here at Westconn; his inclusivity and genuine love for everyone inspires me every day. he guides us all with his caring, understanding, REAL, and extremely charismatic leadership. He is someone I look up to and someone the department is so so lucky to have!"

**Yazmin DeJesus (she/her)**  
**BFA Musical Theatre**



Top left: rising Sophomore MT, Yazmin DeJesus in Dr. Cowan's directorial production of Rodger's & Hammerstein's Allegro.  
Top right: Virgo motha- Dr. Justin P. Cowan  
Middle: Virgo motha- Beyoncé  
Bottom: WCSU's LGBTQIA+ identifying faculty displayed in front of trans-inclusive pride colors.





Visual & Performing Arts Center at Western Connecticut displayed with a transgender and POC inclusive Pride flag.

“It’s an honor to be a LGBTQIA+ leader in the arts. When I grew up in rural Ohio, I had no role models or a safe environment to be my authentic self. This affected me a great deal and while I overcame the huge challenges,

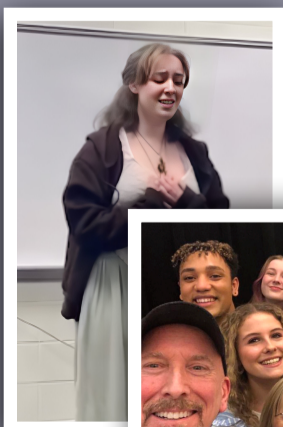
I also vowed to always make sure that everyone in my classroom felt accepted, loved and seen for how God created them.

Working in the arts as a Queer person is a gift. For the most part, it allows us to collaborate safely with other artists and also requires us to bring our true self to the table. Theatre has the ability to be the most political art form and educate the artist and the audience. For that reason, I couldn't be more humbled and honored this fall to be directing *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. I look forward to bringing this LGBTQIA+ masterpiece to the WCSU community. HAPPY PRIDE EVERYONE!! Wear it proudly!”

**Professor Tim Howard (he/him)**  
**Coordinator of the BFA Musical Theatre Program**

“Working with Tim is a pleasure! He is very knowledgeable and brings a lot to the table. He is able to make you think and open up new perspectives and objectives about your character that may not have been realized before. He always sees your potential and is able to bring it out of you! He always leads with he best intention for you and your growth. The work he puts in as a director does not go unnoticed, his productions are always a great watch, and you’ll always want to go back and watch again. I can’t wait to see what he does in his next production of *Angels in America!*”

**Zayda Greer (any pronouns)**  
**BFA Musical Theatre**



Left: Rising Junior Zayda Greer performing in Professor Tim Howard’s MT Studio class.  
 Center & Right: Howard’s rising Sophomore and Junior BFA MT’s



Professor Tim Howard with LGBTQIA+ friends and allies.

This Fall, the WCSU Theatre Dept. is taking on an unapologetically queer and bold production that centers around the LGBTQIA+ and the AIDS epidemic. Tim Howard will be directing the Pulitzer Prize winning play by Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*. For more information and updates, follow @wcsu\_theatre on Instagram or go check us out on Eventbrite where tickets are sold.



“As the great James Baldwin once stated, ‘It is astonishing that in a country so dedicated to the individual, so many people should be afraid to speak.’ Furthermore, as I grew into myself as an out gay man, I agree with Baldwin’s realization that in being a gay man of color, ‘I thought I’d hit the jackpot.’

I continue to feel this way, in and out of the classroom, as I see our young queer students growing into their confidence and understanding and often taking the lead in ensuring safe and creative spaces in our department and across campus, not just for others like them, but for all students. That proactivity in opening minds and hearts is salvational for a world seemingly turning inward to vour its own people in a misguided battle for supremacy and exclusivity.

As such, watching and helping our students grow has become one of the greatest sources of pride for Pride Month—and any other month!

Thank you—and Happy Pride!”

**Dr. Donald Gagnon (he/him)**  
**Professor**



Top: Dr. Donald Gagnon alongside his husband.  
Middle: Gagnon on one of his fabulous vacations.  
Bottom: Gagnon and his WCSU students seeing A Strange Loop on Broadway

“I feel incredibly honored and eternally grateful to have Dr. Donald P Gagnon as a professor. Dr. Gagnon has been a wonderful mentor and inspiration for me from the moment that we first started working together, and he remains consistently raising the bar for other professors ever since. He has encouraged and uplifted not only my work, but my personhood by creating safe and inviting spaces in the classroom and in his office. I especially loved being enrolled in Dr. Gagnon’s Queer Theatre class last semester. It was a supreme joy to hear Dr. Gagnon discuss and analyze queerness each day in class. He brought passion, truth, power and tremendous love to every class.

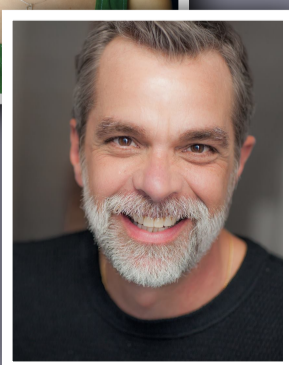
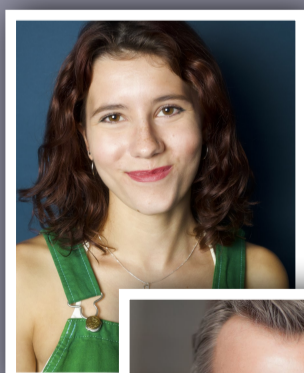
Dr. Gagnon has had an immeasurable impact on me as a student and as a person. I look forward to witnessing the groundbreaking work that Dr. Gagnon will continue to accomplish, I am especially looking forward to working with him on Angels in America dramaturgy this coming fall at WCSU.

Most of all, I look forward to continuing to learn from such a brilliant professor. Thank you, Dr. Gagnon, for creating not only a safe, but also an empowering space for queer students at WCSU. You are fabulous.”

**Olivia Lanteri (she/her)**  
**BFA Acting**



Left: Rising Junior Olivia Lanteri  
Right: Dr. Donald Gagnon



“Working Phillip George was a wonderful experience for so many reasons!! He has this ability to break a scene down so simply to get to the root of character and motivation. He made feedback easy to understand and gave just as much positivity as things to work on. He picked material specific to each person and was able to highlight everyone’s skills. Working with him really felt like his was on your side. Not to mention he’s hilarious and makes every class so much fun! I really appreciated having a professor that was so open about his queerness. He never treated it like it’s something to hide and brought it into the classroom in a purposeful way. He made me feel seen for my own queerness and everything that comes along with being me. Having a professor that is so unapologetically himself encouraged us queer people, and everyone honestly, to let loose in the classroom and feel confident in ourselves. His wonderful queer presence lights up the classroom and anyone is lucky to work with him!!”

**Michelle D’Amico (she/her)**  
**BFA Musical Theatre**

The School of Visual & Performing Arts here at Westconn is so very fortunate to have both our Dean, Brian T. Vernon and our Events Coordinator, Eric Gomez working alongside us. Both queer identifying leaders serve all departments in our building using their expertise in all aspects of the arts to create a rich learning environment for the students attending. CenterStage and the Theatre Department salute both of them for both their leadership and their pride. The following are comments from current students who have gotten to work under them.

“Dean Vernon is a pillar to the WCSU community. As a student body we can always count on him to advocate for his queer-identifying and Black students, and serve as representation for those who have felt unseen in the past. He is always there to support his students of all identities and we couldn't be more thankful for him.”

**Vice President  
Kendyl Grace Davis  
(she/her)  
BFA Musical Theatre**



“Working with Eric has been and continues to be just a great experience through and through. I have learned so much from him! He helped me realize how much I love being involved with the sort of "behind the scenes" portion of theatre. He is the most hardworking person I know and is always ready to help his crew learn with a smile on his face. He's incredibly supportive of all of his crew and team and he is just an absolute pleasure to work with!”

**Ali Montgomery  
(she/her)  
BFA Acting**



Left: CenterStage Vice President Kendyl Grace Davis, Center Left: VPAC Dean Brian T. Vernon, Center Right: Ali Montgomery, Right: VPAC Events Coordinator Eric Gomez

Jen Turey is a long-time and dear friend of the Theatre Department. She choreographed both semesters last academic year, contributing to both *Bat Boy: the Musical*, and *Marat/Sade*. Turey also teaches Dance Workshop and offers half a dozen other dance classes through the HPX department. Representation is important, and being an openly queer female professor brings diversity to our theatre community. We salute Jen Turey for her long devotion to our department, for her leadership, for her unwavering allyship, and for her kindness. Here are some words from one of her students.

“Jen is an amazing professor and an even more amazing person. She embraces people's differences with a grace not everyone has; she sees all people as simply people and never makes it more complicated than that while still holding space for them to be their fully authentic selves. I also admire her activism and willingness to stand up against injustice. She is so encouraging and nurturing to all her students and always has a smile on her face. I've never felt anything other than unconditional support from Jen and as a queer women myself, I'm so happy and grateful to get the chance to work with and learn from her here at Westconn.”

**Dakota Jusem-Laporte (she/her)  
BA Theatre Performance**



Right: Rising Junior Dakota Jusem-Laporte  
Left: Choreographer and Adjunct Professor Jen Turey

“I'm grateful to work for a university in a state where I will not be penalized for being my authentic self in the classroom. I encourage my students to do the same. It's extremely important to me to provide an environment where students feel safe and supported for who they are. So much of what I do with beginning actors is getting them comfortable in their own skin; to trust and use their body as an instrument for acting. In acting we are always seeking truth and honesty in a performance. How can I ask students to do that if they can't be their authentic selves?”

When I was in my undergrad acting training many years ago, any hint that you were gay in your performance was frowned upon. (How will you every work?) It was frustrating and dispiriting. It was asking me to start from a place of artifice, not honesty. I never want any of my students to feel that way in my classroom. And thankfully, LGBT+ representation is much more plentiful in what is being produced these days.”

**Michael Bartoli (he/him)**  
**Voice Coach and Adjunct Professor**



**Cleo Fiedler (she/they)**  
**BFA Musical Theatre**



“I am so glad I got the opportunity to take a class with Professor Bartoli during my first semester here at WCSU. Not only did he make his ‘Acting 1’ class fun and enjoyable, but he also used teaching methods that resonated very well with me, and I can safely say stuck with my classmates as well. Taking ‘Voice and Diction’ with him this past semester was also a pleasure! He made sure to tend to each of our needs while working with new things as we were each learning at a different pace. Bartoli assured us that it was okay to feel vulnerable when acting and always made sure his classroom was a safe space for everyone. He has taught me so much and I am so grateful to have worked with him throughout my first year!”



Left: Rising Sophomore Cleo Fiedler  
Right: Professor Michael Bartoli

“The older I get, the happier I get, the more secure I become, the more perspective I gain, the more the need for Pride clarifies in my mind. I am proud of who I am. I am proud that I survived being a child, a teenager, and a young adult in a world built for people who weren't me, in a world that told me, in a million ways every day, that I wasn't part of the acceptable group. I am proud that, in spite of that, I found empathy, kindness, forgiveness, happiness and most of all love. I am proud of my husband, who has done the same thing. I am proud of both of us for building a marriage without any childhood examples of what a gay marriage could be. I am proud of my community for standing up and demanding equality, back then, and every day now. I am proud of my community for withstanding the violence, the hate, the tiny insidious jibes and jokes, and still holding hands, still celebrating, still supporting each other and most of all still loving. I am proud. I am not fully equal yet, but I am most definitely proud.



Pictured: Jeremy Powell alongside his husband, Ian.

Whilst I am proud to be a member of the queer community, the older I get, the more I realize that it is the arts community that is my real community - it is in the world of the arts where I feel I have found the truest acceptance and the truest diversity. It is home and I can see it being home to so many of my students - something that can never be undervalued!”

**Jeremy Powell (he/him)**  
**Voice Coach and Adjunct Professor**

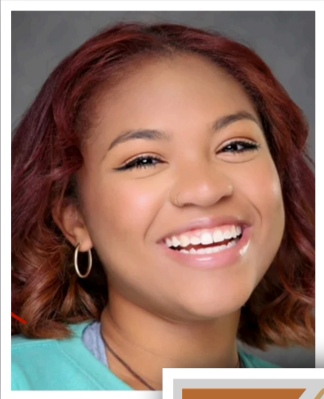
“As a transgender (FTM) student exploring vocal training for the first time, I was hesitant to see how a coach would respond to and subsequently train my voice. At our first meeting, if I'm not mistaken, Jem had made sure he got my pronouns correct, got permission to ask something personal, and asked what my transition plans looked like (regarding hormones, largely). At our next meeting, he mentioned that he'd done research outside of our lesson as to what hormone replacement therapy (HRT) does for transmasculine individuals, how long the process typically took (again regarding voice changes), and said that if this was something I pursued during my time at WestConn, he'd happily reassess and adjust my training as needed. There was never any major fanfare which I appreciated, and the dialogue was very open. He used non-gendered terms when discussing the voice, and found repertoire that suited my voice that was not meant to be sung by a child. From a creative standpoint, he's also encouraged me wholeheartedly to pursue vocal projects that I typically wouldn't be cast in, and has all-in-all bolstered my confidence and enthusiasm for my craft as a transgender person. The work we've done has allowed me to feel comfortable with how my voice sounds and the knowledge that I can utilize many techniques to make it sound any number of ways, and that when it changes, the process can start once again.”



Right: Alumni Beckett Pais  
Left: Jeremy Powell

**Beckett Pais (he/him)**  
**BFA Musical Theatre Alumni**

Here's a few words from the incoming President of our Theatre Dept.'s newly established Diversity Council, Finley Smith.



“Having Queer professors has always been an amazing experience. People who can understand a unique minority and the struggles that come with it are always incredibly valuable. We as a student body are able to indulge in really difficult conversations and we have so much support from our professors in doing so. They are also so respectful of each of us as humans and make it a priority to use our preferred names and pronouns without question. Being able to see successful queer people who dedicate themselves to teaching us is incredibly inspiring and we are incredibly grateful to have their guidance and support.”



**Fourth Wall President Finley Smith (they/them)**  
**BFA Musical Theatre**

The Fourth Wall, advised by Dr. Donald Gagnon, is a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ theatre community and an outlet for peer to peer conversations, check in's, programs, and events that bolster inclusion, progress and love. The Fourth Wall's diverse E-Board is dedicated to being there for their students understanding that the performing arts field requires a level of physical and emotional vulnerability and the work environment needs to be *good* so the work can be *good* in return.

We've asked two of the Westconn Theatre Dept.'s alumni to speak a bit about their experiences here. Both Colin Gallagher and Tyler Caisse, who both identify as LGBTQIA+ are now fulfilling leadership positions of their own; Colin in the wig & makeup industry and Tyler in the education field respectively. Here's what they have to say-

“Pride is the celebration of accepting who you are. As a proud Queer Nonbinary individual, I want everyone to remember that there are many different kinds of people in this world and it is important find who you truly are. Accept your differences and love what makes you, you!

During my time at WCSU I explored my gender identity through the art of drag. Playing the titular role of the Piggy Queen in "Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead" & "Hamlet" at WCSU was my first look into drag as an art form and It changed my life forever.

Moving forward in the industry I would love to see nonbinary performers cast in roles because of their personal perspective on the character rather than their looks/gender. A performers relatability to a character defies gender and can help tell a much more progressive story if the right storytellers are chosen.”



**ALUMNI**  
**COLLIN GALLAGHER**  
**BFA MUSICAL THEATRE**



**ALUMNI**  
**TYLER CAISSE**  
**BA THEATRE PERFORMANCE**

“Pride is a time of recognition, support, and celebration. Celebrating who we are provides role models and support systems for those who feel alone and ashamed. I am honored to be part of a resilient community that advocates and ensures equal rights and representation.

One of my favorite memories at WCSU was playing Ernst in "Spring Awakening." When I read that cast list, I felt immense pride that I would portray an LGBTQIA+ character. Thank you to WCSU for creating a safe space for artists to thrive.”

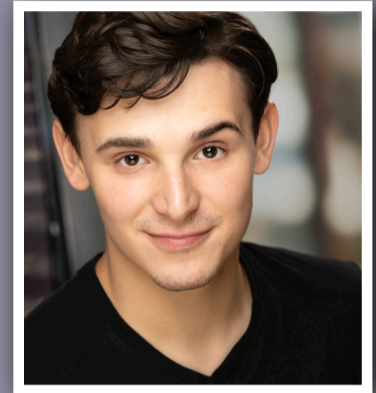
To keep up to date with our thriving WCSU VPAC Alumni, follow the page-  
@wcsutheatrealum on instagram for regularly posted updates! There you can find projects, jobs, and productions from past and current students.

Representation of all kinds is vital to a successful performance art organization. Theatre is intended to give a voice to the voiceless and aid in self-expression of every human identity. Being surrounded by exuberant amounts of LGBTQIA+ excellence from my peers, professors, mentors, friends etc. makes me beam with pride and allows me to live my true authentic self through my art.

WCSU's productions of shows such as Fairview and Angels in America allow traditionally underrepresented students to have a canvas for their work, passion, experience and authentic self to be translated and celebrated through the art of performance. We celebrate PRIDE to recognize how beautiful each one of us is as ourselves and also to remember how far we as a community have come with all due respects to members of our LGBTQIA+ community with intersecting marginalized identities who fought with their lives for us to have a space where we can just freely be.

Happy Pride. This month and every month!

**Co-President Kiernan Urso (he/him)**  
**BFA Acting**



## **Additional Contact**

### **Social Media:**

**@WCSUCenterStage on Instagram & our NEW FaceBook**

**@wcsu\_theatre**

**@wcsutheatrealum @thefourthwallwcsu**

### **Website:**

**wcsu.edu**

**eventbrite.com (Visual and Performing Arts Center at WCSU)**

**Co-President Kiernan Urso: urso009@wcsu.edu**

**Co-President Donovan Shaw: shaw097@wcsu.edu**

**CenterStage: Centerstage.western@gmail.com**

