

A photograph of two men embracing warmly in front of a grand, classical building with ornate architectural details. The man on the left is wearing a denim jacket, and the man on the right is wearing a dark sweater. The scene is lit with a soft, warm glow, suggesting an evening or indoor setting with stage lights.

THIS BITTER EARTH

BY **HARRISON DAVID RIVERS**

DIRECTED BY **DAVID MENDIZÁBAL**

FEB 16 - MAR 20

**THEATER
WORKS
HARTFORD**



NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

During times of struggle, love is what carries us through. Love is what gives us hope and inspires us to action – to go, to do, to change. When first commissioned to write **THIS BITTER EARTH** in 2015, I was asked, “can you talk about what it’s like to move about the world in a black body during these times?” In 2022, the same question is still being asked, and an answer is still hard to find. What has carried through though, is the importance of moments of love – large and small – between the moments of struggle. **THIS BITTER EARTH** is a love story about two men finding each other and finding their voices in an extremely challenging time, and the ways in which their love changes them forever. Through love, Jesse feels safe and supported in exploring the ways that he is comfortable interacting with his blackness and his activism in a country that does its best to make him feel unworthy. Through love, Neil, Jesse’s white partner, is called to activism, becoming a passionate advocate for his partner’s life and for all Black lives.

In 2022, when distance is encouraged due to covid and Black lives are still being ended by police, the connections that bring us together are more important than ever. The story of two men finding and loving each other in spite of the world’s coldness, then persevering in the face of tragedy and uncertainty, reminds us that life is the small moments of joy found within each other, even when the world tells us that what keeps us apart is most important.

– HARRISON DAVID RIVERS

NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

We live in a time in which all of our choices are politicized within an imaginary binary. Likewise, many of our society’s systems uphold a polarized “black or white” way of thinking, created to highlight and enforce our differences. But it is in the gray areas – where two truths exist in the same breath – that we have the potential to find real understanding and recognize the multitudinous intersections of our own humanity.

In Harrison David Rivers’ play **THIS BITTER EARTH** we meet two men, Jesse and Neil, who choose to lean into the gray areas and connect in a world determined to divide. Set between 2012 - 2015, a period wrought with racial and political tension, and the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement, lies a beautiful and powerful interracial queer love story. Against all odds these seemingly opposite beings defy the racial, political, and class divisions of their reality and dare to love. Through poetry, rage, laughter, and protest, Jesse and Neil remind us of the various roles we are called to play in the revolution, the personal reflection necessary for growth, and the power of love to bring about the change we need.

Revisiting this play in 2022, after more than two years of loss, uncertainty, isolation and a long overdue reckoning, set off by a global pandemic and the continued violence against Black bodies, I’m struck by the poignancy of this work to reflect both the past and the current dilemmas we face as a society. Where has leading with fear, division, and the oppression of Black and brown bodies led us? How might we take the time to listen to each other and lead with compassion, care, and love? As Jesse and Neil teach us, maybe through knowing love “this bitter earth... may not, oh be so bitter after all.”

– DAVID MENDIZÁBAL



THIS BITTER EARTH

BY **HARRISON DAVID RIVERS**

DIRECTED BY **DAVID MENDIZÁBAL †**

THE CAST

TOM HOLCOMB *
and **DAMIAN THOMPSON ***



Set Design

Costume Design

Lighting Design

Sound Design

Fight/Intimacy Director

Stage Manager

RIW RAKKULCHON

DEVARIO D. SIMMONS

CHRISTINA WATANABE

FREDERICK KENNEDY

ROCÍO MENDEZ

NICOLE WIEGERT *

Casting by **X CASTING/VICTOR VAZQUEZ CSA**

This play takes place in New York City and St. Paul, MN.

**It moves back and forth in time over three years,
between March 21, 2012 and December 15, 2015.**

Cover Design by WondriskaRusso
Photo by David Samuel

THIS BITTER EARTH is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals
on behalf of Samuel French, Inc. www.concordtheatricals.com

Originally Commissioned and Produced at The New Conservatory Theatre Center
World Premiere in 2017 San Francisco, CA
Ed Decker, Artistic Director

† Member of SDC, Stage Directors and Choreographers Society.

* Member of Actors' Equity Association, Union of Professional Actors
and Stage Managers in the U.S.

WHO



TOM HOLCOMB (Neil) is making his TheaterWorks Hartford debut. Off-Broadway: *Meet Me In St Louis*, *London Assurance*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Ernest In Love* (Irish Repertory Theatre), *The Broken Heart*, *Macbeth* (Theatre For A New Audience), *Murder In The First* (The Directors Company), *Transport* (Irish Arts Center), *Eightythree Down* (Under St. Marks). Regional:

Stupid F#@ing Bird (Woolly Mammoth production for Syracuse Stage & Portland Center Stage), *The Great Gatsby* (Virginia Stage), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Geva Theater), *Dial 'M' For Murder* (Dorset Theatre Festival), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Guthrie Theater), *Dying City* (Bottling Company), *Ghosts* (Commonweal Theatre). Television/Web: *CoExisting*, *BOKtv*, *#ThatThingFromBefore*, *Onion News Network*. Workshops: *An Ideal Husband* (actor & adaptor, Irish Repertory Theatre), *Look Upon Our Lowliness* (New York Theatre Workshop), *Measured* (The Public Theatre), *This Bitter Earth* (TOSOS), *We Are Continuous* (Playwrights Center). Training: University of MN/Guthrie Theater BFA Actor Training Program. IG: iamtomholcomb



DAMIAN THOMPSON (Jesse) is a classically trained stage, film, and television actor making his TheaterWorks Hartford debut. Born in Kingston, Jamaica and partly raised in Miami, FL, he now resides in New York City. Damian is a 2018 NAACP award winner for his performance in *Fly* at the Pasadena Playhouse in California, and a 2012 Drammy Award

winner for his performance in the *Brother/Sister Plays* at Portland Playhouse in Oregon. He has had the pleasure of performing for both the Obama's and the Clinton's at the Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. and Off-Broadway in New York City. His short film *BLACK?* (for which he wrote, produced, and co-starred in) won best film at the New York Premiere Film Festival, and was an official selection at numerous festivals including the International Black Film Festival, the Orlando Film Festival, and the Albuquerque Film Festival. His work can be seen in the upcoming National Geographic special *Clotilda: The Last Slave Ship* and the upcoming Netflix feature *Wedding Season*. BFA from the University of Evansville, MFA from the University of Delaware. Facebook/Instagram: damianthompsonactor



HARRISON DAVID RIVERS (Playwright) is an award-winning playwright, librettist and screenwriter. His plays include *The Bandaged Place* (Relentless Award), *When Last We Flew* (GLAAD Award), *Sweet* (AUDELCO nom), *Where Storms Are Born* (Berkshire Theatre Award nom), *This Bitter Earth* (Jeff nom, MN Theatre Award) and the musicals *Five Points* with Douglas Lyons and

Ethan Pakchar (MN Theatre Award) and *Broadbend, Arkansas* with Ellen Fitzhugh and Ted Shen (Antonyo and AUDELCO noms). Harrison was named a Runner-up for the 2018 Artist of the Year by the *Star Tribune* and a 2017 Artist of the Year by *City Pages*. He is the recipient of McKnight, Jerome and Van Lier Fellowships, and residencies with the Bogliasco Foundation, Siena Art Institute, the Hermitage, Duke University, NYTW, New York Stage & Film and the Williamstown Theater Festival. Harrison is a member of the Board of Directors of the Playwright Center and The Movement Theatre Company. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. harrisondavidrivers.com



DAVID MENDIZÁBAL (Director | he/they) is a director, designer, one of the Producing Artistic Leaders of the OBIE Award-winning The Movement Theatre Company, and Associate Artistic Director of The Sol Project. Select directing credits include: *Don't Eat the Mangos* (Magic Theatre/Sundance), *On The Grounds of Belonging* (Long Wharf), *The Bandaged Place* (NYSAF), *Then They Forgot About The Rest* (INTAR), *And She Would Stand Like This* (w/choreographer Kia LaBeija), *Look Upon Our Lowliness* (The Movement), and *Tell Hector I Miss Him* (Atlantic). David is a 2021 Princess Grace Award Honoraria Recipient in Theater. They were part of the inaugural Soho Rep Project Number One Residency, where they created and directed the short film, *eat me!*. Alumnus of Ars Nova Vision Residency, Drama League Directors Project, Labyrinth Intensive Ensemble, artEquity, NALAC, and LCT Directors Lab. David was a participant in the TCG Leadership U: One-on-One program, where they were the Artistic Associate at Atlantic Theater Company. BFA - NYU/Tisch.

RIW RAKKULCHON (Set Design | he/they) is a Set & Costume Designer, Animator and Chef from Bangkok, Thailand. Selected Credits: Associate Set Designer (*Pass Over* on Broadway). He/They has worked at Yale Repertory Theatre, Syracuse Stage, Drury Lane Theatre, Asolo Rep, The Acting Company, 59E59, Edinburgh Fringe, Primary Stages, The Public Theatre, amongst others. He/They also works with designers Wilson Chin, Riccardo Hernandez, Jason Ardizzone-West, Donyale Werle, Santo Loquasto, Rachel Hauck, Clint Ramos and Walt Spangler. Board member of WithAll, a non-profit organization on a fight to end eating disorders. BFA - Ithaca College, MFA - Yale School of Drama (Donald & Zorca Oenslager Fellowship Award in Design Recipient). IG: @riwrdesign. Member of United Scenic Artists 829.

DEVARIO D. SIMMONS (Costume Design) Broadway: *Thoughts of a Colored Man*; Off-Broadway: *TUMACHO*, *Between the Bars*, *EMERGENCY!* and *P.S.* Additionally, Simmons has had the pleasure of working regionally at: The Long Wharf Theatre, Jean's Playhouse, Syracuse Stage and Baltimore Center Stage. Other credits include *RUSTIN* (Netflix), three seasons of AMC's television show *TURN*, the 2nd National Touring production of *In the Heights* and two seasons of the PBS television series *Mercy Street*. devariosimmons.com
IG: @devariosimmons. Member of United Scenic Artists 829.

CHRISTINA WATANABE (Lighting Design) is an award-winning designer and educator for theatre, dance, music, and events. Regional: The Rep St. Louis, Pioneer Theatre Company, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Brown/Trinity Rep, Virginia Stage Company, Charlottesville Opera, Palm Beach Dramaworks, White Heron Theatre Company, Florida Rep, Bristol Valley Theatre. NYC: Lincoln Center, The Public, WP Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Primary Stages, Cherry Lane, 59E59, HERE, New Ohio, Theatre Row, Urban Stages, INTAR, Bushwick Starr, JACK. TV: *Colin Quinn* (co-design). USITT Gateway Mentor. Knights of Illumination winner. Faculty: Sargent Conservatory at Webster University. MFA - NYU. Member USA 829. www.StarryEyedLighting.com.

WHO

FREDERICK KENNEDY (Sound Design) is pleased to be returning to TheaterWorks Hartford (*The River* '18, *Fully Committed* '19, *American Son* '19). Recent work includes *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* at Hartford Stage; *Doubt* at Westport Country Playhouse; *The Forbidden City*, an audio play for Lincoln Center Theatre; *Seize the King* with Classical Theatre of Harlem (NY Times Critic's Pick); *Richard & Jane & Dick & Sally* at Baltimore Center Stage; *Native Son* produced by the Acting Company at the Duke Theater in New York City; *Twelfth Night* at Yale Repertory Theater, with choreography by Byron Easley (CT Critics Circle Best Sound Design Nomination); and *Father Comes Home from the Wars, Parts 1, 2, and 3*, at American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. MFA - Yale School of Drama. fredkennedy.org

ROCÍO MENDEZ (Fight/Intimacy Director) is an Award Winning Actor, Fight and Intimacy director and a proud New Yorker committed to building confidence in brown and black girls through storytelling. Rocío has done multiple independent films showcasing their talents in martial arts and comedy. Rocío has worked with a range of theaters nationally including The Public Theater, Atlantic Theater Company, Rattlestick Playwrights Theater and Classical Theater of Harlem, among the many. Rocío has been nominated for multiple awards for their work in Fight Choreography and Movement. Rocío is a team member of UNKLE DAVE'S FIGHT HOUSE - a collective of fight/intimacy/movement directors serving theater, film and educational institutions. rociomendez.com

VICTOR VAZQUEZ CSA (Casting Director | he/him) is the founder and lead Casting Director of X Casting (www.xcastingnyc.com) and sits on the national board of the Casting Society of America. He has cast projects for Broadway, Off-Broadway, London's West End, and Film. He is the proud son of Mexican immigrants.



ROB RUGGIERO (Producing Artistic Director) has been part of TheaterWorks Hartford artistic leadership for 29 seasons. He has directed over 65 shows, including TWH productions of *The Sound Inside*, *American Son*, *The Legend of Georgia McBride*, *Constellations*, *Next to Normal*, *Relativity* (starring Richard Dreyfuss) and *Christmas on the Rocks*, which he also conceived. His

Broadway credits include *Looped* (starring Valerie Harper in a Tony-nominated performance) and *High* (starring Kathleen Turner) which had its world premiere at TWH. He also conceived and directed the musical revue *Make Me a Song: The Music of William Finn* which moved off-Broadway and was nominated for Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards. Rob conceived and directed *Ella*, a musical about Ella Fitzgerald, which saw sold-out runs in 24 regional theaters and was produced as a National Tour. His work on plays and musicals has received multiple awards in Connecticut and around the United States. Rob recently directed *A Grand Night for Singing* at Goodspeed Musicals, where over his 14-year relationship he has directed many award-winning musical productions. Internationally he directed *Fiddler on the Roof* in Athens, Greece.

PAUL MANSFIELD (Director of Production) A recent addition to TheaterWorks Hartford, Paul brings over 24 years of experience in the



industry along with a very successful background in entertainment. His recent credits include the following: 2020 Presidential Debates, *Assassin's Creed Symphony*, *The Illusionists*, *4U Prince*, *Peter Pan 360*, *Moscow Ballet's Nutcracker*, *The Walking Dead Experience*, *Pip's Island*, *Annie*, *Rock of Ages*, *WWE*, *Taylor Swift*, *Jay-Z* and many others over the years.

NICOLE WIEGERT (Stage Manager) **Theaterworks Hartford:** *Christmas on the Rocks '21*, *Walden*. **Regional:** *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Pike St.*, *Detroit '67*, *Henry V*, *A Lesson from Aloes*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Hartford Stage); *Passing Through* (Goodspeed Musicals); *Spinning* (Long Wharf); *Shakespeare In Love* (CT Rep); *Million Dollar Quartet*, *The Flood* (Mountain Playhouse); *Grease*, *A Chorus Line* (Ivoryton Playhouse); *Beauty and the Beast*, *Beehive: The 60's Musical* (Theatre by the Sea); *James and the Giant Peach*, *Big Fish*, *Our Town*, *Anatole* (First Stage Milwaukee); *Hall of Final Ruin*, *The Griots* (Renaissance Theatreworks); *Swan Lake* (Milwaukee Ballet). **Television:** *House Hunters*, *Extreme Cheapskates*, *Biggest Loser*. Love to LC, WW and CW.

ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION (AEA) was founded in 1913 as the first of the American actor unions. Equity's mission is to advance, promote and foster the art of live theatre as an essential component of our society. Today, Equity represents more than 40,000 actors, singers, dancers and stage managers working in hundreds of theatres across the United States. Equity members are dedicated to working in the theatre as a profession, upholding the highest artistic standards. Equity negotiates wages and working conditions and provides a wide range of benefits including health and pension plans for its members. Through its agreement with Equity, this theatre has committed to the fair treatment of the actors and stage managers employed in this production. AEA is a member of the AFL-CIO and is affiliated with FIA, an international organization of performing arts unions. actorsequity.org

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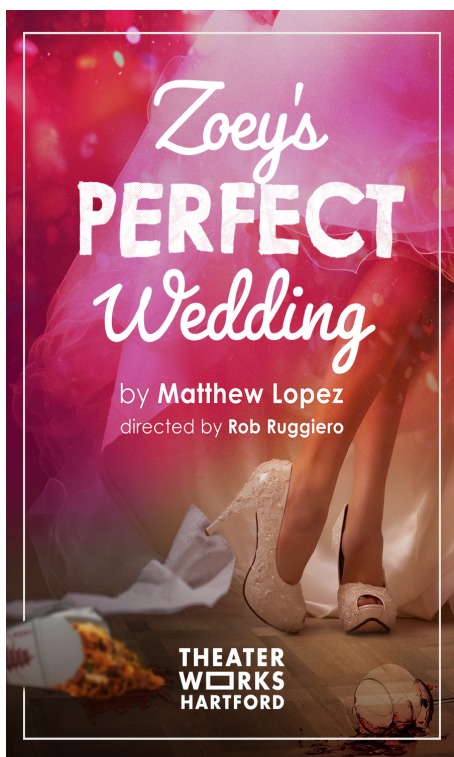
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From the author of THE LEGEND OF GEORGIA MCBRIDE



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