New play about football, X’s and O’s, to begin performances

Baltimore—Oct 22, 2015. The NFL takes Center Stage in X’s and O’s, a new, ripped-from-the-headlines play about America’s love of football and the often traumatic impact the sport has on many of its players and families. X’s and O’s is the final production at Center Stage before building-wide renovations move the company’s last two productions of the season to a temporary residency at Towson University.

Playwright and football superfan KJ Sanchez, and collaborator Jenny Mercein, have written a provocative play about the NFL with a script based on dozens of interviews with pro players, their families, fans, and medical experts. Some of the topics tackled in the play are how former players grapple with Alzheimer’s, dementia and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) caused by brain injuries; life after the NFL; what football means to fans; debate around children playing football; the NFL as a way out of poverty for black Americans; and others.

X’s and O’s was co-commissioned by Center Stage and Berkeley Repertory Theatre, where it premiered earlier this year. Center Stage is presenting the same critically acclaimed Berkeley production with its original cast and creative team, led by Berkeley Rep Artistic Director Tony Taccone. It begins previews in Center Stage’s Head Theater on Friday, Nov. 13, opens Friday, Nov. 20, and runs through Sunday, Dec. 20. Press Night for X’s and O’s is Friday, Nov. 20.

“KJ Sanchez is a fearless artist, and we’re honored to have supported the development of this extraordinary play, which merges journalism and drama,” Center Stage Artistic Director Kwame Kwei-Armah says. “Baltimore loves football, and we wanted to produce something that is culturally relevant, as well as incredibly entertaining and thought-provoking.”

“I’m a lifelong football fan, and I wanted to explore what’s going on in American football today,” Sanchez says. “But I wanted to look at it through the lens of the players, families of the players, and the fans to fully examine our cultural values around the game. What we have crafted is a story that presents both the beauty and brutality of the game and how it ties so profoundly into our identity as Americans. We hope the audience embraces the story whether they are ardent football fans or curious theatergoers.”

Adding to the experience of the play is an interactive lobby design. Center Stage’s props and costume shops have found and in some cases created replicas of vintage football gear and fan games that patrons will be able to hold and even try out. A Nintendo station in the Chapel Bar will be set up for play of vintage football video games, and photos showing the history of Baltimore football have been collected to give a sense of what the sport means to Charm City. There will also be a production-long raffle for the collection of historic football gear, electronic games, and more.

KJ Sanchez (playwright) is the founder and CEO of American Records (amrec.us), devoted to making theater that chronicles our time. She is the co-author, director, and producer of American Records’ flagship production ReEntry, based on interviews with Marines returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. ReEntry has toured extensively to theaters across the country – including at Center Stage in 2010 – as well as to over 35 military bases and hospitals in the U.S. and abroad. Sanchez is also the voice of many characters on the Nickelodeon cartoons Go, Diego, Go! and Dora the Explorer. She is a Fox Fellow and a Douglass Wallop Fellow. Sanchez is the winner of the 2014 Rella Lossy Playwright Award for X’s and O’s.

Tony Taccone (director) is the artistic director of Berkeley Rep, where he has directed shows that transferred to London, Continental Divide and Tiny Kushner, and two that landed on Broadway: Bridge & Tunnel and Wishful Drinking. Before working at Berkeley Rep, Taccone served as artistic director of Eureka Theatre, where he commissioned Tony Kushner’s legendary Angels in America and co-directed its world premiere.
X's and O's features the same ensemble of actors who premiered the production at Berkeley Rep, and all are making their Center Stage debuts:

Bill Geisslinger (Frank, Rocky, Tough Guy, and Chorus), as an acting company member at Oregon Shakespeare Festival for 25 years participated in more than 70 productions, including most recently August: Osage County, the world premiere of Ghost Light by Tony Taccone, and as assistant director of A Streetcar Named Desire.

Dwight Hicks (George Coleman, Ramon, and Chorus) began his career in athletics as a defensive back on the University of Michigan’s football team. He signed with the San Francisco 49ers and his outstanding play led him to four consecutive Pro Bowls and two Super Bowl Championships before starting his acting career. His film credits include The Rock, Armageddon, Jack, Virginia, and Cartel War. Some of his television credits are Castle, Body of Proof, How I Met Your Mother, and Cold Case.

Anthony Holiday (Addicott, Ben, and Chorus) appeared on Broadway in Magic/Bird at the Longacre Theater. His Los Angeles credits include Richard in Questa at the Court Theatre, Red/Jason in Play at the Gardner Stages, and Peter in The Last Pitch at the Renegades Theatre in Los Angeles. Holiday also played Richard in Machinal at the Chandler Theatre in Los Angeles, for which he was nominated for an ADA Award.

Eddie Ray Jackson (Eric, BJ, Anthony, and Chorus) has played Muhammad Ali in Will Power’s Fetch Clay, Make Man at Marin Theatre Company and was a 2013 company member at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival where he appeared in the U.S. premiere of The Heart of Robin Hood. His New York credits include Much Ado About Nothing at Classic Stage Company; A Midsummer Night’s Dream and La Ronde at the Riverside Theatre; and Miss Julie, The Proposal, and Endgame at Columbia University.

Jenny Mercein (Kelli, Martha, Roberta, and Chorus) is a co-collaborator of X’s and O’s and daughter of Super Bowl winning former professional player Chuck Mercein. Writing credits include her solo shows pretty, Waiting, and Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge. Her acting credits include Keen Company, HERE Arts Center, New Georges, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and Pioneer Theatre Company. Mercein’s TV/film credits include 30 Rock, Law & Order, Unforgettable, The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer, and The Prospects.

Marilee Talkington (Physician, Caroline, Giants Fan, and Chorus) off Broadway has played Eleanor in A.R. Gurney’s The Middle Ages and Eileen in the revival of John Belluso’s A Nervous Smile with Theatre Breaking Through Barriers. She is the recipient of a San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critic’s Circle Award, a California Center for Cultural Innovation Award, and is a proud MacDowell Fellow. Talkington is one of only two legally blind actors in the country to earn an MFA in acting (American Conservatory Theater).

The creative team for X’s and O’s includes Todd Rosenthal (scenic designer), Meg Neville (costume designer), Alexander V. Nichols (lighting and projection designer), and Jake Rodriguez (sound designer). The stage manager is Kimberly Mark Webb.

X’s and O’s is 85 minutes, with no intermission, and is appropriate for ages 12 and older. For more information, visit www.centerstage.org or call the box office at 410-332-0033.

The last two shows of Center Stage’s 2015-16 Season will be at Towson University, where Center Stage will be in temporary residency to present an all-female version of Shakespeare’s As You Like It and Dominique Morisseau’s contemporary play set in Detroit amongst a backdrop of Motown and unrest, Detroit ’67.

X’s and O’s media partner is WYPR. Center Stage is supported by a grant from the Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC), an agency dedicated to cultivating a vibrant cultural community where the arts thrive. An agency of the Department of Business and Economic Development, the MSAC provides financial support and technical assistance to nonprofit...
organizations, units of government, colleges and universities for arts activities. Funding for the MSAC is also provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. Center Stage’s 2015-16 Season is made possible by Season 2015-16 presenting sponsor M&T Bank and season sponsor The Shubert Foundation.

About Center Stage
Under the leadership of playwright, actor and director Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE (Artistic Director) and national arts leader Stephen Richard (Managing Director), Center Stage is an artistically driven institution committed to engaging, entertaining and enriching audiences through joyous and bold performances.

Hailed by The Wall Street Journal as “one of America’s leading regional companies,” Center Stage has, for more than 50 years, dedicated itself to exploring new works and bringing classics to life. This rich history is marked by critically acclaimed new works that have shaped the American theater— from the Tony Award-winning The Triumph of Love to world premieres such as Miss Evers’ Boys by David Feldshuh and On the Verge by Eric Overmyer.

In 2015, Center Stage’s production of Kwei-Armah’s world premiere Marley became the best-attended and highest grossing show in Center Stage’s 52-year history. The 2015-16 Season is a transitional year when the theater’s historic Mt. Vernon home will undergo a dramatic renovation and revitalization in order to welcome innovative future projects, relocating Center Stage to a temporary residency at Towson University for the final two productions of the season.

FACT SHEET: X’s and O’s
WHO: Written by KJ Sanchez with Jenny Mercein
Directed by Tony Taccone
Creative Team: Todd Rosenthal (scenic designer), Meg Neville (costume designer), Alexander V. Nichols (lighting and projection designer), and Jake Rodriguez (sound designer).

Cast: Bill Geisslinger (Frank, Rocky, Tough Guy, Chorus), Dwight Hicks (George Coleman, Ramon, Chorus), Anthony Holiday (Addicott, Ben, Chorus), Eddie Ray Jackson (Eric, BJ, Anthony, Chorus), Jenny Mercein (Kelli, Martha, Roberta, Chorus), Marilee Talkington (Physician, Caroline, Giants Fan, Chorus)

WHAT: Center Stage presents X’s and O’s, a new, ripped from the headlines play about America’s love of football and the often traumatic impact it has on many of its players in a script based on interviews with former NFL players, their families, medical experts, and fans.

WHERE: Center Stage, Head Theater, 700 N. Calvert St., Baltimore, MD 21218
WHEN: Friday, Nov. 13, through Sunday, Dec. 20; Opening/Press Night: Nov. 20
Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays @ 8 p.m.
Thursdays @ 7 p.m.
Saturdays and Sundays @ 2 p.m.
Sundays @ 7:30 p.m.
Weekday matinee: Wednesday, Dec. 16, @ 1 p.m.
No performances: Thursday, Nov. 26; Tuesday, Dec. 15; and Sunday, Dec. 20, at 7:30 p.m.
HOW MUCH: Obstructed View + Kickin’ It with the ’Rents: $10, Section B: $19, Section A: $29-45, Premium: $39-59. Half-price tickets available one hour before curtain. GO Pass for ages 18-34 available for entire season at $49, with GO Friend tickets at $20. For group discounts, contact groups@centerstage.org or 410-986-4013.

SPECIAL EVENTS:

Nov. 13-19: Preview performances Nov. 17: LGBTQ Night Out Pre-Show Reception

Nov. 20: Opening Night/Press Night, includes post-show party with food by Classic Catering, beer by Union Craft Brewing and RavenBeer, and wine.

Nov. 26: Thanksgiving: No show
Nov. 27: Meet the Actors Post-Show Q&A with the Cast

Nov. 29: Post-Show Discussion with X’s and O’s playwright and actor Jenny Mercein

Dec. 3: Post-Show Discussion: Positive Community Impacts of Football
*Special Discount for Blue Star Military Families

Dec. 5: Kickin’ It with the ’Rents pre-matinee lunch with the cast and $10 tickets

Dec. 6: Post-Show Discussion: Life after the NFL w/ a former Baltimore Colts Player Doug Nettles

Dec. 10: Post-Show Discussion: Traumatic Brain Injury and Medical Developments

Dec. 17: Post-Show Discussion: Youth Football, Race, Technology and the Future of Football

Open Captioning: Nov. 22, Dec. 6 @ 7:30 p.m. Audio Described: Nov. 22, Dec. 6 @ 2 p.m., 7:30 p.m.