FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BERKELEY REP PRESENTS THE WORLD PREMIERE

OF X’S AND O’S (A FOOTBALL LOVE STORY)

American identity and love of the game meet head-on in this compelling docudrama

December 2, 2014 – Berkeley Repertory Theatre is proud to present the world premiere of X’s and O’s (A Football Love Story), a hard-hitting docudrama that examines our country’s passion for a game that is life-giving yet lethal. Our singularly American sport is intricately woven into our culture and rituals, yet its traumatic effect on players and their families has us reexamining its place in our country’s story. Playwright and football superfan KJ Sanchez, and collaborator Jenny Mercein, brings us a captivating story based on interviews with players, their families, and their fans. Directed by Michael Leibert Artistic Director Tony Taccone, X’s and O’s (A Football Love Story) is as visceral, emotional, and as highly theatrical as the game itself. Originally co-commissioned by Berkeley Rep and Center Stage in Baltimore, the play was developed in The Ground Floor: Berkeley Rep’s Center for the Creation and Development of New Work. It begins previews on Berkeley Rep’s intimate Thrust Stage on Friday, January 16, 2015, opens Friday, January 23, 2015, and runs through Sunday, March 1, 2015. Press night for X’s and O’s (A Football Love Story) will be held on Friday, January 23, 2015.

"KJ Sanchez is a fierce theatre-maker and documentarian who came to us with an idea to explore head trauma in football,” remarks Taccone. “I’m a big sports fan and thought this was the right story to tell at this time. The play has the great advantage of being developed and nurtured at The Ground Floor — our incubator for new work. We hope to fuse a documentary style with some theatrical fireworks to create a living, breathing, three-dimensional event that will reveal something about the heart of American society and the heart of American entertainment.”

“I’m a lifelong football fan and I wanted to explore what’s going on in American football today,” adds Sanchez. “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 theatregoers.”

Mercein, the daughter of Chuck Mercein, a Super Bowl–winning former professional player, adds, “I grew up in a household where football was everything, and I see a lot of parallels between live theatre and live sports. I think we are experiencing a pivotal moment in football and I’m curious as to how the game might change. We hope this play will provide new perspectives on the game: for the people who play it, the people who love it, and those who don’t consider themselves fans. And I hope it sparks conversations about how the game is played in the future.”

(MORE)
KJ Sanchez is the founder and CEO of American Records (amrec.us), devoted to making theatre that chronicles our time. As playwright, Sanchez’s work has been produced at Asolo Repertory Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Two River Theater Company, Center Stage in Baltimore, Round House Theatre, Cornerstone Theater Company, Chicago’s Yo Solo Festival, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Hopkins Center for the Arts, and HERE Arts Center, and off Broadway at Urban Stages Theater. Her directing credits include the Studio Theatre, Cincinnati Playhouse, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Round House Theatre, Two River Theater Company, and Actors Theatre of Louisville. Sanchez 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 theatres across the country 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 (A Football Love Story). The award honors the memory of Rella Lossy, a longtime champion of theatre and playwrights, and is given annually by the San Francisco Foundation to support the production of a new play by an emerging Bay Area writer.

During Taccone’s tenure as artistic director of Berkeley Rep, the Tony Award–winning nonprofit has earned a reputation as an international leader in innovative theatre. In those 18 years, Berkeley Rep has presented more than 70 world, American, and West Coast premieres and sent 23 shows to New York, two to London, and one to Hong Kong. Taccone has staged more than 35 plays in Berkeley, including new work from Culture Clash, Rinde Eckert, David Edgar, Danny Hoch, Geoff Hoyle, Quincy Long, Itamar Moses, and Lemony Snicket. He directed shows that transferred to London, Continental Divide and Tiny Kushner, and two that landed on Broadway as well: Bridge & Tunnel and Wishful Drinking. Prior to working at Berkeley Rep, Taccone served as artistic director of Eureka Theatre, which produced the American premieres of plays by Dario Fo, Caryl Churchill, and David Edgar before focusing on a new generation of American writers. While at the Eureka, Taccone commissioned Tony Kushner’s legendary Angels in America and co-directed its world premiere. He has collaborated with Kushner on eight plays at Berkeley Rep, including last season’s The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures. Taccone’s regional credits include Actors Theatre of Louisville, Arena Stage, Center Theatre Group, the Eureka Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, the Huntington Theatre Company, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Public Theater, and Seattle Repertory Theatre. As a playwright, he debuted Ghost Light, Rita Moreno: Life Without Makeup, and Game On, written with Dan Hoyle. In 2012, Taccone received the Margo Jones Award for “demonstrating a significant impact, understanding, and affirmation of playwriting, with a commitment to the living theatre.”

X’s and O’s (A Football Love Story) features an ensemble of accomplished actors — many of whom make their Berkeley Rep debut with this production:

- **Bill Geisslinger** (Frank, Rocky, Tough Guy & Chorus) previously appeared at Berkeley Rep in Ghost Light, Continental Divide: Mothers Against/Daughters of the Revolution, Dinner with Friends, and The House of Blue Leaves. As an acting company member at Oregon Shakespeare Festival for 25 years he 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. Other credits include the world premiere of Continental Divide by David Edgar (OSF, Berkeley Rep, La Jolla Playhouse, Birmingham Rep, and the Barbican).
• **Dwight Hicks** (George Coleman, Ramon & Chorus) is making his Berkeley Rep debut. He 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. Hicks is now creating a successful career in the entertainment business. 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 & Chorus) is making his Berkeley Rep debut. On Broadway he understudied and debuted playing Magic/Willy/Henry 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 Renegade 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 & Chorus) is making his Berkeley Rep debut. A San Francisco native, he was last seen playing Muhammad Ali in Will Power’s *Fetch Clay, Make Man* at Marin Theatre Company. He was also 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 & Chorus) is thrilled to make her Berkeley Rep debut as both an actor in and a co-collaborator of *X’s and O’s*. Writing credits include her solo shows *pretty, Waiting*, and her current piece in development *Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge*. Her theatre acting credits include *Keen Company, HERE Arts Center, New Georges, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Pioneer Theatre Company, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Shakespeare Festival St. Louis, Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, Florida Studio Theatre, White Heron Theatre Company, Connecticut Free Shakespeare, and the Fulton Opera House*. Mercein's TV/film credits include *30 Rock, Blue Bloods, Unforgettable, Law & Order, The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer, and The Prospects*. Mercein teaches at UC Santa Barbara in the theatre/dance department.

• **Marilee Talkington** (Caroline, Team Physician, Laura & Chorus) is making her Berkeley Rep debut. Off Broadway she 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. Most recently, she played Catherine in the Bay Area premiere of *Rapture, Blister, Burn* at the Aurora Theatre Company. 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 (A Football Love Story)* 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**.

The 2014-15 season is supported by BART and Wells Fargo, who have generously renewed their commitment as Berkeley Rep’s official season sponsors. Berkeley Rep is also proud to have KPIX-TV (Channel 5) as a first-year season sponsor. *X’s and O’s (A Football Love Story)* is made possible thanks to the generous support of season sponsors Jack and Betty Schafer and the Strauch Kulhanjian Family, lead sponsors Mary and Nicholas Graves, Stewart and Rachelle Owen, and Steve Silberstein, as well as the Mosse Artistic Development Fund and the San Francisco Foundation’s Rella Lossy Playwright Award.
ABOUT BERKELEY REP
Berkeley Repertory Theatre has grown from a storefront stage to an international leader in innovative theatre. Known for its core values of imagination and excellence, as well as its educated and adventurous audience, the nonprofit has provided a welcoming home for emerging and established artists since 1968. In four decades, four million people have enjoyed more than 300 shows at Berkeley Rep. These shows have gone on to win five Tony Awards, seven Obie Awards, nine Drama Desk Awards, one Grammy Award, and many other honors. In recognition of its place on the national stage, Berkeley Rep received the Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre in 1997. Its bustling facilities – the 600-seat Roda Theatre, the 400-seat Thrust Stage, the Berkeley Rep School of Theatre, the Osher Studio, and a spacious new campus in West Berkeley – are helping revitalize a renowned city. For more information visit: berkeleyrep.org.

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FACT SHEET

X’S AND O’S (A FOOTBALL LOVE STORY)

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).

WHAT: Are you ready for some football? American identity and our love of the game meet head-on in this world premiere commissioned by Berkeley Rep and directed by Michael Leibert Artistic Director Tony Taccone.

WHERE: Berkeley Repertory Theatre
        Thrust Stage, 2025 Addison Street @ Shattuck, Berkeley, CA 94704

WHEN: 51 PERFORMANCES: Friday, January 16–Sunday, March 1, 2015
        • Tuesdays and Fridays @ 8:00 PM; No performance on Tuesday 2/24
        • Wednesdays @ 7:00 PM
        • Thursdays @ 8:00 PM; 2:00 & 8:00 PM on 1/29 & 2/26
        • Saturdays @ 2:00 PM and 8:00 PM; 8:00 PM only on 1/17 & 1/31
        • Sundays @ 2:00 PM and 7:00 PM; 7:00 PM only on 1/18

Special Events:

Low-cost previews: Friday 1/16, Saturday 1/17, Tuesday 1/20, and Thursday 1/22 @ 8:00 PM; Sunday 1/18 and Wednesday 1/21 @ 7:00 PM

Opening Night: Friday 1/23 @ 8:00 PM; includes a pre-show dinner for donors sponsored by Autumn Press, C.G. Di Arie Vineyard and Winery, and Hugh Groman Catering.

Teen Night: Friday 1/16 @ 6:30 PM

FREE docent events: Before Tuesday and Thursday evening performances and discussions after all matinees

Post-play discussions: Thursday 2/5, Tuesday 2/10, and Friday 2/20 following the performance

Last Call: Friday 1/30 following the performance

Open Captioned Performance: Sunday 3/1 @ 2:00 PM

HOW MUCH: Premium: $49–79 · Section A: $39–67 · Section B: $29–55
        Half-price tickets available for anyone under 30 years of age; $10 discount for students and seniors one hour before curtain; groups of 10 or more, contact (510) 647-2918 or groups@berkeleyrep.org

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