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WOOLLY MAMMOTH THEATRE COMPANY ANNOUNCES FIRST RECIPIENTS OF THE WEISSBERG COMMISSIONS

The four recipients develop new theatrical works funded by the
Weissberg Foundation

(Washington, D.C.) **Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company** is proud to announce the first recipients of the Weissberg Commissions. The commissioned artists are **Vivian J. O. Barnes, Gethsemane Herron, Jenn Kidwell, and Justin Weaks**. Read more about the program [here](#) and more information about each artist is listed below.

The Weissberg Commissions are opportunities for Woolly to support artists born, raised, or based in Washington D.C. and surrounding areas and/or writing about topics that resonate with the DMV. Woolly chose the four recipients for their artistic innovation and the way they center racial justice in their works. Woolly will provide the developmental support to bring these innovative new works into the world.

The artists' commissioned projects include:

- A finishing commission for Vivian J.O. Barnes's *The Sensational Sea Mink-ettes*. Barnes is originally from Northern Virginia, and her work will be new to Woolly.
- A finishing commission for Gethsemane Herron's *Kin*. Herron is a poet/playwright from Washington, D.C. and her work will be new to Woolly.
- A full commission for a devised work by Jenn Kidwell called *the blackening*. This commission allows her and a team of devisers to create an entirely new work. Kidwell is originally from Maryland, and *Underground Railroad Game*, a work she co-wrote and co-created, was presented at Woolly in 2018.
- A commission for Justin Weaks' memoir play *A Fine Madness*. Weaks was based out of D.C. for several years and continues to work regularly in the DMV. He is an actor and member of Woolly Mammoth's Company of Artists (most recently seen in *There's Always the Hudson*) who is expanding into playwriting with this work.

"We are overjoyed to launch the Weissberg Commission program with these groundbreaking artists," says Woolly Mammoth's Director of New Work, **Sonia**

Fernandez. “Each represents a depth and breadth of artistry that is inspiring — from the intimate to the absurd, including devised work, movement-based memoir, and plays that break the traditional form. This first cohort is creating meaningful work that explores the intersections of race, gender, violence, power, community, and intimacy. I can’t wait to see their artistry and research promote robust conversation.”

“Vivian, Gethsemane, Jennifer, and Justin are all absolutely brilliant artists, and showcase the tremendous talent associated with our region of the country,” says **Maria Manuela Goyanes**, Artistic Director. “Marvin Weissberg had a monumental impact on Woolly and the theatre community in the DMV, and we are thrilled to honor him with this commissioning program. I can't wait to see how this commissioning model will develop and seed new work at Woolly for many years to come.”

In April 2022, the **Weissberg Foundation** chose Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company for a grant to honor the late Marvin Weissberg, tremendous philanthropist and theatre lover. The resulting Weissberg Commissions Project is the theatre’s first dedicated commissioning program. Commissions under this new program range from \$5,000 to \$25,000 per project and fund completely new full-length plays, the testing of new ideas, or give artists the opportunity to finish incomplete works.

Marvin Weissberg was a mainstay in Woolly’s audiences from its beginnings at Church Street to the theatre’s current home on D Street in Penn Quarter. Most recently, the Foundation’s Fund for Diversity in Theater helped Woolly Mammoth build a strong equity and inclusion lens to prepare for the search for a new artistic director in 2018 and a new managing director in 2019.

ARTIST BIOS

Vivian J. O. Barnes (Finishing Commission) is a writer from Virginia. Her short plays have been produced at Ensemble Studio Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and Steppenwolf Theatre. She has developed plays at Geffen Playhouse, The Playwrights Center, Manhattan Theatre Club, Second Stage Theater, Clubbed Thumb, Montana Repertory Theatre, and Ojai Playwrights Conference. In the TV world, she’s been staffed on shows at Amazon, Peacock, and Apple TV. She lives in Los Angeles.

Gethsemane Herron-(Finishing Commission) is a playwright from Washington, D.C. She has developed work with JAG Productions, The Hearth, The Fire This Time Festival, The Liberation Theater Company, Roundabout Theatre Company, The Playwright’s Center, Ars Nova, and WP Theater. She is a Resident Artist with Ars Nova’s Play Group, a 2020- 2022 member of the WP Lab, a 2021-2022 Jerome Fellow, and a 2022-2023 Many Voices Fellow at the Playwright’s Center. Additional residencies from VONA and the Millay Colony. 2022 Winner for the Helen Merrill Award. Winner of the Columbia@Roundabout Reading Series. Winner of the 45th Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Short Play Festival. Finalist for the Van Lier New Voices Fellowship at the Lark and the Founders Award at New York Stage and Film. MFA: Columbia University. Gethsemane splits her time between New York City and Minneapolis. Proud member of the Dramatist’s Guild. She’s enamored with Sailor Moon & other magical girl warriors. She writes for survivors.

Jenn Kidwell's (Full Commission) poignant, performer-driven theater work questions our way of being with sharp intelligence and wry humor. Invested in challenging social mores, she says that her work is "concerned with discomfort and/or confusion around normative practices and systems." With Scott Sheppard, Kidwell wrote and performed "Underground Railroad Game," lauded by The Philadelphia Inquirer as a "brilliant theatrical commentary on contemporary race relations." Most recently she co-wrote/performed *Those With 2 Clocks* which premiered at The Wilma Theater in 2022. As a devising performer she's most recently in *Ocean Filibuster* (PearlDamour), *Fat Ham* (The Wilma Theater), *Body on a Table* (Michelle Ellsworth), *Syllabus for Black Love* (Jaamil Olawole Kosoko), Bessie Award-winning *Home* (Geoff Sobelle), *Adrienne Truscott's Still Asking for It* (Joe's Pub). Published in movement research *Performance Journal #45* and *hyperallergic.com*. 2013 TCG/Fox Resident Actor Fellowship, 2015 Leeway Foundation Art & Change Grant, 2016 Pew Fellow, 2017 Independence Fellow, 2020 Ruthie Award & Hodder Fund Grant, 2023 FCA Grantee.

Justin Weaks (Commission) has appeared in *Describe the Night*, *BLKS*, and *Gloria* [2019 Helen Hayes nomination for Outstanding Supporting Actor, Outstanding Ensemble] at Woolly Mammoth. Other D.C. area credits include: *Long Way Down*, *The Watsons Go To Birmingham 1963*, *Darius & Twig and Bud*, *Not Buddy* (The Kennedy Center); *Gem of the Ocean* (Round House Theatre); *Curve of Departure* (Studio Theatre); *Word Becomes Flesh* [Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor, Outstanding Ensemble], *Still Life With Rocket* and *Dontrell*, *Who Kissed the Sea* (Theater Alliance); *Charm* (Mosaic Theater Co.); *The Christians* [Helen Hayes nomination] (Theater J); *Lobby Hero* (1st Stage). Additional regional and New York appearances include New York Theatre Workshop, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Shakespeare & Company, Barter Theatre, and *Hamlet Isn't Dead*. Education/Training: Greensboro College (B.A. in Theatre).

ABOUT WOOLLY

The Tony Award®-winning Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company creates badass theatre that highlights the stunning, challenging, and tremendous complexity of our world. For over 40 years, Woolly has maintained a high standard of artistic rigor while simultaneously daring to take risks, innovate, and push beyond perceived boundaries. One of the few remaining theatres in the country to maintain a company of artists, Woolly serves an essential research and development role within the American theatre. Plays premiered here have gone on to productions at hundreds of theatres all over the world and have had lasting impacts on the field. Currently co-led by Artistic Director Maria Manuela Goyanes and Interim Managing Director Ted DeLong, Woolly is located in Washington, DC, equidistant from the Capitol and the White House. This unique location influences Woolly's investment in actively working towards an equitable, participatory, and creative democracy.

Woolly Mammoth stands upon occupied, unceded territory: the ancestral homeland of the Nacotchtank whose descendants belong to the Piscataway peoples. Furthermore, the foundation of this city, and most of the original buildings in Washington, DC, were funded by the sale of enslaved people of African descent and built by their hands.

ABOUT THE WEISSBERG FOUNDATION

The Weissberg Foundation envisions a world that recognizes inequities and actively seeks to dismantle structural racism by continuously building access, opportunity, and power so that all can thrive. Through funding, amplification, capacity building, and collaboration, we advance organizations and efforts building the power of those most negatively impacted by

racism.

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Headshots available upon request