

# WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE

MARK LAMOS, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR | MICHAEL BARKER, MANAGING DIRECTOR

## NEWS RELEASE

**Contact:** Patricia Blaufuss, Public Relations Manager  
(203) 227-5137 x197 | (203) 571-1287 | pblaufuss@westportplayhouse.org

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### **Westport Country Playhouse Offers Free-of-Charge Events Exploring Pop/Rock Musical “Next to Normal”**

**Programs with composer and other guest speakers are scheduled to “Dig Deeper” and enhance community insight on the Tony Award®-winner**

Westport Country Playhouse will present “Next to Normal: Dig Deeper,” a series of special events, free-of-charge and open to the community, surrounding the first production of its 2022 season, the pop/rock musical, “Next to Normal,” playing April 6 - 24. The events, funded by a CT Humanities grant, will enhance the community’s insight on the production and its themes.

No performance ticket is necessary to attend the programs. Guests are invited to arrive at the Playhouse approximately two hours and 30 minutes after curtain time; events will begin immediately after the performance. All attendees will be required to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination and wear a mask while indoors at the Playhouse. For updates on Covid-19 health and safety protocols at the Playhouse, visit <https://www.westportplayhouse.org/visit/covid19safety/>

“Next to Normal” tells how a family copes with the mother’s bipolar issues. The musical takes audiences into the minds and hearts of each family member, presenting their story with love, compassion, and spirit.

“With a pop/rock musical that pushes boundaries in structure and story, we want to invite the audience and our community into a dialogue as well as provide resources,” said Liam Lonagan, Playhouse assistant artistic director. “This group of guests, curated by Jenny Nelson, the Playhouse’s Roz and Bud Siegel director of education and community engagement, will help connect the show to issues of mental health, community, and song.”

Tom Kitt, composer of “Next to Normal,” will be the guest at a Sunday Symposium on Sunday, April 10, following the 3 p.m. matinee performance. Kitt will discuss the musical that received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and two Tony Awards® for Best Score and Best Orchestrations. Kitt is also the composer of “Flying Over Sunset,” which recently ran at Lincoln Center Theater. The symposium is hosted by David Kennedy, Playhouse associate artistic director.

Other programs open to the community include post-play dialogues with the audience. The first will be a conversation about the music from “Next to Normal” and its significance to the subject matter, on Thursday, April 7. The dialogue will be hosted by Liam Lonagan, assistant artistic director, and Jenny Nelson, the Playhouse’s Roz and Bud Siegel director of education and community engagement. Lonagan founded Egg & Spoon Theatre Collective in 2017. He received his BFA from Syracuse

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25 POWERS COURT WESTPORT, CONNECTICUT 06880

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE T (203) 227-5137 F 203.221.7482 | BOX OFFICE T (203) 227-4177 F (203) 454-3238

[westportplayhouse.org](http://westportplayhouse.org)

University, where he was the managing director of Black Box Players. Nelson is associate artistic director of Collective Consciousness, a social justice theater company in New Haven. She received a master's degree in theater from the University of Arizona, and a second master's degree in education from Fairfield University.

Pastoral counseling services and spiritual wellbeing will be discussed with Reverend Dr. Bernard R. Wilson, Senior Minister of Norfield Congregational Church, Weston, on Tuesday, April 12. Dr. Wilson is a retired Navy chaplain who received numerous awards, medals, and citations for his stellar military career of 22 years. Dr. Wilson served as an adjunct preaching professor at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and at Howard University School of Divinity for Continuing Education. He serves on the board of directors of the David and Dovetta Wilson Scholarship Fund (DDWSF) with his eight brothers and sisters ([www.WilsonFund.org](http://www.WilsonFund.org)).

A perspective on the musical's mental health themes will be presented by Jeffrey Borenstein, M.D., president and CEO of the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation, the largest private funder of mental health research grants, on Tuesday, April 19. Dr. Borenstein will discuss how to live with and help folks who are coping with mental illness, and share new scientific research to improve their lives. Dr. Borenstein developed and hosts the Emmy-nominated public television series "Healthy Minds," and also serves as editor-in-chief of "Psychiatric News," the newspaper of the American Psychiatric Association.

Resources for those community members living with mental illness will be explored by Linda Autore, president and CEO of Laurel House, Stamford, on Friday, April 22. Under her leadership, two innovative programs, Thinking Well (Cognitive Remediation) and [www.rtor.org](http://www.rtor.org), a gateway to expert mental health services, were developed and implemented to fill voids in community mental health services. Autore is a member of the Silver Hill Hospital board of directors, and the executive committee of the coordinating council of Opening Doors Fairfield County.

In addition to the post-show events, a pre-show, guided meditation group workshop will be led by Thema Haida, co-founder of One Village Healing (OVH), New Haven, on Saturday, April 16, from 2 to 2:45 p.m., prior to the 3 p.m. performance. The meditation will not only prepare the audience for the show's subject matter, but will also connect the story to the community, promoting healthy mindfulness in participants' own lives. Haida is a certified Usui/Holy Fire Reiki master teacher, a Yoga Alliance registered yoga instructor, and a certified advanced metaphysical healing practitioner. Space is limited; RSVP at <https://bit.ly/WCPmeditationN2N>.

Corporate Production Partner for "Next to Normal" is Bank of America, a longstanding contributor to the Playhouse. Bill Tommins, president, Bank of America Southern Connecticut, said, "Bank of America values the Playhouse's integral role in our local arts landscape. Over the past two years, our local arts and culture community has been challenged unlike ever before, and yet the value of experience through theater has never been more apparent. We are excited and honored to support 'Next to Normal' and look forward to our continued partnership with the Playhouse as they welcome back our community."

Production Sponsor is Czekaj Artistic Productions. Additional support is from cthumanities. 2022 Season Media Sponsors are Moffly Media and WSHU Public Radio.

Single tickets for "Next to Normal" start at \$35 during preview performances (April 6 - 8), and beginning April 9 Opening Night, tickets start at \$50 and are subject to change based upon availability. Buy early for best prices. For information on special offers, including discounts for students, senior citizens, educators, military and first responders, Indigenous peoples, professional playwrights, and groups, as well as options for pay-what-you-will and Westport Library pass, visit [www.westportplayhouse.org/visit/box-office/](http://www.westportplayhouse.org/visit/box-office/).

All play titles, artists, dates, and times are subject to change.

For more information and to buy tickets, visit [www.westportplayhouse.org](http://www.westportplayhouse.org), or call the box office at (203) 227-4177, toll-free at 1-888-927-7529, or visit Westport Country Playhouse, 25 Powers Court, off Route

1, Westport. Stay connected to the Playhouse on Facebook (Westport Country Playhouse), follow on Twitter (@WCPlayhouse), and on YouTube (WestportPlayhouse).

### **ABOUT WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE**

The mission of Westport Country Playhouse is to enrich, enlighten, and engage the community through the power of professionally produced theater of the highest caliber and the welcoming experience of the Playhouse campus. The not-for-profit Playhouse provides this experience in multiple ways by offering live theater experiences of the highest quality, under the artistic direction of Mark Lamos; educational and community engagement events to further explore the work on stage; the New Works Initiative, a program dedicated to the discovery, development, and production of new live theatrical works; special performances and programs for students and teachers with extensive curriculum support material; Script in Hand play readings to deepen relationships with audiences and artists; the renowned Woodward Internship Program during the summer months for aspiring theater professionals; Family Festivities presentations to delight young and old alike and to promote reading through live theater; and the beautiful and historic Playhouse campus open for enjoyment and community events year-round. Charity Navigator has recently awarded its top 4-star charity rating to the Playhouse in recognition of its strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency.

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