



## Just doing his duty

Meredith's integration of Ole Miss is told from view of his white bodyguard

By Anne Murphy Mar 12, 2024 Updated Mar 12, 2024



There are several reasons playwright Harrison David Rivers wanted to tell the story of Henry Gallagher and James Meredith. Gallagher was the white Army second lieutenant from Minneapolis who led the security detail for Meredith at the University of Mississippi in 1962. Meredith was the first Black student admitted to previously all-white Ole Miss, and his enrollment there set off a riot of protests.

Rivers' play, *A Unique Assignment*, will receive its world premiere from March 16 through April 7 at History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St. The playwright is nationally known for his work in theater. After graduating with an MFA in playwrighting from Columbia University in 2009, he received fellowships from the New York Theatre Workshop and the New Dramatists in Manhattan. When he was awarded a Jerome Many Voices Fellowship at Minneapolis' Playwrights' Center in 2014, he moved to the Twin Cities and now lives in the Summit-University neighborhood of Saint Paul.

Among Rivers' nearly 20 plays are *To Let Go and Fall*, performed in 2019 at Theater Latté Da; *Weathering* and *the bandaged place*, performed in 2022 at Penumbra Theatre and New York City's Roundabout Theatre, respectively; and *The Salvagers*, which opened in 2023 at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven.

### Rivers' third play for History Theatre

*A Unique Assignment* is the third play Rivers has written for History Theatre. The first was *A Crack in the Sky*, a play about immigration co-written with Ahmed Ismail Yusuf and produced in 2018. The second was *Parks*, about the early career of Black photojournalist Gordon Parks, which premiered in 2022.

"I've had this lovely relationship with History Theatre," Rivers said. "There's a real trust there, a real friendship." Before longtime History Theatre artistic director Ron Peluso retired in 2022, "he mentioned Gallagher's story," Rivers recalled. "He said, 'I think there's a play there.' So I read Gallagher's memoir and said, 'sign me up.'"

### Based on Gallagher's memoir

That memoir is titled *James Meredith and the Old Miss Riot: A Soldier's Story*. "Meredith actually wrote a letter to Gallagher right before he left campus in which he described Gallagher's assignment as unique," Rivers said.

*A Unique Assignment* tells the story of the two men in their own words. The drama stars James A. Williams as Meredith, Kevin Fanshaw as Gallagher at 23 years of age and Pearce Bunting as an older Gallagher reflecting on the events of 1962.

"The thing that I think is most interesting," Rivers said, "is that when we hear civil rights stories, they're often told from the Black perspective, which is wonderful. But we rarely hear about the roles other people played in those sorts of moments and movements. This story is remarkable because Henry Gallagher didn't necessarily know he was a part of something bigger while it was happening. That's something we can all take with us—this idea that every day we are a part of history and that history might be way bigger than us or what we thought it would be. It might end up being a thing that our grandchildren or their grandchildren read about."

Rivers described the play as "a really wonderful, sometimes hilarious and stressful tale of trying to keep this very special man safe and alive." But what especially intrigued him about the story is "that all involved were just doing their jobs," he said. "Who knows, tomorrow might be a day when if you do a good job you have an impact. It could be at the grocery. You grab a can for someone who can't reach it and then they can feed their family. It's maybe really silly, but you just don't know.

"I was really inspired by the fact that Gallagher just did a really good job at his job," he said. "And he did it with integrity and with as much grace as he could muster. There's something to us living our lives with purpose, with kindness and with intention."

Rivers believes Meredith was doing the same thing at Ole Miss. "He was in the position of being the only student on a campus of folks who didn't want him there," he said. "I think his priorities were to keep his head up, keep moving forward. He did that with great determination. Those are qualities all of us can work on and try to emulate. I think there's something to be learned from that kind of integrity, that kind of 'I'm just going to do this really well every day.'"

Over the past 10 years, Rivers has come to view the Twin Cities as a remarkable place for theater. "People think of New York City as the bastion of theater, the bastion of the arts, but I think there's just as much of that here. I also feel the Twin Cities has really committed to new work and developing new stories, and that feels important. Coming out of COVID, it was sometimes hard to see the good in every day and in each other. That's something new work is all about. A new play is hopeful, and that's to be applauded."

### Gallagher will take part in post-show discussion

*A Unique Assignment* will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, at 10 a.m. on March 21 and 28, at 2 p.m. Sundays, and at 2 p.m. on March 30 and April 6. Gallagher, who now lives on the East Coast, will take part in a panel discussion following the shows on March 16 and 17. Meredith still lives in Mississippi, but his health has prevented him from traveling.

Tickets to the play are \$25-\$64 with discounts for seniors, students and those under age 30. For reservations, visit [historytheatre.com](http://historytheatre.com).



Playwright Harrison David Rivers attends one of the early rehearsals of *A Unique Assignment*. His new drama about James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962 and the white Army lieutenant from Minneapolis who led his security detail will open on March 16 at the History Theatre in downtown Saint Paul. Photo by Brad Stauffer

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