

# **SALVATION ROAD**

**A new play by D.W. Gregory**

**Copyright 2010, 2012, 2016**

**By D.W. Gregory**

**All rights reserved**

**This script is protected by U.S.**

**And international copyright laws.**

**It cannot be copied, distributed or produced**

**Without the express written permission**

**Of the author.**

## **CONTACT:**

Elaine Devlin,  
Elaine Devlin Literary Agency  
411 Lafayette Street - 6th floor  
New York, NY 10003  
212-842-9030  
edevlinlit@aol.com

**"A moving and well-crafted play ... stirs emotions and engenders thought that will occupy audiences long after the stage is bare."**

*-- Arts Louisville*

**Salvation Road "provides a satisfying and grounded dissection of youth, religiosity, family, and the psychology of cults."**

*-- Washington City Paper*

**"The play forces us to consider our own thoughts on the bonds of family, the meaning of sacrifice, and the seeming irrationality of faith ... The overall effect of Salvation Road is not unlike that of a cultish devotion: simultaneously satisfying and terrifying."**

*-- Washington City Paper*

*Salvation Road* is the winner of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education's Playwrights in Our Schools award. It was initially produced, in one-act form, at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, under the direction of Aaron Oster. The full-length version was subsequently developed by New Plays for Young Audiences at New York University's Steinhardt School and produced at NYU in October 2012, directed by David Montgomery. *Salvation Road* was also the national winner of Walden Theatre's Slant Culture Competition and was produced at Walden Theatre in November 2012, directed by Alec Volz. It was subsequently produced at Seton Hill University in April 2013, directed by Kellee VanAken; at the Capital Fringe Festival in Washington, D.C., in July 2015, directed by Marie Byrd Sproul; at Texas Lutheran University, in March 2016, directed by David Legore, and at the Harrison School for the Arts in Lakeland, Fla., in February 2017, directed by Angela Harrel.

All productions of this play must credit NYU and Walden Theatre in any program materials, as follows:

*Salvation Road* was developed by New Plays for Young Audiences at New York University's Steinhardt School under the direction of David Montgomery and opened there Oct. 26, 2012. It was subsequently produced by Walden Theatre of Louisville, Ky., as part of its Slant Culture Series, and opened Nov. 8, 2012, under the direction of Alec Volz.

THE STORY: When Cliff's hip older sister falls in with members of a fundamentalist church, she suddenly cuts off the whole family as "toxic." A year later, an unexpected sighting of Denise propels Cliff and his best friend into the heart of a deepening mystery. Is she a victim or an accomplice in her own disappearance? And where exactly do you draw the line between faith and fanaticism?

PRINCIPALS:

Cliff Kozak, 17, and earlier, in memory  
 Jill, his sister, 15, and earlier, in memory  
 Denise, their sister, 19 and earlier, in memory  
 Brian Duffy, Cliff's friend, 18  
 Elijah, early to mid 20s, a current member of the Disciples  
 Sister Jean, a campus chaplain  
 Rebecca, a current member of the Disciples  
 Simi, a girl, 20, who left the Disciples

Ensemble: four to eight other actors who double into roles as concertgoers, students, customers, and partiers, including the following:

Father's voice  
 Karl (or Karla), an impatient clerk at McDonalds  
 Melanie, a flirtatious clerk at McDonald's  
 Rachel, a member of the Disciples  
 Sarah, a member of the Disciples  
 Patti, a member of Denise's band  
 Jacob, a member of the Disciples  
 Tank, a member of Tau Kappa Epsilon

Slashes (// or ///) indicate overlapping lines.  
 The role of Karl can be played a female; Jacob's role also can be adapted for a female.

THE TIME: Autumn, the present day.

THE PLACE: Suburban Philadelphia and a university town in central New Jersey

## NOTES ON PRODUCTION:

Salvation Road is intentionally minimalistic in style, more evocative than literal, allowing for a fluid movement from location to location with the use of a few furnishings and only those props essential to establish the scenes or serve the action. In such a staging, set changes are to be effected by the actors, whose movements should be incorporated into the ongoing action. At no point should the stage go dark for a scene change.

## SILENT SCENES and the ENSEMBLE:

The silent scenes are projections of imagination and memory and to that extent, can be stylized and, ideally, underscored with music. The ensemble can serve to create a sense of place in these scenes as well as in scenes of public activity, such as the McDonald's, the library, the frat house party. Other opportunities may present themselves, and the director and cast should feel free to explore those possibilities. However, care should be taken not to overdo the use of this device. Further, there is no obligation to use every member of the ensemble in every group scene. But however they are staged, the ensemble scenes should be crisp and active, simple without being cartoonish. It is critical that the silent scenes be silent--no ad libbed dialogue--and that there be some distinction made between past and present, memory and imagination. That distinction can be as simple as a lighting or sound effect, or as complex as a specific color scheme reflected in lighting or costumes. This can be particularly effective towards the end of the play, when the frat party merges into the party Cliff imagines Denise attending.

MUSIC: The script suggests certain songs for key moments in the play; other choices are possible. It is up to the producing organization to obtain the performance rights to any song used in the production. Should the producer use an original song--which would be a terrific addition to the play--then strike Denise's line "My dad taught us this one" and use

## DENISE

Here's something I worked out on the weekend .... Dad? This is for you--:

AT RISE:

We hear an electric guitar riff--the fading strains of an original composition, as lights rise on Denise, performing before a crowd with two other musicians. Denise is flush with the pleasure of a song well received as the crowd hoots and applauds.

DENISE (CONT'D)

Thank you--thanks! Okay. All right. Yeah! Once again--I'm Denise Kozak, we're Lost Horizon--and that was uh, that's called 'You Can Run, But You Can't Hide.' (wryly) Dedicated to my kid brother, Cliff--who, I guess, had better things to do tonight? Than support Guatemalan earthquake relief? (she scans the audience, hoping to see him) But hey--you are all here--which is awesome!--and I am just so grateful to everybody who stepped up and came out tonight? Because--it's like--you know fate? You don't choose your fate. It chooses you. And if you're lucky in this life--and I think we are all pretty lucky, really--well, you have an obligation, you know? To do what you can for the ill-fated of this world.

Applause from crowd and bandmates.

DENISE (CONT'D)

So thanks everyone once again--and okay, uh Patti?

Patti steps forward.

PATTI

Okay, so we have two more bands coming up---the Sledgehammers from Upper Dublin High (applause from audience). All right!

DENISE

And and Dwindling Hopes from--(Patti, in a soft voice, correcting her)--sorry? Dwindling ...

PATTI

Homes.

DENISE

Homes. Dwindling Homes from Jenkintown. Okay! Time for one last song.

PATTI

And because you've been so nice to us -- we'll be nice to you. So--here's a ballad?

DENISE

(after applause)

That's what I thought!

Denise trades her electric guitar for an acoustic guitar. She begins to strum a traditional ballad.

DENISE (CONT'D)

My dad taught us this one. So Dad? This is for you--:

She strums and together, she and Patti sing in clear, confident voices, a traditional ballad about unreasoned love. Such as:

DENISE AND PATTI

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?  
Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.  
Remember me to one who lives there.  
She once was a true love of mine.

Tell her to make me a cambric shirt.  
Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.  
Without a seam or needlework.  
Then she'll be a true love of mine ...

As they sing, lights fade out on Denise and Patti and rise on Cliff alone, a year later, addressing the audience.

CLIFF

My sister Denise. Neechie to us. She always had an opinion about everything--but she was right about one thing: There really are times when you have to step up. Even if you think you can't. Like in the movies? Where the hero is separated from his regiment? And he's on this, like, super secret rescue mission to save the girl spy--only he's lost in the dark and he doesn't know what to do. And then suddenly--lightning flashes across the pitch dark sky--and he sees this German unit in the fields--and suddenly he realizes--they're going after the girl! And he has to stop them. So he takes his rifle, and picks them off one by one! From the rear--like in a turkey shoot. (noise like a rifle) Ke-shew, ke-shew. And the lightning flashes--the thunder booms--ke-shew, ke-shew! And in the very next scene, the hero is like, running through the woods with the girl ... or getting a medal or something. Mission accomplished! (beat) That's the movies. In my life, it doesn't exactly go like that? Doesn't start in an open field. It's our rec room in Willow Grove. On a Sunday afternoon in late October--the year after Neechie disappeared. And there aren't any German soldiers ... just my younger sister, Jill ...

Enter JILL

JILL

(eager)

Cliff! Come on! We're ready to look at it.

CLIFF

Who is like, too young to drive--

JILL

Cliff!

CLIFF

But too old to ignore.

Enter DUFFY.

DUFFY

Kozak! You are not gonna believe this.

CLIFF

Brian Duffy. My best friend since, like, third grade ...

A remote control in his hand, Duffy attempts to get a DVD to load.

CLIFF (CONT'D)

A total techno freak.

DUFFY

I uploaded this video from my brother's cell phone? So it's a little ... I dunno... grainy?

CLIFF

But not a talented techno freak.

DUFFY

But man, you really gotta see this!

CLIFF

Oh and the girl spy? No spy. It's Neechie. And until this moment--we have no idea where she's been.

DUFFY

Dude?

JILL

Clifford! Brian is talking to you!

CLIFF

(to audience) Like I need her to tell me that? But hey.  
(casually joining the scene) My philosophy is: if it doesn't kill me. I don't care. (to Jill) So, yeah. He uploaded it from his cell phone. And?

DUFFY  
Scott's phone, actually. But man---you really gotta see it.

A beat as they watch a video, which may be unseen by the audience. Duffy proudly waits for their reaction.

JILL  
What are we looking at?

DUFFY  
On the right.

Jill looks again, doesn't comprehend.

DUFFY (CONT'D)  
In the blue.

JILL  
Neechie?

CLIFF  
No way.

DUFFY  
I was like two feet from her, man.

As they reconsider the image,

DUFFY (CONT'D)  
She hasn't changed *that much* since last fall.

JILL  
What's that in her hand?

DUFFY  
Flowers. (off Jill) They were selling them. (off Cliff) For world hunger?

CLIFF  
World hunger. (cynical) Of course.

DUFFY  
Like I was gonna give 'em five bucks for a carnation? Anyway-- we go in and order--

JILL  
Wait--you didn't take this on campus?

DUFFY  
Strip mall on Route 1. So we sit down and Scott goes: Hey isn't that Kozak's sister? And I go--



JILL  
Did you talk to her?

DUFFY  
Not really. That kid (indicating) did most of the talking.

JILL studies the video.

JILL  
It's Elijah.

DUFFY  
Elijah?

JILL  
From Neechie's church.

CLIFF  
The guy who ran that house in Amherst.

JILL  
The one who said Daddy was toxic.

DUFFY  
That's the // dude?

JILL  
(on //)  
Said our whole family was *toxic!*

CLIFF  
Dad was pretty volcanic. You gotta admit.

JILL  
He just wanted to talk to her!

CLIFF  
Correction. He wanted to yell at her?

JILL  
So she would come home.

CLIFF  
And you see how well that worked out.

JILL  
It's not his fault, Cliff!

DUFFY  
Hey. Guys.

He turns off the video as they break.

DUFFY (CONT'D)

I thought you'd be interested in this.

CLIFF

Sorry, man.

JILL

Sorry, Brian.

Brian turns on the video again.

DUFFY

Anyway. (warming into it) There I am. About to bite down on a Big Mac, when Scott goes, 'Hey isn't that Kozak's sister?' And I look up--and there she is. So I say: Get some pictures; I'm gonna talk to these guys. (as the hero of his own story) And I go out ... and tell this Elijah dude, okay, I'll take a flower. (pleased with himself) You know? And while he's making change, Denise is standing there--I can sorta feel her looking at me? But when I look at her, she looks away.

JILL

Like she was embarrassed?

DUFFY

Maybe.

JILL

Why would she be embarrassed?

DUFFY

Hard to say. But she's not saying anything, so I don't either. So I just talk to him: (in the moment) so are you guys, like, here a lot? This seems like a good cause, blah blah--and he starts telling me how everybody needs an anchor in life and he didn't have one 'til he found Jesus and now he does, whatever. And just then, another guy drives up in this rusted out van, and before I can say another word--boom! Everybody piles in. And that's when she looks at me. Like, right at me--with this look of---I don't know ---'help me.'

JILL

Ohmigod.

DUFFY

Yeah.

CLIFF

(unimpressed)

Yeah.

DUFFY

I'm telling you, dude. She seriously wants outta there.

CLIFF

You don't know what she wants. You didn't even talk to her.

DUFFY

It was in her eyes, man.

CLIFF

Oh. Her eyes said what her lips couldn't?

JILL

Don't be such a dork. You weren't even there.

CLIFF

Neither were you.

DUFFY

I kinda got the feeling she was, you know. Afraid to talk?

JILL

Because of Elijah?

DUFFY

And if we went back---

JILL

When?

DUFFY

And got her alone--

JILL

'Cause I'll totally go with you--

CLIFF

Hold it! You're not planning some kind of commando raid?  
'Cause somebody tried that already.

DUFFY

I just figured: Make contact. You know? Let her know she's got help.

CLIFF

I hate to break it to you guys: She knows where we live. If she wanted a ticket home--she'd have one.

DUFFY

Might not be that simple, dude.

JILL

She might not have the money.

CLIFF

She can pick up a phone.

DUFFY

What if she can't get to a phone?

CLIFF

Who in America can't get to a phone?

DUFFY

So what are you saying, man? We just let this go?

JILL

We can't just let it go!

CLIFF

What are you gonna do? Kidnap her? Hold her hostage?

A moment.

JILL

Maybe you're right. (as she leaves) But you're still a dork.

She is gone.

DUFFY

At least think about it, okay? 'Cause if it was my sister--- I'd at least *try* to do something.

As he goes.

CLIFF

Like what am I supposed to do, man? Neechie doesn't take orders from me.

Sound of the folk song, finishing, off. Cliff listens. Denise's voice, far away: "Hey I love you guys!" Followed by the laughter of an audience.

CLIFF (CONT'D)

Denise always set her own agenda. From the very beginning.

Light shifts to an early morning at the breakfast table. Denise enters, with an electric guitar, dressed in an affected, artsy fashion that cries out "I am my own self (sort of)." She picks at the guitar, which is not plugged in, and makes notations in a notebook.

CLIFF (CONT'D)

Like, she was supposed to be a boy? Dennis. But she had other ideas.

DENISE

All children are female during the first 10 weeks of gestation. Scientific fact. So Freud had it completely backwards. Women are not incomplete men. Men are overdeveloped women.

CLIFF

(to the audience)

Not exactly a candidate for the nunnery?

Denise makes a face.

CLIFF

(to the audience)

But we're not what you call mortify-the-flesh, Opus Dei type Catholics. At least I'm not. I mean, I go to Mass. When I can't get out of it. But I don't let that religious stuff *affect* me.

DENISE

The hell you don't.

CLIFF

(joining the scene)

I no longer buy into the Sky God myth.

DENISE

You tell Mom that?

CLIFF

She's aware.

DENISE

(amused)

I bet that went over well.

CLIFF

It's a process. I tell her how I feel. She tells me I'm wrong. Next Sunday I sleep in--we see how it goes.

DENISE

Cliff. I can tell you right now how it's going to go.

CLIFF

Isn't it better for everyone if I stay home? Otherwise, I'm just a hypocrite, going to Mass. Right?

DENISE

You want my honest advice?

CLIFF

Maybe.

DENISE

The reason you're turned off by your religion? Is that it has nothing to do with the rest of your life.

CLIFF

Exactly, my point.

DENISE

Because you don't let it, Cliff. It could be so different if you just let yourself be inspired. But instead, you put up this pathetic Chinese wall. Between going to Mass ... and living your life.

She plays a riff on the guitar, which is not plugged in, then makes notations in a notebook.

CLIFF

You know that's not plugged in.

DENISE

I mean, I basically agree with you. No point going if that's how you feel.

CLIFF

How can you practice if it's not plugged in?

DENISE

'Cause if you're going to even bother to have a religion--you need to like, you know, *live it*.

CLIFF

I guess you save energy that way, if it's not plugged in.

DENISE

I'm trying to work something out.

CLIFF

What, a new form of music? Like John Cage? Only worse?

DENISE

No, funny guy. I can't plug in before 10. Dad's rules.

CLIFF

Wise man, my father.

(A beat. She regards him.)

DENISE

So. Did you talk to Brian and Scott?

CLIFF

About?

DENISE

The benefit. For the earthquake victims? (off Cliff) You guys are going, right?

CLIFF

I'm not really into global issues.

DENISE

Cliff. It's not optional. You live in the world, you are "into" global issues.

CLIFF

Please.

DENISE

We're talking about human suffering!

CLIFF

Human suffering? Is that like, when I'm up till three, studying for my chemistry exam?

DENISE

No! It's like when you're 10 years old, and you've got nothing to eat ... and your mother just died of some horrible infection because there's no drugs to treat her. That kind of suffering.

CLIFF

Way too early for this.

DENISE

That's the reality for millions of people, Cliff ... And we just make it worse by the way we live in this country.

CLIFF

And I'm supposed to fix that, exactly how? By not eating Cheerios?

DENISE

It's a start.

CLIFF

No Cheerios. Got it.

DENISE

If one person makes one small change ... another person will follow ... and another. And before you know it, a global movement is born.

CLIFF

Hey! I refuse to be part of any global movement that would have me as a member.

DENISE

You're hopeless.

CLIFF

And you're naive. If you think people are starving to death 'cause I eat Cheerios for breakfast. It's like, some big diamond cartel or some warlord in Zimbabwe. Or something. Believe me, I could like turn into a Franciscan monk overnight and eat nothing but worms and dirt for the rest of my life--and there would *still* be starving kids in Africa.

DENISE

What a convenient philosophy. 'Why should I care? It's out of my hands.'

CLIFF

It is out of my hands. Out of your hands, too.

DENISE

I don't believe that. And a lot of your friends don't believe it either. So if you stay home tomorrow night, you'll be the only one.

CLIFF

No, I won't. (leaning in) Phillies versus The Mets. 7 o'clock. Channel 17.

He sits back with a smug grin.

DENISE

You are a selfish pig, you know that?

CLIFF

It's so interesting how, whenever you lose an argument with me-- it's because I'm a pig.

He goes for the cereal as Denise gets up and marches out

CLIFF (CONT'D)

And for your information--a pig is not selfish. It's acting in rational self-interest by eating as much as it can. Thank you very much.

He snarfs cereal from the box. A beat and Denise returns. She studies him.

DENISE

(a shift in tone)

Cliff. If you came to the benefit tomorrow night? It would mean a lot to me. Mom and Dad and Jill are coming. And if you came, then my whole family would be there ... and that would make me feel really, really good.



A beat as he takes her in,

DENISE (CONT'D)

So I hope you will think about it. Okay?

With dignity, she goes off again. Cliff eyes the audience.

CLIFF

Okay, I was a dork. I didn't go to the benefit. And I didn't ask about it either. Even when I heard it was some big deal, and they raised like fifteen hundred dollars or something, I made a point *not* to ask her about it. I made a point not to do a lot of things. Like take out the garbage when it was my turn. Or wait for her at the bus stop. Or lend her money when she came up short for her share of the pizza. I ate her share of the pizza. (beat) And then one day, she disappears.

Light shift to late night as Cliff picks up the video remote,

CLIFF (CONT'D)

... and becomes *The Forbidden Subject: She Who Cannot Be Named*. Because if you make the mistake of talking about it, your mom spends the rest of the night crying in the kitchen---

He settles on the couch.

CLIFF (CONT'D)

While your Dad sits in the rec room, with the remote in his hand -- staring at a blank TV....

He turns on the video again. Now that he is alone, he allows himself to feel the full weight of the images.

CLIFF

You figure it out pretty fast, what not to say.

Jill enters. A beat.

JILL

Cliff?

He turns off the video abruptly and turns to a textbook.

JILL (CONT'D)

Were you watching it again?

CLIFF

Just ... flipping channels.

JILL  
Can't you sleep?

CLIFF  
I sleep fine. (beat as he gets busy) Got a paper due.

Jill picks up the remote and turns on the video again. She looks to Cliff, who steadfastly ignores her.

JILL  
I can understand. If you think we shouldn't try anything, but: (bravely) We should at least tell Daddy about this.

CLIFF  
Good idea. Then he and Mom can get into another fight.

JILL  
They have a right to know.

CLIFF  
Know what? (off Jill) Somebody saw her at a mall. That's all we know.

JILL  
We know where she is now.... And we know she's not happy.

CLIFF  
Just 'cause peddling carnations isn't your idea of a good time.

JILL  
How could anybody be happy doing that?

CLIFF  
Easy. She's with her friends. She's saving the world. For her, that's Nirvana.

JILL  
Get serious, Cliff.

CLIFF  
I'm totally serious. (a shift in tone) But look, you want to tell them, be my guest. Maybe this time, Dad will get a clue. And instead of calling the cops, he'll hire a private eye.

JILL  
Very funny.

CLIFF  
And they can lock her in a motel room until she comes to her senses.

JILL

Something *happened* to her! Don't you even wonder what it was?

CLIFF

We know what it was. She went to college. And met that Elijah dude.

JILL

It's more than that.

CLIFF

That's totally it. She thinks he's hot. And now she's chasing him around. Like girls do.

JILL

Oh get out!

CLIFF

Girls do it. They get all, "He's everything to me!" And totally go off the deep end.

JILL

When did Neechie ever do that?

CLIFF

Uh, last October? When we went up to Amherst to see her?

A light shift -- and scene transforms to a college campus, as students cross on their way to class and other activities. Two guys are off to the field house, two girls head to band practice. Another pair (or trio) of students meanders, sharing a private joke... and one, lone preoccupied student stops to consult a schedule. Perhaps a professor with a briefcase breezes by as another student tags along, asking about a grade on a paper. Jill is in the middle of this as Denise returns in memory.

DENISE

Jill! Over here!

Denise is dressed more conservatively now, a look that startles Jill.

CLIFF

You remember how freaky friendly she was?

Cliff watches from the couch as Denise rushes to Jill and embraces her.

JILL  
Neechie!

DENISE (CONT'D)  
Praise be you got here safe!

Jill gives Cliff a quizzical look.

DENISE (CONT'D)  
(releasing Jill)  
How was the drive? Okay?

CLIFF  
(crossing into the memory)  
Got stuck in traffic and almost ran out of gas.

DENISE  
Oh, no!

Denise approaches him as if to give him a hug.

CLIFF  
What are you doing?

She pokes at him instead.

DENISE (CONT'D)  
I'm glad to see you. I know you're secretly glad to see me. Admit, it Cliff. Come on--

CLIFF  
(in the memory)  
Okay, all right! Just don't get extreme about it.

DENISE  
I can't help it. It's how I feel right now!

JILL  
What's going on? Did you get another band together?

CLIFF  
Another band?

JILL  
Lost Horizon broke up.

CLIFF  
Missed that news.

DENISE  
You can't expect to keep playing together when you're at different schools. (recovering) But it's okay. Things are starting to come together in a really amazing way.

What happened? JILL

Well ... DENISE

Elijah, who has been sitting at a distance with Jacob and Rebecca, observing them, now crosses briskly and cheerfully into the scene.

Oh. JILL

You must be Jill. ELIJAH

Hi. JILL

I'm Elijah. ELIJAH

From my fellowship? DENISE

Great to meet you. I know Denise is so excited to have you here. ELIJAH

What fellowship? CLIFF

The most fantastic church. DENISE

And you have to be Cliff. ELIJAH

Yeah, when I have to be, I guess I am. CLIFF

Funny guy. I like that. ELIJAH

Thanks. CLIFF

Denise has told me so much about you---she says you're a history buff? World War II? ELIJAH

Not really-- CLIFF