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Seeking Structure From Chaos

Tough childhood informs his plays

By Christopher Wallenberg | Globe Staff | October 28, 2011



NEW YORK - As a shy, creative kid growing up in the 1980s and '90s in a rough-and-tumble Miami housing project, Tarell Alvin McCraney learned to recognize and appreciate the duality of human behavior.

Whether it was watching his mother's struggle with crack addiction and caring for her kids, or being taught to ride a bike by the local drug dealers, McCraney's eye-opening early experiences with human complexity informed the empathetic sensibility that has shaped him as a person and a playwright.

"I remember this one kid punching me in the face, and then the next day, I saw him smiling with his friends, and I was like, 'Wow, he smiles, he laughs.' And I could see that he had good within him - whether or not he was showing it to me," McCraney, 31, said one evening last week, his 6-foot 3-inch frame snugly jammed into a seat at a small SoHo cafe.

THE BROTHER/SISTER PLAYS

"I think that's how you know you're an artist, because you kind of can see the varied colors in human nature," he said. "You can see when the people who are supposedly good to you are doing something that is actually not so good for you. And you can let that go almost without judgment and say, 'Well, that's who they are.' "

That ability goes to the heart of McCraney's work, which includes his landmark 2009 trilogy, "The Brother/Sister Plays." Company One is mounting the Boston premiere of the work in two parts at the Boston Center for the Arts. The first installment, "In the Red and Brown Water," is in previews. The second part, which includes "The Brothers Size" and "Marcus; or the Secret of Sweet," will debut Nov. 10.

Set in and around a housing project on the Louisiana bayou, the trilogy zooms in on the relationships among a group of interrelated African-American characters, several of whom overlap in the plays and span a generation in time. "In the Red and Brown Water" revolves around Oya, a young black woman haunted by the broken dream of giving up her college track scholarship to care for her ailing mother. Years later, Oya is torn between love for two men and struggles with her inability to bear children.

"The Brothers Size" focuses on the fraying of a formerly tight-knit relationship between two siblings when one comes to live with the other after his release from prison. The third play, "Marcus; or the Secret of Sweet," looks at an African-American teenager struggling with his sexuality and discovering his true self as a powerful hurricane bears down on the bayou. Although not autobiographical, "Marcus" was inspired in part by the nature of McCraney's own coming-out process.

Embedded within the trilogy are the mythologies of West Africa's Yoruba people, spiritual traditions that McCraney grew up with and was informed by. The main characters in the plays are named after Yoruban deities (or Orishas) like Oya (the goddess of the winds), Ogun (the god of iron, fire, and labor), Oshoosi (spirit of the forest and the wanderer), and Elegba (the trickster spirit of chaos).

McCraney says he saw that the pantheon of deities in Greek, Roman, African, and other world mythologies reflected the attributes and personalities of real people. And when he began examining specific gods in different religions, he discovered the echoes of certain character traits among them.

"They start to triangulate. The pattern is in every culture and cosmology," he said. "We had to give these human attributes to the gods. So then you see the god in people. You see the god in everybody. You see the superhuman strength to survive, to make merry out of nothing, to talk people into doing things, all of it."

Company One marketing director Summer L. Williams, who's directing "The Brothers Size" and "Marcus," said that the plays - with their profanely poetic language and lyrical dialogue combined with an authentically rendered portrait of the characters' troubled lives - "exists in this weird space between the projects and heaven."

"The same way that people say, 'You stand on the shoulders of those who have come before you,' it feels like the play stands on the shoulders of [Yoruban] mythology and [Yoruban] culture," Williams said.

The director of "In the Red and Brown Water," Megan Sandberg-Zakian, said she believes that McCraney is asking "some pretty intense and challenging questions about the nature of freedom, the risk of being free, and the importance of sometimes being tethered."

"One of the things that I found particularly juicy is the way he is really interrogating and reframing the African-American narrative around freedom," Sandberg-Zakian said. "I think the plays ask about whether it's possible to be free if you truly love someone, whether freedom is really what we want, and whether it's really fulfilling as a human being to be liberated in the most extreme sense."

Tall, lithe, and uncommonly handsome, McCraney radiates a low-key confidence and easy charm, despite growing up as a shy, quiet boy who loved ballet and theater and was enthralled by the natural world that enveloped his blighted urban environment.

"Growing up in Miami was like living in a savage garden. There was a sea breeze and beautiful sunsets and incredible thunderstorms with lightning that you could see from miles away," he said. "But I also lived in the inner city, so there were drug dealers and crack addicts. And drugs were in my home and part of my life and a part of the lives of the people who I loved. So I think the fact that those things existed in the same place would lead almost anybody to grow up with a variety of crazy ideas and strange influences."

In that chaotic environment, McCraney craved structure. What saved him was finding creative outlets like dance and performing as a teenager with the Village Improv, run by Teo Castellanos, who became a father figure to McCraney. The young playwright eventually brought his sensibilities to the Yale School of Drama.

Because of his growing acclaim, McCraney is starting to feel the pressures that come with capturing prestigious prizes such as the Steinberg Playwright Award and earning commissions from the likes of the Royal Shakespeare Company and Manhattan Theatre Club.

"Nobody thinks of me as a new writer. Everybody thinks of me as like a mid-career writer, that I'm here and I'm established," he said. "But I've only written four plays that have been produced in New York. I'm like, 'I'm still figuring [expletive] out!' . . . Rather than a showstopping burst or flare, I'd much prefer a long life in the theater, with all its ups and downs."