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A woman racing to catch her dreams

By [Don Aucoin](#) | Globe Staff | November 01, 2011



Photo: Liza Voll

‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ Langston Hughes famously asked.

That question reverberates throughout Tarell Alvin McCraney’s “In the Red and Brown Water,” in which a young woman named Oya, living in a Louisiana housing project, searches for her place in the world. “I want my own mark,” she says. “I want to look down and see myself mirrored back to me.”

When not one but two major life-dreams are denied Oya, the consequences are haunting.

“In the Red and Brown Water,” now receiving its Boston premiere at Company One under the assured and supple direction of Megan Sandberg-Zakian, is the first installment of a trilogy that McCraney, now 31, titled “The Brother/Sister Plays.” In a couple of weeks,

Company One will tackle the other two, “The Brothers Size” and “Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet.” In the meantime, “In the Red and Brown Water” should not be missed.

The rich and resonant lyricism of McCraney’s writing gets under your skin. Even an unusual device you’d think would be distracting - having his characters speak stage directions as part of the dialogue, annotating the story even as they enact it - somehow adds to their vivid individuality.

Sandberg-Zakian finds ways to consistently engage the eye: This production overflows with arresting and memorable images. A splendid cast, including the luminous Miranda Craigwell as Oya, delivers vibrant performances across the board.

More broadly, the production is further proof that Company One, under the leadership of Shawn LaCount, is a necessary destination for Boston theatergoers in search of rewarding challenges. Last year, this venturesome troupe produced Annie Baker’s “The Aliens” as part of a festival of Baker plays, an ambitious collaboration with the larger Huntington Theatre Company and SpeakEasy Stage Company. Judging by “In the Red and Brown Water,” it appears that “The Brother/Sister Plays” will represent another step forward for Company One.

In writing his 2009 trilogy, which is set in the fictional bayou community of San Pere, La., in what McCraney calls the “distant present,” the playwright tapped into the stories and spiritual icons of the Yoruba people of

West Africa. While this endows his characters with the universality of archetypes, it doesn't diminish the emotional involvement they elicit from us as they are beset by familial and romantic crises.

Oya's name is drawn from the Yoruban goddess of the winds, and this teenage track star, who grows to womanhood over the course of the play, can indeed run like the wind. In her red-and-white singlet, white shorts, and blue running shoes with yellow laces, Oya exudes optimism and faith in a bright future. She is thrilled when she receives an offer from The Man from State (Jerem Goodwin) to run on the college's track team. But Oya's mother, Mama Moja (Michelle Dowd), is stricken with a strange illness, so Oya says no to The Man from State, that she needs to spend one more year at home, acting as caregiver. Though she hopes the door will remain open, Oya's chance at college will not come again.

Meanwhile, two very different young men are vying for her attention: Ogun Size (Johnnie McQuarley, excellent), a good-hearted fellow whose attempts to woo Oya are hindered by his stutter, and Shango (Chris Leon, also first-rate), who is brash and arrogant but charismatic, en route to a military career, with a sexual magnetism Oya finds hard to resist. As time passes, and Ogun starts building a career as a mechanic while Shango enters the service, Oya finds herself torn between the reliable wage-earner and the glamorous but unfaithful warrior.

A youth named Elegba (the nimbly expressive Hampton Fluker) also breezes in and out of her life, part prankster, part seer. Showing Oya his infant son, he says: "You ever felt that, Oya? Something all yours."

No, she hasn't felt that. The onetime runner is immobilized, trapped, with no clear identity of her own. She desperately yearns for a child, to own the title of mother, but she cannot seem to get pregnant. She does eventually find a way to make her own mark, but it's not one that the dream-filled young Oya - or any of those who have come to care about her - could ever have imagined.