

The Brother/Sister Plays

Feb 8 - Feb 18 2007

THE BROTHERS SIZE

BUY TICKETS

SCHEDULE

by Tarell Alvin McCraney | Directed by Kent Gash

“ Mr. McCraney’s soulful monologues..provide real harmony. Listen closely, and you might hear that thrilling sound that is one of the main reasons we go to the theater, that beautiful music of a new voice. ”

– *The New York Times*

RESOURCE GUIDE**Introduction: *The Brothers Size* - By Douglas Langworthy**

Set in San Pere, Louisiana near the Bayou in the “distant present,” *The Brothers Size* by Tarell Alvin McCraney is a poetic examination of the lives of two brothers and the friend that comes between them. It is part of a trilogy of plays written by McCraney “to understand my interconnectedness with my brothers and sisters.” According to the playwright, the plays are “inspired by Yoruba life and traditions, steeped in Southern rhythms and cadences, and seamed shut with the fire of urban music and dance.”

In *The Brothers Size*, the characters’ names are taken from the Yoruba religion of West Africa and have mythological meanings. The older brother is named Ogun, after the shape-shifting god of war and iron, and the younger brother is named Oshoosi, after the deity of the wanderer and the hunter. The third character in the play is named Elegba, after the shape-shifting trickster figure: the embodiment of the crossroads, the messenger of the gods, and the ultimate master of potentiality.

As the story begins, Oshoosi has just gotten out of prison and is on parole. His brother Ogun runs an auto repair shop, and decides that Oshoosi should work at the shop, too. Their deeply devoted but difficult dynamic – Oshoosi is especially angered by Ogun’s constant references to his time in jail— is complicated by the appearance of Elegba, Oshoosi’s best friend from lock-up. Throughout the play Elegba and Ogun vie for Oshoosi’s loyalty. Each has his shortcomings: Ogun can’t compete with the bond formed by Elegba and Oshoosi in the pen, and as Elegba says to Ogun: “I can’t never be his brother like you his brother.”

Particularly attuned to the rhythms of speech, *The Brothers Size* incorporates both realistic dialogue and heightened poetic language. The actors speak their stage directions: in other words, all of the lines that describe movement on stage (eg. “Ogun comes from under the car”) are spoken aloud by the actor they pertain to. It also includes several dream sequences, which have been staged with stylized movement

Who’s Who in the Production**ACTING COMPANY**

Keith Chappelle
Oshoosi

Marc Damon Johnson
Ogun

Jordan Mahome
Elegba

PRODUCTION

Tarell Alvin McCraney	Playwright
Kent Gash	Direction
Emily Beck	Set and Costume Design
William H. Grant, III	Lighting Design
Marc Damon Johnson	Percussion Rhythmic Concepts

Interview with Tarell Alvin McCraney



Tarell McCraney

Originally from Miami, FL, Tarell McCraney attended the New World School of Arts High School, matriculated into The Theatre School at DePaul University, and graduated with his BFA (cum laude) in Acting (2003). Currently, Tarell is a third year student in the Yale School of Drama's MFA playwriting program, headed by Richard Nelson. There Tarell has created 5 new works: WITHOUT/SIN, hailed by Peter Brook as "beautifully written with a truly fresh and open sense of theatrical form," A LONE; THE BROTHERS SIZE; RUN, MOURNER, RUN; and IN THE RED AND BROWN WATER. The McCarter literary staff asked Tarell to respond to a few questions:

When did you start writing plays and why?

I've been a maker of dramatic plays basically all my life. I still haven't stopped playing make-believe. Sometimes I make up stories in my head about people I have never met. I imagine what they do in the morning, what their dreams are like, what their favorite colors might be...

I began writing specifically for an audience with a man named Teo Castellanos. He's an artist based in Miami, where I am from, and he was asked by a rehabilitation center, the Village South, to create a troupe of teenagers, mostly of color, from around the Miami-Dade area, who would go to youth rehabilitation centers, detention centers, and spread a message of HIV awareness and prevention through the vehicle of theater. Sounds like an after school special, I know. But what began to happen, because of the rawness that Teo REQUIRED of us...because we wanted work that both reflected our own complex lives at home and the powerful creative life we were endeavoring in. . .we created works disturbing and palpable so that our peers in the rehab and detention centers cried, told us dark secrets, and we told them ours and we became more of a community. Somehow exploring how we sometimes fall victim to our surroundings, how our parents had sometimes guided us into risky behavior, all of those sharing moments helped us feel not so alone...this is where I began my life as a theater artist. I began to write from myself as source for people who would understand me instantly... That is where and why I began to write.

Who are your greatest influences?

I am heavily influenced by Lorca and Reynaldo Arenas, Essex Hemphill and Alvin Ailey. I love dance. I watch more dance than I do plays. I try to write how I see dance—in moves, in body language that doesn't lie, in syncopation. Barely anything in the space but bodies that tell you all the story that you need. I am also highly influenced by [director] Peter Brook. He strips everything down to the simplest and rawest form. I am influenced by the street dances that I watched in Miami, the parades, and by my family, how I watched them celebrate and mourn and love and...

Why were you moved to write this play in this form—as part of a trilogy, using Yoruba imagery, with spoken stage

directions? Why does this story need to be told in this way?

The Yoruba have been with me, around me, even when I didn't know it. From a young age I found myself running into people—Lucumi, Santero, in Miami—who would tell me that I am a child of Yemoja or that the Deities speak to me strongly. Saying things I had no idea what they meant. Eventually I learned more about the Cosmology and thought the IFE, the stories, beautiful in their not so happy endings, in the simple complexities. They reminded me of my own life, how delicate happiness could exist next to pressing tragedy like kith and kin. So I begin to explore.

In *The Brothers Size* I was trying to explore rhythms, drum-like, but in the voice. In *In the Red and Brown Water* [another part of the trilogy] I begin exploring the mixing of two stories from two different culture-- Yerma and Oba-- and how they mix, and essentially how those mixtures are what make up the people in Cuba and the Spanish Caribbean, African and European Spanish. And in *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet* I explored what the absence of those direct links feels like in African-Americans today. I haven't proved or unproved anything. Just exploring and using what I know of my life in the South in the swampy areas of the Everglades and Homestead, FL.

But above all the story is a story and we should not forget that it is being told to us by talented artists who want us to feel for the characters and remember that we have all been to this same place that they are evoking.

The Brothers Size draws from the cosmology of the Yoruba people of West Africa. Yoruba culture first spread across the Atlantic when West Africans were sold in the slave trade. Today its influence is felt throughout the African Diaspora, which includes countries ranging from Haiti to Brazil to Cuba to the United States. Practiced in various forms by millions today, Yoruba religious traditions embrace a rich pantheon of *orishas*, or spirits, whose life forces animate and inspire their followers.

Ogun	orisha of war and iron
Oshoosi	orisha of the hunter, the tracker, the wanderer
Elegba/Elegua	orisha of the crossroads, messenger of the gods, trickster, shape-shifter
Shango	orisha of the thunderbolt, dispenser of justice
Oya	orisha of the Niger River, wind and storms, one of Shango's wives
Shun	orisha of the Oshun River, the most beautiful of Shango's wives
Yemoja	orisha of the oceans, mother goddess

Pre- and Post-show Questions for Discussion, Assignments, and Activities

Note to Educators: Use the first three avenues of inquiry below to prepare your students, as well as to engage their imaginations and creativity, before they experience The Brothers Size in performance. Then utilize the last two sections to allow students to evaluate their experience of the performance and to encourage their own imaginative and artistic projects.

1. **Sibling Rivalries Resolved.** At the heart of Tarell Alvin McCraney's *The Brothers Size*, is the tense and troubled relationship between two brothers who struggle with a variety of issues and resentments typical to many siblings and families. These struggles include individual/opposite temperaments (e.g., "perfect child" vs. "problem child,"), differing attitudes towards personal and familial responsibilities, and an inability to forgive and forget the past.
 - Ask your students if they have encountered similar issues with their own brothers and sisters or in their own families.

Have they been able to openly address and discuss these problems? If so, how? What were the outcomes of these discussions?

- Have your students think of an unaddressed or unresolved tense situation with a sibling or close family member in which individual/opposite temperaments, differing attitudes towards personal and familial responsibilities, or an inability to forgive and forget the past play a part. Give them the opportunity to script an idealized dialogue between themselves and their family member in which they are able to express their feelings. If appropriate, students may volunteer their scripts to be read aloud to the class and discussed.
2. **Inspirational Exploration.** McCraney's life and work has been greatly inspired by the Yoruba religion of West Africa and its cosmology and traditions. While McCraney notes that you do not need to know Yoruba mythology to understand his plays he offers, "If you know anything about Yoruba, it will resonate on a different wavelength." To deepen the levels of your students' understanding and appreciation of *The Brothers Size*, have them research Yoruba, its peoples, and their history, religion(s), and cosmology/cosmogony. Specific avenues for research include:
- Ile-Ife, the ancient Yoruban city and spiritual and artistic center of the Yoruba people
 - Yoruba *Orishas* or deities
[Ogun, Oshoosi, Eshu/Elegba, and Yemoja are of particular significance to *The Brothers Size*]
 - Yoruba legends
[The full text of M. I. Ogunfemu's *Yoruba Legends* (London: Sheldon Press, 1929) is available on the internet at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/yl/index.htm>.]
 - Yoruba in the New World and throughout the African diaspora
3. **Ancient Myths and Modern Mythmaking.** A myth or legend can be defined as a traditional, often ancient, narrative that deals with supernatural beings, ancestors or heroes and which serves to explain natural phenomenon; describe the customs, behaviors, ideals or values of a society, culture, or faith system; or provide a foundation for communal identity or solidarity. A mythology, then, refers to a collection of these types of stories, and can be applied to the narratives of all religions, both those that are widely practiced and those no longer practiced. For example, one can refer to a Yoruba mythology, a Jewish mythology, a Christian mythology, an Islamic mythology, a Greek mythology, an Ayyavazhi mythology, a Buddhist mythology, etc. (It is important to note that the terms myth and mythology can refer to beliefs without implying fantasy, fiction, or falsehood.) Have your students explore the Yoruba mythology as presented by M. I. Ogunfemu in *Yoruba Legends*: [<http://www.sacredtexts.com/afr/yl/index.htm>]
- Ask them to discuss the characters, stories, and themes of these myths/legends. What phenomenon or idea is each story attempting to explain? What are the natures or personalities of the characters in each story? What ideals or values is each attempting to teach or instill?
 - Discuss other mythologies and specific myths or legends your students have heard, read, or studied. How do these myths compare with the Yoruban narratives?
 - Take your students through a brainstorming session to identify modern-day phenomena, persons, customs, behaviors, ideals, or values that would be fun to explore and explain (and perhaps correct) through the creation of a "modern myth." Once a list has been generated divide the class into pairs or triads to devise their own narratives. In the following class meeting, have your students share their new classroom mythology.
4. **Sizing Up *The Brothers Size*.** Following their attendance at the performance of *The Brothers Size*, ask your students to reflect on the questions below. (You might choose to have them answer each individually or you could divide students into groups for round-table discussions. Have them consider each question, record their answers, and then share their responses with the rest of the class.)

Questions to Ask Your Students About the Play in Production

- a. What was your overall reaction to *The Brothers Size*? Did you find the production compelling? Stimulating? Intriguing? Challenging? Memorable? Confusing? Evocative? Unique? Delightful? Meaningful? Explain your reactions.
- b. Did experiencing the play heighten your awareness or understanding of the play's themes? (e.g., the challenges of

familial relationships and their power to build up or tear down an individual, and the struggle for freedom in the face of mounting challenges and oppressions, such as poverty, racism, and one's own history of mistakes or bad choices) What themes were made especially apparent in the course of the production? Are you able to identify additional themes? Explain your responses.

- c. Do you think that the pace and tempo of the production was effective and appropriate? Explain your opinion.
- d. Did the music and use of song enhance the story and themes of the play? How? Could you envision *The Brothers Size* without its musical elements? Explain your response.

Questions to Ask Your Students About the Characters

- a. Did you personally identify with any of the characters in *The Brothers Size*? Who? Why?
- b. What qualities were revealed by the action and speech of the characters? Explain your ideas.
- c. Did any characters develop or undergo a transformation during the course of the play? Who? How? Why?
- d. Did experiencing the play heighten your understanding or appreciation of McCraney's connection to and interest in Yoruba religion and mythology? In what ways did the characters reveal this connection or interest? Explain your responses.

Questions to Ask Your Students About the Style and Design of the Production

- a. Was there a moment in *The Brothers Size* that was so compelling or intriguing that it remains with you in your mind's eye or ear? Can you write a vivid description of that moment? As you write your description, pretend that you are writing about the moment for someone who was unable to experience the performance.
 - b. Did the design elements of the production—for example, its staging, the scenic design, sound design, costume design, and lighting design, and music—enhance the performance? Explain your reaction.
 - c. Did the design elements work together to create a unified production? Were there any elements that distracted from the action of the play? Which? Why?
 - d. Did the style of the production and its design reflect the themes of the play? How?
 - e. What mood or atmosphere did the lighting design establish or achieve? Explain your experience.
 - f. How did the sound design enhance your overall experience? Explain your response.
 - g. Did the color and design of the costumes serve to illuminate the characters, themes, and style of the play? How?
5. **“...Write for [yourself], as a source for people who would understand [you] instantly...”** At the age of 14, playwright Tarell McCraney became a member of a teenage troupe that taught HIV awareness and prevention through theatre at youth rehabilitation and detention centers. He notes that he and his peers created theatrical presentations that reflected their “own complex lives at home,” contained “dark secrets,” offered opportunities for “sharing moments that made them feel as if they weren't alone,” and lead, ultimately, to a greater sense of community among his peers and the youth for whom they performed. McCraney writes of that experience, “I began to write for myself as a source for people who would understand me instantly...” Have your students consider what personal stories they might share with their peers to make them “feel as if they weren't alone” or to cultivate a greater sense of community. Ask them what could they write for themselves that could be understood instantly by their peers? Have your students dramatize, that is script, their stories for the ears, eyes, and edification of their classmates. Have them consider how they might use myth and music in the manner of Tarell McCraney as forms of inspiration and expression. If appropriate, students may volunteer their scripts to be read or performed aloud to the class and discuss



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| Venue : **Berlind Theatre** |