WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Marcus; or
The Secret of Sweet

BY TARELL ALVIN McCRANEY
DIRECTED BY MARK RUCKER
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY
ELIZABETH BRODERSEN
PUBLICATIONS EDITOR
DAN RUBIN
PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY ASSOCIATE
MICHAEL PALLER
RESIDENT DRAMATURG
EMILY HOFFMAN
PUBLICATIONS INTERN
ZACHARY MOULL
DRAMATURGY INTERN

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ABOVE Dancing on Basin Street, New Orleans, 1994, by Lewis Watts
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet*
4. Before *Marcus*: Synopses of *The Brother/Sister Plays* Parts I & II
5. American Bayou: An Interview with Tarell Alvin McCraney  
   *by Dan Rubin*
18. Playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney on *The Brother/Sister Plays*
20. *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet* Design Presentation
23. Creating the Emotional Cocoon: An Interview with Lighting Designer  
   James F. Ingalls  
   *by Elizabeth Brodersen*
28. The Open Secret of Sweet  
   *by Emily Hoffman*
30. On the Down Low  
   *by Emily Hoffman*
35. Two-Spirit  
   *by Michael Paller*
38. Place: San Pere, LA / Time: Late August (Distant Present)
40. African Echoes  
   *by Zachary Moull*
44. Questions to Consider / For Further Information . . .
THE BROTHER/SISTER PLAYS FAMILY TREE

The love triangle among Oya, Shango, and Ogun is central to In the Red and Brown Water.

The barren Oya leaves Ogun for Shango, who is unfaithful. Oya's sadness drives her to self-mutilation.

The relationship between the responsible Ogun and his misfit brother, Oshoosi, along with their relationship with Elegba (a prominent character as Oya's godbrother in In the Red and Brown Water) is central to The Brothers Size.

We first meet the title character of Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet in In the Red and Brown Water, when Elegba brings him as an infant to Oya's house and proudly shows Oya the birthmark (on his thigh) he shares with his son, which is how Marcus got his name.

KEY
Water: In the Red and Brown Water
Brothers: The Brothers Size
Marcus: Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet
CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

MARCUS; OR THE SECRET OF SWEET

The full-length version of Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet was first presented in a student production at the Carlotta Festival of New Plays at Yale School of Drama in 2007. The professional world premiere production of Marcus was presented by The Public Theater and McCarter Theatre Center as part of The Brother/Sister Plays trilogy (which also includes In the Red and Brown Water and The Brothers Size) in 2009; for the trilogy production Marcus was adapted (and shortened) in order to share an evening with The Brothers Size. a.c.t.'s production is the West Coast premiere and the first professional production of the unabridged version of Marcus as a stand-alone work.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

MARCUS ESHU
Richard Prioleau

OSHA
Shinelle Azoroh

SHAUNTA IYUN
Omozé Idehenre

OBA/SHUN/ELEGUA
Margo Hall

OGUN SIZE
Gregory Wallace

OSHOOSI SIZE/SHUA
Tobie L. Windham

TERRELL
Jared McNeill

SETTING
San Pere, Louisiana. Late August (distant present).

SYNOPSIS

ACT I. The spirit of Oshoosi Size comes to 16-year-old Marcus in a dream; Oshoosi asks Marcus to remember him to his brother, Ogun Size. It is a recurring dream that haunts the boy. The next day, from the hilltop of the cemetery, Marcus sees Ogun sobbing at the funeral of Shango (the father of one of Marcus’s best friends, Osha). Marcus is too shaken to approach Ogun to tell him about his dream. As Osha and their friend Shaunta Iyun try to calm Marcus, all three miss the burial. Osha’s mother, Shun, hunts Osha down and chews her out for hanging out with “sweet Marcus.” After Osha leaves with her mother, Shaunta asks Marcus if he is, as she suspects, “sweet”—i.e., homosexual. Marcus dodges the question.
Oba, Marcus’s mother, seeks out her son, worried because he missed the funeral. Marcus asks her to tell him about his father, Elegba (now dead), hoping to discover whether he was, as rumor has it, sweet. Oba refuses to talk about it, telling Marcus that if he himself is feeling such “sleeping traits” awake in him, he best pray on it.

Oba leaves before Elegua, a town elder, approaches from the funeral; she explains to Marcus that her nephew, Ogun, has taken funerals hard ever since Oshoosi left. Oshoosi was Elegba’s best friend. Marcus asks Elegua whether his father was sweet, and when she, too, avoids giving him a straight answer, he asks if she knows how to interpret dreams. She remembers that when Elegba was a boy, he would run around talking about his dreams, and some of them came true. Marcus explains that in his dreams a man he does not recognize is trying to tell him something, but it is raining so hard he can barely make out the words. Elegua tells him to keep listening to the man and hold onto the dream. She wants to say more, but Ogun comes to take her home. She does tell Marcus that people once thought that “sweet boys got a secret of sight,” which is why their dreams have a particular import and Marcus’s dream about rain is worrisome. Marcus follows his dream down to the bayou. Speaking to no one but the water, he wishes his father were alive to explain things to him; short of that, he wishes the water would rise up and take him. Ogun appears and warns Marcus to be careful what he wishes for.

Ogun says that Marcus reminds him of Oshoosi and Elegba; when Marcus asks what happened to Oshoosi, Ogun explains that Oshoosi ran away when he and Elegba got into trouble with the law. Elegba stayed behind and turned himself in. Ogun has never understood the intense bond Elegba and Oshoosi shared, but he admits that Elegba was never the same after Oshoosi left. He died in jail. Marcus and Ogun share an emotional moment, and they kiss. Terrell (a boy from school), Osha, and Shaunta catch up to Marcus at that exact moment: Terrell mocks him for being gay; Shaunta is hurt that Marcus did not confide the truth about his sexual identity to her; Osha is crushed because she has been carrying a torch for Marcus since they were kids. Osha orders Terrell to walk her home. Shaunta follows. Left behind, Marcus tells Ogun about his dream.

_Act ii._ A couple of days later, Marcus is stuck at home “on punishment” for having stayed out so late the night of Shango’s funeral. Shaunta comes to sneak him out of the house, but Marcus refuses, not wanting to get into more trouble. As Shaunta tries to persuade him to come out, Elegua enters in a crazy state. Shaunta says that Elegua has been acting strange ever since Marcus told her about his dream. Furthermore, Ogun is sending Elegua away because a storm is coming. Shaunta leaves to make sure Elegua gets home safe. Shua—a young man visiting from the Bronx—sees Marcus and flirts with him.
Thrilled by the attention, yet too uncomfortable to act on his awakening desire while in his mother’s house, Marcus suggests that they meet later down by the water. He sneaks out that night, only to run into Ogun. Ogun asks him to say more about the dream, but Marcus is anxious to meet up with Shua and brushes him off. Down by the water, Shua seduces Marcus.

Osha waits for Shua on her porch; apparently he has been fooling around with her, as well. Marcus arrives, excited to share his experience with his best friend, but Osha chastises him for leading her on all these years when he must have known how she felt about him; he counters by asking how she could have been ignorant of his sexuality if she were a good friend. They are beginning to mend their friendship when Shua enters to pick up Osha, signaling to Marcus to keep their relationship a secret.

That night, Marcus has a new dream. Shaunta and Osha are in the dream, which puts Marcus at ease to express his sexuality more freely; at the same time, his friends are angry that he did not warn them about the coming storm. Shua enters the dream, and after Shaunta and Osha disappear, he transforms into Oshoosi.

The next morning, Marcus tells Shaunta about hooking up with Shua and says he needs to tell Osha what happened. He tells Shaunta to bring Osha down by the water. There he tries to trick Shua into demonstrating his unfaithfulness to Osha, but things take a dangerous turn when Shua tries to force Marcus to do more than he is willing to. Shaunta and Osha enter and save Marcus.

Marcus visits Elegua’s house, but her windows are boarded up, and Ogun tells him that she has left for Houston and won’t be back until the storm passes. Marcus tells Ogun that the man in his dream is Oshoosi, who asked Marcus to tell his brother that “the sky is bout / To open up, and God’s gone open his eye wide / Over the Bayou and the sky will cry.” Oshoosi wants Ogun to know that he is “Already / Down in that dirty water.” Ogun says that Marcus’s dreams mean that Oshoosi is dead. Ogun marches off in a funeral procession by himself, as Marcus watches to make sure he gets home safe.

The [spoken] stage directions are integral to the play because they allow for the actor to call to the audience and invite you into the space and remind you that this can’t happen without you, you belong here with us. If you’re not here, this is a rehearsal.

—Tarell Alvin McCraney
BEFORE MARCUS . . .

PART I: IN THE RED AND BROWN WATER
Oya is a high school track star, but she gives up a free ride to the state university to stay with her dying mother. Without the scholarship, Oya is forced to remain in the projects of San Pere, and she takes over her mother’s home after she passes. Oya’s life becomes about relationships, first with the bad-boy-turned-soldier Shango and then with the more-civilized, faithful, and adoring (yet less-sexually-satisfying) Ogun. Throughout her life, she is visited by a young friend, the spritely Elegba; when he fathers a baby (Marcus), Oya feels an emptiness within her. Try as she might, however, she cannot get pregnant by either Ogun or Shango. She eventually pushes Ogun away, and when she finds out that Shun—her rival for Shango’s affections—is carrying Shango’s baby, she decides to give Shango a gift. When Shango returns from abroad and comes to visit, Oya cuts off her ear—the ear that he had intimateley caressed when they were together—and offers it to him. We learn from Ogun in The Brothers Size that Oya never recovered from her despair; he never recovered from the heartbreak of losing her.

PART II: THE BROTHERS SIZE
Ogun Size has been trying to protect his younger brother, Oshoosi, since Oshoosi, as a nine-year-old, was caught stealing money from the church’s collection plate to spend on crap games. So when an older-yet-not-much-brighter Oshoosi gets out of prison (for a different crime), Ogun tries to set his brother on the right path by offering him work at his car repair shop. Oshoosi’s prison friend (and occasional lover) Elegba, however, is more interested in seeing Oshoosi have fun. Elegba gives Oshoosi a car and the two go out cruising, but Elegba fails to tell Oshoosi about the cocaine he’s carrying in his duffle bag. A power-hungry sheriff pulls them over. Instead of staying to face a certain return to prison, Oshoosi flees to Ogun’s home. The next morning, Ogun pushes Oshoosi out the door, telling him to abscond to Mexico. We learn in Marcus that Elegba, bereft of his friend, turned himself in and later died in prison.
Tarell Alvin McCraney is not a household name—yet. If the meteoric rise of this 30-year-old playwright’s career is any indication, however, it is only a matter of time. Just three years out of the Yale School of Drama playwriting program, he is only the third playwright to become the International Playwright in Residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company in England. The three plays that make up his Brother/Sister cycle—In the Red and Brown Water, The Brothers Size, and Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet—have received major productions in New York, London, and Chicago (among other places) and have earned numerous prestigious awards, including the inaugural New York Times Outstanding Playwright Award. Here in San Francisco, city officials designated September 10, 2010, Tarell Alvin McCraney Day in recognition of his talents and the three-theater collaboration among Marin Theatre Company (MTC), Magic Theatre, and A.C.T. to produce The Brother/Sister Plays.

Despite the recent flood of accolades, McCraney is adamant that he did not simply appear out of nowhere: “My journey as an artist hasn’t just begun,” he corrected an interviewer in November 2009. “I’ve been doing theater all my life. And I’ve been working hard at it and trying new things and continuing to do so. For me the awards are signposts saying, ‘We see you. Keep walking, working, going.’ Sometimes the signposts stop coming, [and] I look closer at the road and figure out which way to go. And that’s okay, because there was a time when there were no signposts and very few paths. I had to make my own.”
McCraney grew up in Liberty City—a tough neighborhood in Miami’s urban center named after the Liberty Square Housing Project, built in the late 1930s for low-income African Americans. The area remains impoverished, with its residents struggling to make ends meet. McCraney contests, “Americans like to say, ‘You can do anything. You can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and make it. But I have often said, ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ . . . There are moments that you miss (or they miss you), and [these lost opportunities] can change the trajectory of your entire life.”

McCrane grew up near a dangerous “drug hole,” but the same dealers his parents told him to avoid were the ones who stepped in to help when he was trying to teach himself how to ride a bicycle. “All of a sudden one of the dealers on the corner was behind me and telling me to balance and to stay up and he would follow me.” He counts this as a seminal moment in the development of who he is as a person—and a writer.

McCrane objects to the notion that residents of the projects are all “baddies”: the majority are “people trying to step in the right direction.” It is for this demographic that he writes, giving, as he says, dramatic “voice to the voiceless.” His appreciation for theatricality dates back to childhood Sundays watching his grandfather preach; his own first performances were in front of his elementary school class, for whom he recited (and critiqued) the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. McCraney began writing specifically with an audience in mind as a teenager, when he joined Teo Castellanos, artistic director of the Miami-based Teo Castellanos D-Projects. With Castellanos’s troupe, McCraney went into youth rehabilitation and detention centers to spread awareness about HIV. McCraney remembers, “[Simply saying] ‘Don’t do drugs,’ is a bad way of telling someone who has lived a life of crime and drugs not to do drugs. We had to perform from what we knew, from the places we grew up. We told stories that were about our own parents and about the brothers and sisters that we lost, the cousins that we saw get shot or OD.” He continues:

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 a source for people who would understand me instantly. That is where and why I began to write.

He did not go to school for writing, however, but for acting. He attended Miami’s New World School of the Arts High School and then DePaul University in Chicago. While living in the Windy City, McCraney met legendary director Peter Brook, who cast the undergraduate in an English adaptation of Can Themba’s South African fable Le costume (a French adaptation of which Brook had directed to acclaim in the United Kingdom).
McCraney learned many things from Brook—including that a future on the stage was not for him. Instead, with Brook’s encouragement, McCraney entered Yale’s graduate program in playwriting.

As a writer, McCraney’s inspirations are eclectic. There is no kind of theater that does not excite him, and he is particularly captivated by modern dance, his first true passion, especially the work of Alvin Ailey: “I love dance,” he confesses. “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.” More literary heroes include the poet/editor/activist Essex Hemphill (*Earth Life, Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*), the Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas (*Singing from the Well*), and playwrights August Wilson, Federico García Lorca, and Caryl Churchill. McCraney’s work is infused with lessons learned from sources as varied as the plays of the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare, the speeches of Ronald Reagan, the songs of Marvin Gaye, the Yoruba legends of West Africa, and the oral traditions of the American South. As a practiced observer, he retains everything. What others extol as masterful poetry, he humbly describes as simply the result of mashing together everything he has ever heard or read or seen: “You’ve got to learn from all kinds of performance how to keep theater valid, to keep it real, to keep it palpable.”

The *Brother/Sister Plays* did not begin as a trilogy, but rather as what McCraney describes as a “triptych” that shares characters, concepts, and a fictional setting—San Pere, a community ostensibly located in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana (which encompasses the peninsula that juts out into the Gulf of Mexico). “They’re different plays with different things. . . . I love that the theaters here [in the Bay Area] wanted to do them by themselves, because I like them differently.” McCraney wrote *The Brothers Size* first in response to what he says is a lack of “stories about men of color, especially poor men of color, that have to do with intimate relationships.” Interested in growing a theater audience that might otherwise think that the art form has become too elite for them, he first presented *The Brothers Size* with friends in the courtyard of the projects in which he grew up.

The process of creating the piece was painstaking: “I was totally trying to be a craftsman. I can go through that entire play and tell you where I was when I wrote every part of it.” In contrast, McCraney doesn’t even remember writing *In the Red and Brown Water*: “I woke up one morning and, literally, I had printed it out and it was sitting on my desk.” That play started as an accumulation of scenes interspersed between love letters, sermons, poems, and images the playwright had written and collected while living in Oxford (England) and suffering from severe jet lag. After reading the draft, he recognized that he had unintentionally mimicked some of the structure of Lorca’s *Yerma*. At that point, he
decided to fully sculpt his play around Lorca’s, openly acknowledging it as a source. He finished *In the Red and Brown Water* the month Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.

The title of *In the Red and Brown Water* stems from McCraney’s longtime fascination with the bayou—known as the Everglades in his native Florida. McCraney muses:

> The two portions of the earth meet in the Gulf of Mexico, and that gulf is a rich and fecund place. It’s got old nasty stories about conquistadors and pirates, and French and Spanish and African blood mixed there to make this incredible hodgepodge. When you go to the bayou it’s this sort of reddish-brown water; if you step on some parts of it you’re in the shallows, but then you take two steps farther and it’s the same color but it’s a 20-foot drop out of nowhere. So you never quite know where you are. For me, the bayou is about a rich history that’s essentially American. You cannot find a place more American than Louisiana, than Florida, than Alabama, and in that gulf is where it all meets together.

Like the bayou where they are set, McCraney’s plays are fundamentally American. This is especially true of *Marcus*, a play about the freedom to choose an identity other than the one prescribed for you by society.

*Marcus* came out of a trip to post-Katrina New Orleans, where McCraney had been invited by the current producing director of mtc, Ryan Rilette, to participate in a three-playwright project called *The Breach*, which explores the devastating personal toll taken by the hurricane. Considering the despair surrounding its origins, *Marcus* is not what you might expect, admits the playwright: “It is such an odd little play. It’s not a tragedy, as the other two [Brother/Sister Plays] seem or feel to be. It definitely has a funny bone through it that runs really fast and furious.” He adds, “I wrote it in such a different state of mind. The elfish, trickster part of me was totally in charge.”

McCraney had just finished *Marcus* and was starting on the cycle’s fourth play when McCarter Theatre Center proposed producing *The Brother/Sister Plays* as a trilogy that would run over the course of two evenings with *The Brothers Size* and *Marcus* sharing a night. McCraney’s initial reaction: “Why would you want to do them together? That’s kind of dumb.” He had written the structurally and tonally different plays in very different ways, and he was not at all certain they could fit together in the way McCarter was suggesting. But he shelved the fourth play and agreed to adapt the other three:

Putting them together took a while, because most of us like to separate the parts of our consciousness. It’s easier: these are the whites, these are the delicates. We wash them differently. So when people tell you to mix them up and
wash them together, you’re afraid you’re going to rip your delicates and darken your whites. That’s essentially how it felt when they told me they wanted to do [all three plays together]. It actually took me a moment to agree, “Okay, the whites can get a little darker and they’ll be okay. We won’t lose the fabric. The delicates will rip a little bit in their wear, but that’s alright.”

He quickly found merit in the project by focusing on the performers, who would play multiple roles across the plays. He explains, “These pieces are built from the inside for the actors. I had to think about how the journeys would chart. How is it going to emotionally build? Once I figured that out, it got easier.”

All three plays got shorter. Marcus, which at that point had only received a student production at the Carlotta Festival at Yale, lost a number of elements, including some monologues and dream sequences. Now, at a.c.t., the full version of the play is receiving a professional production for the first time, which excites the playwright. “The longer version is, to me, more interesting. We get to understand what [Marcus’s] dreams are actually saying, why they stay with him so long, and why they’re so complex. Why he wakes up with such a complexity of feeling and is in such a fog the day he goes to seek answers.”

McCraney visited the Bay Area in September to see previews of MTC’s production of In the Red and Brown Water and Magic’s production of The Brothers Size. While he was in town, we were fortunate to be able to speak to him about growing up in Miami’s inner city, writing Marcus, and the importance of self-determination.

WHENEVER YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR HOMETOWN, MIAMI, YOU COME ACROSS AS VERY FOND OF IT.

I love it. Miami is warm all year long. It’s freezing here [in San Francisco]. It’s supposed to be the end of summer and it’s cold outside. I’ve got on two shirts and a sweater. Miami is hot and steamy and it’s very overpopulated. It has a lot of swatches of cultures smashed up against each other; it’s oversaturated with blending.

I lived in the inner city—Liberty City. The city of Miami itself is not that big, and Liberty City is one of the few neighborhoods that is actually within the city limits. South Beach is not in Miami; it’s on Miami Beach, which is an island off the coast. The reason I make the distinction is because people assume, “Oh, you live in Miami, so you must live on the beach,” but the beach is actually far away. You have to get through all the nice gates and over the bridges; you have to have a car to get there. If you’re poor, you have to take three buses to get to the beach.

Liberty City is landlocked, and it’s a strange place. We have a high death rate among young people. Last summer we lost about five teenagers within a couple blocks of where I
grew up. Not “gangbangers,” but kids caught in the crossfire. But it’s also really beautiful. On the same corner, it can be sunny and a block away it will be raining. You can literally stand across the street out of the rain and watch it, because [the landscape is] so flat. It’s one of those miracle places, where you can have storms walk towards you and you can walk across the street and not be in the storm anymore.

Miami is magical in a way, but it also has quotidian crime in a dangerously impoverished inner city.

WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY OF LIBERTY CITY LIKE?
My aunt has lived in the same project house for about 15 years now, so it is difficult to close the door and not know anybody, because you are going to see [your neighbors] every day for the next 15 years. Their children are going to play with your children. You’re going to hang your clothes on the same line. At some point you interact. It’s hard to be isolated in an environment like that. The power goes off every summer because everybody has their air conditioning on; when there’s no power, you have to talk to somebody.

The difference between that and the neighborhoods I lived in when I was in Chicago and London is that [the latter] are much more transient. People don’t stay there that long, [and they have the mentality of] “I’m only here for a certain amount of time and then I am on to the next thing. I’m renting for now, and then I’ll buy my house in the suburbs.” Then they go live in the suburbs and it’s similar to the projects: my godparents, who’ve lived in their [suburban] neighborhood for about 20 years, know all their neighbors. Their cats play with their dogs, their kids wander into their trees and eat their mangoes, and they yell about it. So it’s the same [kind of] community; the inner city just has uglier buildings.

WHEN DID YOU GET THE IDEA OF SETTING MARCUS JUST BEFORE KATRINA HAPPENED, AND HOW DID THAT IDEA DEVELOP?
It was when I was in New Orleans working on The Breach. While I was down there I met this guy who was about my age, and he was leading me through New Orleans and talking to me about his experience there. Thus came my portion for The Breach, [which is about] a family that was existing in a certain way, and then all of a sudden they’re trapped up on a roof for three days. What happens when all the small talk dies down? But I was also trying to talk about this highly buried family history, which had a lot to do with magic and a lot to do with sexuality—things that people just don’t talk about—how a person really has to go through a journey to sift through all of that. Walking through places like Tremé and the Ninth Ward, stories wanted to be told. And when I got the stories, there would be so
much humor in them. People in New Orleans have this way of telling you something with such vigor and such life that you laugh so hard you forget to cry.

So Marcus became a poem about people who have such humor that, even if they’re in tears, they got you about to bust a gut. It’s about the exploration, especially for that young man, of growing up and taking on a complicated legacy. Just as he was about to get everything he thought he was going to get, the storm came and shook everything up. I was so in love with that, that I had to create something from it. Marcus came literally out of that.

**WHAT IS MARCUS ABOUT?**
That’s pretty simple: it’s a coming-of-age play. The older I get, the more convinced I am that there are very few actually original stories. There are like 90,000 coming-of-age stories, and this is just one of them. The new thing about Marcus is Marcus. We don’t often hear from the type of person that Marcus represents. Some people’s coming-of-age stories are left out of the canon, especially in the theater. [For example,] I’d like to hear a coming-of-age story from a woman in Juárez. What’s important is that, on an American stage, we allow for the people in the margins, on the fringes, to explore every human condition: to come of age, to marry, to give birth, to die, those many threshold rituals we all share.

I don’t know that there is a message, per se. I think that coming of age is different for everyone. My coming of age was different from yours, and so the day I said to myself, “I am a man,” is different from the day that you said whatever you said when you hit up against the identity that society gives you.

That’s essentially what we have to do. Society says, “You are these things. This is how we see you.” And at some point, you have to say to society, “Fuck you on these things,” or, “I agree with you on these things.” I have a younger brother, who is about six-foot tall and he’s attractive and he’s straight. He’s very average and he knows it. He subscribes to the checklist absolutely, because that’s where he feels comfortable. I was never comfortable in that way. I never felt average, so when people tried to put me in an average place, I couldn’t subscribe to it because it didn’t feel right to me. And that’s what is important about Marcus: it is a moment in which someone is saying, “I will say yes to these things and no to those things.” The revolutions, as well as the accommodations, are important. There’s no message in that, except that in this free society here is a description of what can and cannot happen.

**WHEN DID YOU START FEELING LIKE YOU WEREN’T AVERAGE?**
There are things learned and there are things felt, and I learned that I wasn’t average first. I was in fifth grade and I was 5’11” and I didn’t want to play basketball [laughter], so auto-
matically I was weird. I was black and I was really tall and I didn’t want to play sports, so clearly there must be a problem.

All young kids demonstrating traits that are different from the mainstream, displaying some queerness, are sexualized really early. People see a young girl who is very tomboyish and say, “Oh, she’s very mannish.” She gets a little older, and they say, “Oh, I think she might be a lesbian.” Saying those things is like saying to a heterosexual girl, “Oh, I think you’re going to like dick when you get older.” They begin the conversation about sexuality before a person has clearly even had these thoughts. Sexuality in our country, I will add, is not based on who you love but on who you have sex with. It’s a very clear distinction. It’s whose penis, or not, you put in where.

When you begin to say things like, “You’re gay. I think you’re a fag,” it makes a child instantly begin to think, “Sex must be something I want. Even though it’s not on my mind, even though I’m really just interested in learning how to write cursive, something about me must be sexual—and in a way that is different from everyone else.” Those ideas are introduced and learned at an early age, especially to kids who demonstrate some queer identity. I think the introduction of said ideas that early on is very harmful and unfair to children.
Was your attraction to the arts part of that narrative? Instead of playing basketball, you gravitated towards the arts, so you must have been something different?

I was always a good observer and listener. I know I’m talking a lot now, but I’m really very quiet. In school I would sit quietly until someone asked me, “What’s the answer to this?” and then, of course, I had a four-page answer, repeating things my grandfather, the Reverend, had said, or things I had picked up listening to what Ronald Reagan said on the news. At first I wouldn’t say anything, and then they couldn’t get me to shut the hell up. There were already performative qualities, a sort of call and response, to what I was doing. Professed teachers thought it best to hone in on that by putting me in front of the class to talk. That’s how I got involved in the arts.

But my first understanding of what theatricality was came from church. I watched how [the congregation] reacted to my grandfather, and I realized, “Oh, his pitch rises here in order to induce this.” The call and response; the use of the dramatic pause; the use of positioning, when the actor comes off the stage and stands in the audience and then goes back onstage. I could see how music played a part. How the dwindling of time played a part. Waiting and waiting and waiting until the final three minutes of church service to say the important messages, and how that spurs the ebb and flow of the afternoon. Those rules apply to everything.

I didn’t wake up one morning and think, “The stage!” There are parts of me that are painfully shy. Acting was actually killing me for a while. The last time I was onstage, I literally thought, “I’ve got to get the hell off of here.” What we do in the theater is so important. Sometimes I think I take it too seriously, my job to reach out, to convey something. But if I am not doing it well, especially in the moment . . . I can be distracted by 90 things [when I’m acting]—the light hit me in this eye, or that woman just sneezed, and now I’m not focused—and then I go offstage and think, “You didn’t do your job. You were so terrible.”

I felt like I was going to end up in therapy, or in Lake Michigan when it’s 32 degrees out. I had to stop [acting]. There are braver people than me. There are people who are hungrier for it than I am. And there are people who can go to sleep at night after they’ve done it instead of thinking about the 90,000 things they didn’t do right.

Before you stopped acting, you worked with Peter Brook in Chicago.

That was the beginning of No More Acting for Tarell. I had been raised in a conservatory since I was in middle school. I went through a high school theater program. I had just gone to DePaul for four years. I was ready. I knew how to [with bravado] “performatively do
what you are asking of me, Mr. Brook!” And he said, “Yeah, no: All of that is exactly what I don’t want.” He didn’t say it like that. He just kept saying [while pointing], “No.” “No, no.” “No.” “No.” He does that until you strip down to the bare essentials of who you are.

I am much more mercurial, emotional, much more fluid than that, and so I was crying and then trying to talk and then doing all these other things, and that’s when he was like, “Yeah: there. Stay in that place.” But I can’t function in that place! Society won’t allow me to be that person. You can’t walk down the street and start crying whenever you see something beautiful. They put you away for doing stuff like that.

There is a performative part of all of us that allows us to function in society. Peter is not interested in any of that. He is interested in the person that is deeper and more primal and more instinctual—really intimate and really vulnerable. I realized that I can’t go to that place every night. I don’t care how much money you pay me. Every night? Sometimes twice a day? For three and a half hours? I’m made of softer stuff than that. I’m not that guy.

After that I said, “Okay I’m going to go to Yale for a while and I’ll hide out there.” But he gave me an interesting understanding. I have a great deal of respect for actors. Actors also know I’m really hard on them. I tell them, “This is what you wanted to do, and you’re brave for doing it. I love you for it, but at the same time, hey, you signed up. I know it’s hard, but get in the game.”

IS WRITING SAFER FOR YOU THAN ACTING?
No, writing isn’t safer, because I still have to go to that place. I have to find people in my life who will let me go there. It’s hard to have a relationship. I need a large, empty room so I can walk around. I act out all the plays. I read the plays for every director. I’m every character. I have to know how the characters work. Tina [Landau, who directed The Brother/Sister Plays for Steppenwolf Theatre Company] jokes all the time, “If one of the actors goes down, you’re in.” And I’ll know how to do it, because for me it’s just part of what it is to write for the stage. It’s different from writing for anything else.

I think other writers work differently. Other writers are much more literary. They’re poets. My friends at school are so smart and their way with language and their grammatical structure is formidable. I’m not like that. I have to understand how this character is moving and what they need: “No, he needs a line here that’s going to help him transition there. He can’t get to that emotional place just by saying this. There’s a rev that goes up here. There’s a turn that has to happen that’s not happening here. You need this line, you need this word, you need this thing to get there.” That’s my talent more than anything else: to be able to write how I can act.
BUT YOU CLEARLY HAVE AN AMAZING HANDLE ON LANGUAGE. YOU HAVE YOUR OWN POETRY. DOES THIS COME FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE AS AN ACTOR?
You read enough Shakespeare, it seeps in somewhere. I can go through all of my plays, and point out, “That’s from Shakespeare. That’s from Tennessee Williams. That’s from Chekhov. Those three lines are from some song I heard.” They live within you. Again, I listen really well, so often the answers just come. A Marvin Gaye song might be the perfect answer to a question. Henry V is the best way to say this. King John is the best way to say that. There’s this African tale I know that’s best here. There’s this Hephaestus and Ares myth I know that’s best there. It’s about having that retention. That’s how it works.

HOW DOES RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY PLAY INTO YOUR WORK? WE HEARD THAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO GO TO NIGERIA TO MEET WITH WITCHES?
The Nigeria trip is to meet with children who are accused of being witches. They’ve been cast out of their communities by their parents at the behest of a pastor or minister because some oddity has befallen the village and they are blamed for it because they have some scar or they’re a bad child. Those children also undergo exorcisms: burning, torture, castration. There’s a thousand of them in an orphanage outside of a village in Nigeria. It’s a growing epidemic. That’s why I’m going. I really want to talk to those kids. When I was a kid there was a “witch” who said that I was a witch, told me that I had witch-type powers.

Spirituality and religion are important, especially in the American theater. A lot of us try to talk about the American landscape without spirituality, but it is very difficult to do that because the majority of America is highly spiritual—or, if not spiritual, religious. They have fundamental beliefs. Some would call them fundamentalist beliefs. The fact that the president has to keep reminding us that he’s a Christian is important to note in a country that talks about the separation of church and state. In our work we often say, “Well, I’m liberal, so I’m going to take these views out,” but in everyday life, those views play a part. People do believe that God has a message for them or has had an effect in their lives. How far is that from Antigone? How far is that from a girl saying, “The deities above have told me that I have to bury my brother. Otherwise he’ll be in purgatory, not allowed to go to the land of the dead. And then I will be to blame. Then I will have sinned.”

Why not keep that conversation [about spirituality] going if it’s relevant? If we keep trying to skirt around it and pretend it’s not there, we won’t really understand each other. I want to go to the theater and get an understanding. I want to understand Jerry Falwell a little better. I want to know what it means to be that fundamental. I want to know why you want to burn the Koran without demonizing you. The more we keep that distance, the more problems we have. We’ll never move together.
WILL PEOPLE LEAVE MARCUS WITH A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF A CERTAIN COMMUNITY?

Marcus is hard because it is designed to defy my community. It’s specifically done to agitate and upset them. First of all, it’s really funny, and normally when we do something about gay men in the black community we are lamenting, “Woe is the gay man in the black community!” and everybody goes, “Awww, poor gay man in the black community!” [Marcus] is saying, “Actually, here is a community that, in more than one way, accepts Marcus. They may call him bad names, but they pretty much accept that he is gay. Don’t do this play and at the top [of the posters] write, “He’s got a secret.” No. There is no secret. Everybody knows he’s gay, including his mother. From the first scene on, they tease him. When I was a kid, people did that all the time, and later I said, “But then, when I came out of the closet, why did everybody have such a fit? You’ve been saying I was gay since I was nine.”

WOULD YOU SAY MARCUS IS A GAY PLAY?

It’s definitely a gay play, in the way that it is about identity. You could essentially call Brothers Size a queer play (a play with queer politics), but it’s not about identification. Marcus is, and that’s why it is a gay play. That’s why it’s a black play as well, because it is about figuring out how that identity works.

The thing that has always made it hard for me—especially dealing with my “own community” in Liberty City—is this notion that you can’t be more than one thing. You have to be only one thing. That’s why Elegba in Red and Brown Water scares the hell out of people. During the part where Elegba and Egungun get together, you could hear rat piss on cotton. Here is this boy who has been running around talking about girls the entire play, had a baby at 16 (and is proud of it), and then all of a sudden he’s basically making out with the [male] deejay. People were like, “What!? Oh my God!”

You can’t be that. You have to be one or the other. I always found that interesting because I’ve always felt like I’ve had a duplicitousness about myself. I’ve always felt, “Okay, today, I have to identify with this camp. Today I have to speak like this for about 35 minutes, and when I go home I’ll speak like this, and when I talk to my best friend I’ll speak like this, and when I talk to my boyfriend I’ll speak like this.” My poor boyfriend, it drives him nuts because sometimes I’ll be happy and the next moment I’ll tell him to leave me alone because I’m working. He can’t understand how those two people exist together, and I tell him, “There’s more in here, you realize. You just get those two. Wait until it’s been 15 years and you find out there’s actually about 90.”

The other day I was having a conversation about race and it was annoying the shit out of me. It started with eight people in England asking me, “Where are you from?” I said,
“Miami,” and they asked, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, but where are your parents from?” I said, “Miami.” They asked, “Well, where are your grandparents from?” “Miami. I’m third-generation Miami.” “Okay, but your ancestry?” I said, “Well, my grandmother’s grandmother is Irish.” “Are you trying to be funny?” “No, I’m not trying to be funny at all, but you’re trying to make me say that I’m AFRICAN American, and I think I’m just American. I’m American and I’m black. That’s pretty much all I can give you.” If I go through the lineage, I can splinter off into my Native American grandmother and I can splinter off into my Irish great-great-grandmother and then my Senegalese . . . It just gets complicated, because at this point nobody’s one thing anymore, but everybody needs to identify you.

Marcus is a play that says, “Well, I may be gay, but I also see dreams that tell the future.” How magical is that? You can be more than just one thing. You can be a pillar in your community but also be something they disdain.

**DO YOU THINK YOU’LL USE SAN PERE AS A TOUCHSTONE FOR FUTURE WORK?**

Sure, but if San Pere is where we located it on the map the first time we did these plays, it’s gone. The hurricane comes and it goes away. There’s not much to go back to.

**IT’S INTERESTING THAT YOU’VE SAID YOU DON’T THINK OF MARCUS AS A TRAGEDY, BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT HURRICANE KATRINA IS COMING.**

Oskar Eustis said at The Public [Theater]: “Listen, you’ve got a few references in there that really push the play towards Katrina. Could you cut those?” And I told him, “Nobody’s going to think about that. It’s been five years.” Because, for me, I don’t necessarily mean Katrina. But enough people went there, so I decided to cut those moments out.

I lived through [Hurricane] Andrew. In my mind, there’s Before Andrew and there’s After Andrew. For anybody who’s lived through a natural disaster, there will always be that marker, because when the sky falls, or when the earth moves, when something that you are sure is going to be there just isn’t, you submit to the idea that you are just this and not in control of all of that. Something shifts in your mind-set. You can make all of the decisions you want to about who you are and where you’re going to go, and then all of a sudden the sky rains down on you. Then what do you do?

After Andrew, my mother came into the room and started sweeping, and I didn’t understand why. But it’s about that courage to say, “You know what, I’m going to continue to live, or try to live, in some way, shape, or form.” That step forward, even if it doesn’t make any sense—because certainly sweeping up in the middle of the rubble made no sense to me (and probably to no one around us), but my mother felt like that would help somehow.

For me, that’s why Marcus isn’t a tragedy—because I think that life does go on.
There were days I thought I was born into a third-world country. Partly from overzealous imagination, but also from the scarce ability to keep running water in our home coupled with the battle to keep the rampant rodents that plagued our project from chomping into my baby sister. I was not in Port au Prince or a slum outside Rio de Janeiro, but the languages and songs and foods outside my doorstep were of French Creole cadence and Afro-Spanish malaise. I was still in an American city. I was brought up near the Tropic of Capricorn, hurricanes common as mosquito bites. Sea breezes strong enough to send you sailing and starry nights that made the voyages of Columbus seem distant and not yet present. Yet there in the midst of that beauty were drug lords who ran the street corner like Wall Street and Beirut combined.

I lived in the other America; the America that doesn’t always get depicted in the cinema. The America that we are told to pretend isn’t there. And in an attempt to create theater that told untold stories, that gave voice to another half of America, I created The Brother/Sister Plays.

Theater as Community

My first building block of theatrical understanding came from watching my grandfather preach. It was the way the crowd hollered at my granddaddy when he would pause. When he would tell them they didn’t want to hear the rest, they would shout, “Preach on!” The drums and the organs of the church began to catch his rhythm, my grandfather acting out portions of the piece and the church re-seeing what he described and singing and moaning and crying until they all were on the same accord.

This is theater as community. It is holy theater not because it exalts something on high, but because for the hour or so onstage the audience and actor are one and all those people, though each seeing it slightly differently, are believing—following the same course or going on a journey together. In The Brother/Sister Plays, I have tried, through language, content and format, to invigorate the communal portion of the plays. The actors speak stage directions that invite the audience to remember that they are in a theater and that the story that is being told is for them and to feel free to call and respond back. Truly, in a world where stories are told in many beautiful and spectacular ways, the live theater still has the powerful construct of communal journey, communal belief, community.
THEATER AS RITUAL
When the slaves of the New World were forced into Christianity, many—especially in places such as Haiti, Brazil, Cuba, and New Orleans—mixed in their home religion and kept practice of their old ways with the European new. Their stories are complex, not good versus evil, but good and evil at the same time. Life is good, but so is death. Radiantly beautiful is bad, but so too is ugly. The archetypes of these deities were worn on my friends like sleeves. I began to investigate how to use ancient myths, stories, to tell urban ones. I found that the stories are all still there. So I began taking old stories from the canon of the Yoruba and splicing them, placing them down in a mythological Housing Project in the South. This made the stories feel both old and new, as if they stood on an ancient history but were exploring the here and now. I mixed in lore and theatrical devices from the Greeks, from Spanish Lorca, from Jacobean England.

This ritual is not new. In order to make the pyramids that still stand today, slaves were made to mix the mortar of old shards of pots, clay bowls in with the new hay, water, and sand because that mixture of old and new created something stronger. Something else. The ritual onstage is taking these very old stories, archetypes, myths, and even rumors, and playing them out with new voices, new bodies, set in new and present times. Hoping to create evenings that make something powerful, something distant yet present, something . . . else.

THEATER AS REMEMBRANCE
The Yoruba believe that when evoking the spirit of the Gods in the space, the goal is not to fully become the deity and lose self, but rather to become oneself more fully and therefore evoke the god in you. It is a great practice of mine that actors never forget that they are actors always, creating theater, telling stories for an audience, and that they themselves must become their most vulnerable in order to become that character. Then we the audience will see them at their core and begin to watch them move in these extraordinary and sometimes foreign circumstances but understand and relate to them. The actors in the trilogy are asked to play multiple roles, sometimes inside one play, sometimes between plays. This allows for a certain amount of reminding: that we are in a theater space, that something formal and holy is happening, that you the audience are most important and we cannot go on this journey of belief without your approval, help, and willingness to go. As the man from Madagascar reminds Oshoosi [in The Brothers Size], “C’mon, let’s go!”

**MARCUS; OR THE SECRET OF SWEET**  
**DESIGN PRESENTATION**  
Excerpts from Remarks Made to a.c.t. Cast and Creative Team, September 30, 2010

During the first week of rehearsal of each production, the director and designers present their vision for its design, which is typically the culmination of months of research, discussion, and textual analysis. This introduction is a kind of “snapshot” of the creative team’s understanding of the world of the play at the moment they step into the room with the actors, an understanding that will evolve and grow and perhaps change in significant ways as the cast brings life and breath and physical action to the playwright’s words over the following four weeks of rehearsal.

For *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet*, we did things a little differently. *Marcus* is one of three plays that comprise Tarell Alvin McCraney’s *Brother/Sister* cycle, which is being given its West Coast premiere by a three-theater collaboration among Marin Theatre Company, Magic Theatre, and a.c.t. Staff from each theater were present for the first day of rehearsal for all three plays. Additionally, a.c.t. invited three high school classes to attend the presentation, which was followed by a Louisiana-style lunch and a reading of the play.

Below are excerpts from remarks made during that presentation, which offer a glimpse into the initial impulses behind the look and feel of the upcoming production.

**ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MARK RUCKER, DIRECTOR OF MARCUS**

It means so much to me that this is my first show as associate artistic director. One of the first things [a.c.t. Artistic Director] Carey [Perloff] asked me to do when I came here was to build bridges in the community, and I couldn’t have imagined anything like this happening so quickly. I am so grateful to Marin and the Magic for collaborating with us. As you see, we’ve plastered our rehearsal room with research from all three productions, because we want to carry the first two with us while we work. We’ll be working together to weave all of the colors that are in this piece, which make it speak to the other two pieces but make it also incredibly unique. I am so proud that I have spent this fall with Octavio Solis and Ryan Rilette [directors of *The Brothers Size* and *In the Red and Brown Water*, respectively] working on these plays. It has already brought such enormous goodwill to our community, and I am deeply proud of the two productions that are already playing.
I love this play so much. It was one of the first things Carey threw at me when I came into the building last fall; she said, “You have to read this,” and I did and here we are. I love Tarell’s incredible voice. We had the great gift of having Tarell with us for a couple of days, a couple of weeks ago, and he promised me he wants to come back and see us [perform]. It was wonderful to talk with him, to be with him, and just to take in what he’s like. That’s something that I love about working on a new play—you get to have the author around.

Tarell has said that these plays are about the actors, and about the characters. What we aspire to do is present these actors with simplicity and energy and joy. We have an incredible gathering of actors who represent our core company [Gregory Wallace], our recent M.F.A. Program graduates [Omozé Idehenre and Tobie L. Windham], our current students [Shinelle Azoroh and Richard Prioleau], a local legend [Margo Hall], a young exciting actor from New York [Jared McNeill]. I feel like I have an ensemble that has been together for years, and that is such a gift. I’m thrilled we get Tobie from The Brothers Size and Jared from In the Red and Brown Water coming to our production. They’ve brought the work of those plays with them—they’ve brought the passion and they’ve brought the joy right into this room.

And I am so pleased that these high school students are here today and grateful that your teachers went out of their way to bring you on a Thursday afternoon. We want you to know that this play is for you. It is a play about being a teenager—about finding oneself and accepting one’s sexuality. It is a gay play, and it makes me so proud that my first play
here as associate artistic director is a gay play, but it is also a play about becoming a man. It is not just about sexuality. It is about finding one’s self and understanding how one’s past can contribute to one’s present and one’s future. It is about family. It’s about mourning. It is about that amazing combination of the emotion, passion, and joy that happens at this period in one’s life. There’s such energy in it, and humor and loss and acceptance.

One of the incredible challenges—a wonderful challenge—for us is that we are doing this beautiful play in a very large space. We’ve done an enormous amount of research about this part of Louisiana [where the play is set], but because it is a fictional place we had a lot of permission in creating the world. With the design, we wanted to make sure that the actors are well supported, but in a way that is evocative and simple. We want to pull things as far forward as possible in the space, so that the actors aren’t in a vast open void, while creating a kind of landscape for them.

We also started immediately talking about some of the evocative imagery that this play, this locale, this imaginary place conjures. We know that it takes place before a storm, which may or may not be Hurricane Katrina. There is a sense that everything is happening just before some impending storm. You see it in the escalation of the action in the play. The characters are just starting to get information, to understand, when the storm comes, and [that timing] creates energy and tension.

Our talk about the imagery turned into a talk about the possibility of using video projections. In this play there is dream, there is daydream, there is mirage, there is storm, there is mourning; there are touch points that are places in which reality becomes altered. We’ll use video to support those moments. We won’t use it heavily; we don’t want this to be a bottom-to-top video extravaganza. The idea is to support and to be evocative, but never to take away from the language of the play, never to take away from what the actors are doing.

You could say that the play takes place on the eve of Katrina, but it could be any storm. We wanted to keep the clothes contemporary, but not like today necessarily: something that could work five years ago as well as for now.

—Director Mark Rucker on the costume design of Marcus
CREATING THE EMOTIONAL COCOON
An Interview with Lighting Designer James F. Ingalls

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

Veteran lighting designer James F. Ingalls is no stranger to A.C.T. A friend and colleague of Artistic Director Carey Perloff since designing her 1986 production of David Allen’s Cheapside for Roundabout Theatre Company in New York, he traveled to San Francisco a few years later to design the lighting for Robert Woodruff’s notorious A.C.T. production of The Duchess of Malfi. He has since worked on nine A.C.T. productions, including, most recently, Perloff’s Phèdre last January. His work has also been seen in the Bay Area at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, San Francisco Ballet, and San Francisco Opera; he counts among his many honors a recent Knight of Illumination Award, earned for his work on Mark Morris’s L’allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato, which toured to London in April.

The role of a lighting designer is slightly different from that of a scenic or costume designer. Ingalls observes, “With lighting design, you don’t know really know what it is until you’ve done it. Light is intangible: you can’t really draw pictures of it, or make models of it.” Like all the designers on a theatrical creative team, the lighting designer first reads and discusses the play with the director and fellow designers. Rather than submitting fully conceived designs before rehearsals begin, however, he or she hands in the first step, a “light plot”: a document similar to an architectural blueprint that describes the necessary lighting instruments and where and how they should be positioned in the theater. The actual lighting of actors and scenery does not take place until weeks later, when the production transfers from the rehearsal studio to the theater for technical rehearsals during the final days before the show begins preview performances, when the actors are finally able to rehearse on the fully constructed set and in costume. The lighting design cannot be executed until everything else is in place. This means that, in addition to supporting the play, a lighting design supports the other designs by pulling everything together.

Ingalls is also no stranger to the work of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney. He lit Seattle Repertory Theatre’s production of The Breach, written by McCraney and two other playwrights in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The same stories that inspired McCraney’s section of The Breach also inspired Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet, which he completed soon after. Ingalls first saw Marcus at Yale—making him one of the lucky few to have experienced the full-length version of the play. Ingalls has since seen two productions of the complete trilogy, first at The Public Theater in New York and then at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago.
On the day we spoke with Ingalls, he had just experienced the trilogy for a third time, this time in the Bay Area. He started his day with a student matinee performance of Marin Theatre Company’s production of *In the Red and Brown Water*. He then attended the *Marcus* company’s first read-through of the play at A.C.T., followed by the evening performance of Magic Theatre’s production of *The Brothers Size*.

By the time we caught up with him for a late dinner, he was still buzzing with the creative energy sparked by the day’s activities: “This is the kind of experience we live for in the theater.”

WHENEVER WE ASK ABOUT THE DESIGN OF THIS PRODUCTION, WE HEAR THE WORDS “EVOCATIVE” AND “SIMPLE.” WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR YOU?

What we’re trying to do is find ways to support the story. What’s great about Tarell’s writing is that it’s so complete, and yet it’s so economical. It’s like slightly enhanced line drawing. There’s not a lot of warm-up, and there’s not a lot of denouement. [The actors] hit the ground running, they do [a scene], and it’s on to the next. That’s instructive to the design approach. It packs a punch. It’s wildly effective.

It’s like what I said to the actors today [at the first rehearsal of *Marcus*]: the storytelling is strong we’ll be trying to be supportive and yet stay out of the way. We don’t want to create realistic spaces; the words do that. We just want to support them. Like with Shakespeare, you let the words and the actors do the show, and then just surround them with a feeling. The great thing about lighting is that it can provide an emotional base, an emotional landscape, an emotional arc. It can be as simple as, “This scene is warm, and this other scene is cool.” [Tarell] writes “night”; he writes “the bayou”; he writes “day”; and he writes “dream” . . . 

AND “MIRAGE,” “DAYDREAM,” AND “VISION” . . .

Right. All those are the “production numbers” within the piece. It’s very smartly structured. Our job, again, is to support that, but not too much. Usually [those visions are] Marcus’s soliloquies, just like in Shakespeare. You don’t want to have a battle going on onstage while Richard III is talking about that battle. What light can do, I think, and I hope, is provide a kind of emotional cocoon, so that the audience is subliminally helped by the atmosphere.

With our colleague Alex [Nichols], who’s doing the projections, we’ve decided to enhance the production with a visual plane of projection during the magic moments—the moments of magical realism. We [the *Marcus* design team] met last night, and we’re all really on board that the goal is never to be photographic. Never show, say, a picture of a porch. These moments in opera would be arias, when there’s an explosion of feeling and
inner thought. It’s emotional. It’s wildly not real, but also completely of the moment. We’re trying to support that with a video plane in a very precise rectangle at the back of the space.

IS THAT WHAT THE RECTANGLE IS ON THE SCENIC DESIGN MODEL?
Yes, that will be the video area. The video will be another plane of light—on the screen and softened by a scrim in front of it so it has a kind of hazy, more distant impressionistic quality, floating above the actors. Hopefully it will create a subliminal emotional landscape during those magic moments. That’s our goal. Again, everything I’m saying goes back to what you’ve already heard: hopefully the design will be evocative, subtle, and in support of the emotional arc.

WE’VE ALL BECOME SO USED TO WANTING EVERYTHING EXPLAINED TO US, THAT WE LOOK FOR THE LITERAL REFERENCES TO CONNECT THE DOTS.
Sometimes directors say to makeup designers, “I don’t want any makeup; I just want the people.” We [designers] are all focused on our specialties, and unchecked we could just go crazy. The challenge with this play is to fight our own work ethic and have the confidence to know that the piece we’re working on is so brilliantly conceived and so brilliantly complete that we just have to be in support [of it]. We don’t want to hang a thousand-watt
worklight or fluorescent tube (like in your horrible rec room, or something), because that wouldn't help. What might help is a kind of a composed, beautiful space. So that's our goal.

But you're right, this design is actually trending away from literalness, because the text provides everything we need. Tarell is the clearest. If you just do what he's written, you've done more than enough.

HAVE YOU BEEN TO NEW ORLEANS?
I've been to New Orleans twice, both times pre-Katrina. I found it wildly fascinating, and beautiful, and complex. I can't even imagine what it's like now. [Recently] I heard a report on NPR, and I really hope I've got the statistics wrong, but I think they said every 15 minutes a piece of land the size of an American football field gets washed away in the gulf. Even if it's 15 days, or months, it's horrific.

DO YOU HAVE A SENSE OF HOW OUR PRODUCTION, AND THE BAY AREA TRIOLOGY, IS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER PRODUCTIONS YOU'VE SEEN?
I really was really encouraged today to see that [MTC and the Magic] have done the same thing we are trying to do, meaning that the space comes out of the void, there's not a lot of indicative scenery, and the production relies on the actors in space.

Set drawing for Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet by scenic designer Loy Arcenas
I think design is really about appropriateness, and sometimes we get it wrong. Ming Cho Lee, the wonderful scenic designer and teacher of design at Yale, says, “We do not want to do Design with a capital D.” What he means by that is, we don’t want design for its own sake. It needs to be in support of and in conjunction with the text, and the productions I’ve seen today clearly got that and said, “This is enough.”

1. “Every year during the past decade, Louisiana has lost about 24 square miles of wetlands—about the size of one football field every 38 minutes.”

   “Since the 1930s, when scientists first started tracking wetland erosion, 1,900 square miles have been lost—an area the size of Delaware. What Katrina did was speed up the process. Eighty square miles were wiped out by the hurricane in eight hours.” “In Louisiana, Wetlands Erosion Is a Slow-Moving Crisis,” Betty Ann Bowser, PBS NewsHour, August 30, 2010, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2010/08/in-louisiana-wetlands-erosion-is-slow-moving-crisis.html.

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**THE MUSIC OF MARCUS**

“**WALK WITH ME LORD**” Traditional African American spiritual.

“**WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN**” Traditional African American spiritual made into a jazz standard by Louis Armstrong in the 1930s.

“**MAKE YOU SWEAT**” On R&B artist Keith Sweat’s 1990 album *I’ll Give All My Love to You*, known for his distinctive whining vocal style, Sweat was most popular during the late ’80s–early ’90s.

**CARMINA BURANA** A 25-movement cantata by German composer Carl Orff (1937) adapted from medieval poems. Excerpts from the opening and closing movements—both titled “O Fortuna”—have been used repeatedly in horror movies and film trailers.

“**SENSITIVITY**” First solo hit of Ralph Tresvant (of New Edition); it topped the *Billboard* R&B charts in December 1990 and was later released on Tresvant’s self-titled debut album.

“**WHAT WOULD I DO IF I COULD FEEL**” One of the Tin Man’s songs from *The Wiz* (1975), a Broadway musical adaptation of Frank L. Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* set in New York with an African American cast; the *New York Times* calls it “a slow-grooving ballad with the appealing flavor of old-school 1970s R&B.”

“**SUNSHOWER**” On the 1976 self-titled debut album of Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band, which was formed by Haitian immigrants and known for its blend of big-band swing, jump blues, show tunes, and Caribbean boogie.

“**ADDICTION**” On Kanye West’s 2005 album *Late Registration*, released the day after Hurricane Katrina made landfall.
THE OPEN SECRET OF SWEET

BY EMILY HOFFMAN

Don’t do this play and at the top [of the posters] write, “He’s got a secret.” No. There is no secret. Everybody knows [Marcus is] gay.

—Tarell Alvin McCraney on Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet

Marcus Eshu may not be certain about his sexuality, but everyone around him is pretty sure he’s “sweet.” The exact origins of the word—which can range in tone from gently teasing to cruel—are unclear, though it is sometimes used more generally with words like “soft” to describe cowardly or unmasculine behavior. In Marcus, Shaunta Iyun, always full of answers, claims that the practice of calling gay men sweet comes from the method white slave owners employed to punish slaves caught having homosexual sex: whipping the offenders and pouring sugar into their wounds to form a sticky, stinging mass that attracted bugs and infection.

The drama of sweetness in contemporary black culture is not about public revelation and punishment. Instead it is a dance of unspoken acknowledgment, a flirtation with the limits of acceptance. “In general,” says E. Patrick Johnson, scholar and author of Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, “putting one’s business in the street’ is something frowned upon in many black communities. . . . [M]any of the men in Sweet Tea have not ‘come out’—as it were—to their families, even though, by their own acknowledgement, their family members ‘know.’ The open secret of these men’s homosexuality, in most instances, complicates our common notions of what it means to be ‘out,’ especially in light of the white gay community’s insistence on a politics of visibility.”
Lack of discussion does not always indicate dis-\-taste, disgust, or intolerance. Sometimes, according to Johnson, “the more flamboyant one is about his sexuality, the more respect he garners,” even when that sexuality is not openly acknowledged. One of Johnson’s interviewees recounted the story of “a deacon in her church who used to cross-dress all throughout her childhood; her mother forbade her and her siblings to poke fun at this man because it was ‘disrespectful.’”

Men like Johnson’s deacon are often fixtures in the black community. In Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America, Keith Boykin tells the story of a much-loved relative: “People in the family never really talked about Uncle Michael, but we knew he was gay. He was a well-known organist at a popular church in St. Louis, and he had a fraternity of male friends whose association with him raised a few eyebrows in the community. Nevertheless, as far as I can recall, Uncle Michael was very well liked and respected.” Boykin’s uncle was eventually found dead in his apartment, however, likely the victim of a hate crime. The anecdote is extreme, but it touches on the danger that can lurk at the heart of silent acceptance, the precariousness of a life lived in partial secrecy.

Many coming-out stories of black gay men are characterized by similar, sometimes baffling duali-\-ties of acceptance and rejection, of knowing and refusal to know. McCraney’s personal story illus-\-trates: “From the first scene on, [the other characters] tease [Marcus]. When I was a kid, people did that all the time, and I said, ‘But then, when I came out of the closet, why did everybody have such a fit? You’ve been saying I was gay since I was nine.’” Marcus delves into this limbo, excavating the joys and terrors of living in the in-between space of the open secret.
Enter Shua with his Kangol / Low . . . Down Low.

—Shua in *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet*

When Shua, a smooth talker from the Bronx, sidles his way into the second act of *Marcus*, he announces more than just his entrance. Marcus does not hear, or does not pick up on, Shua’s sly pun about the way he wears his hat (his Kangol)—he’s too busy blushing at Shua’s first line: “Damn you got pretty eyes for a nigga.” But something very specific is being signaled to the audience about Shua’s character and sexual proclivities: Shua is on the down low.

The “down low” (or “dl”) is an American slang term that typically refers to the behavior of seemingly “straight” black men who have sex with other men on the sly. These men often maintain a hypermasculine image, and many have wives or girlfriends who know nothing about their concealed proclivities.

The term became widely popularized in the late ’90s and early 2000s when a slew of media outlets covered the phenomenon in the hopes of explaining the high incidence rate of HIV among non-drug-using African American women. The theory went that there must be black men having high-risk unprotected sex with male partners, contracting HIV, and passing the infection to their female partners—through unprotected sex that the female partners, believing they were in exclusively heterosexual (if not necessarily monogamous) relationships, considered to be safe.

This “transmission bridge” theory was largely accepted as truth by mainstream media, though the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) contested that there were “no data to confirm or refute publicized accounts of HIV risk behavior associated with these men.” Keith Boykin, author of *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America*, maintains that the epidemiological evidence for the theory is shoddy at best, that it teaches us nothing new about HIV transmission (unprotected sex is unprotected sex is
unprotected sex), and that the wildfire media coverage was but another instance of the historic demonization of black male sexuality.

Regardless of the media’s claims about HIV transmission, the exposure of a vibrant and active hidden subculture of black MSM (Men who Sleep with Men) who don’t identify as gay or bisexual fascinated America. In 2003, the New York Times Magazine announced in a lengthy article (“Double Lives on the Down Low”): “Rejecting a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate, many black men have settled on a new identity, with its own vocabulary and customs and its own name: Down Low.”

There is a long paper trail of secret and semisecret black male homosexuality, beginning in precolonial Africa, and McCraney writes some of this history into Marcus. Trying to coax an admission of “sweetness” out of Marcus, Shaunta Iyun says:

Round here Niggas think they got it Hard on the ‘down low’ . . . What about back then? Two slaves one dark, and one light, one house And the other field. They see each other one day. That sparkle in they eye, they begin to gather Together when they can, hide their love from the light.

Shaunta’s particular account may be an invention of her powerful imagination, but there do exist slave narratives that make reference to male homosexuality. In The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave, Estaban Montejo, an Afro-Cuban slave who died in 1973 at the age of 113, writes about exclusively male slave families: male “wives” would tend the small bit of land Cuban slaves were allowed, and their “husbands” would take the produce to market. Though these families were scorned by older slaves, there was no pejorative term for male homosexuality during the slave era. Montejo says, “To tell the truth, [homosexuality] never bothered me. I am of the opinion that a man can stick his arse where he wants.” It was only after the abolition of slavery, Montejo explains, as former slaves began to be integrated into white society, that words like “effeminate” came into use as derogatory descriptors of men thought to be homosexual.

Scholars of race and sexuality have exposed white America’s violent regulation of black sexuality, from the rape of slave women by their white masters to the lynching of black men accused of violating white women, to the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. Black male homosexuality did not escape this regulatory oppression. Shaunta puts it elegantly in Marcus:

Say the slave owners get pissed if they find Out they slaves got gay love.
That means less children, less slaves . . . less . . .
Think about it Marcus . . . Where else it come from?
We just naturally mad at gay folk? Come on!

Though this particular logic may be another invention of Shaunta, scholars have made similar arguments. White slave owners exerted tremendous control over the sexual activities of their slaves, simultaneously demanding procreation and destroying the family unit by indiscriminately selling off children, fathers, and mothers. Alternative family structures became a necessity; heterosexual, monogamous marriages often impossible and irrelevant. After the abolition of slavery, historian Roderick A. Ferguson writes, it was the very unorthodox familial and sexual arrangements produced by slavery that the Freedman's Bureau cited as evidence of freed slaves' “uncivilized, undisciplined . . . and wholly unchristian ways” that made them poor candidates for citizenship. According to Ferguson, throughout the 20th century “common-law marriages, out-of-wedlock births, lodgers, single-headed families, nonmonogamous sexual relationships, unmarried persons, and homosexual persons and relationships” continued to be cited by white media and lawmakers as evidence of black Americans' “perversions of the American family ideal.”

While it is simplistic to draw a straight line between the sexual lives of slaves and contemporary expressions of black sexuality, this history provides some backstory for the complicated position of homosexuality in black America today. In 2008, 70 percent of black voters voted in favor of Proposition 8, the measure banning gay marriage in California. Yet gay historian George Chauncey asserts that it is inappropriate to say that black America is less tolerant of homosexuality than white America: “It's unfair to categorize it that way today, and it's absolutely not the case historically. Especially in the 1940s and '50s, when anti-gay attitudes were at their peak in white American society, black society was much more accepting. People usually expected their gay friends and relatives to remain discreet, but even so, it was better than in white society.”

Why the determined secrecy? Why, as the New York Times reported in “Double Lives on the Down Low,” the fixation on hypermasculinity? Certainly, many black men who have sex with men do so in secret out of a sense of necessity; they worry that they will be rejected by their families and friends if they reveal their true desires. These men fit within a familiar story of gay development—they are “closeted”—and there are likely to be fewer of them as the gay rights movement achieves greater success and visibility. They are part of a historical narrative that includes the openly and less-openly gay figures of the Harlem Renaissance (Langston Hughes being among the most famous in the latter category), James Baldwin's
radical writings of the 1950s, the exclusion of black men from the AIDS activism of the late '80s, and the formation of alternative black gay activist groups in recent years.

In the '90s, a number of men on the DL “outed” themselves in tell-all memoirs, renouncing their past dishonesties and infidelities. E. Lynn Harris’s originally self-published *Invisible Life* sold more than a million copies, and J. L. King’s *On the Down Low* became an instant *New York Times* best seller. These successes spawned an entire subgenre of self-help books for women who suspect their men may be on the down low.

There are many African American men on the down low, however, who do not fit neatly into a narrative of gay progress, who simply do not consider themselves gay, or even bisexual, for that matter. For them, being on the down low is not a step on the path to an openly gay life; it’s a permanent choice. They have no interest in “being gay,” at least as mainstream American culture defines it. Within this group there is, of course, a spectrum, ranging from men who would never set foot in a gay club or a bathhouse, to those who enthusiastically participate in a DL cultural and social scene that, while operating far beneath the public radar, rivals the white gay scene.

The question of whether the down low is to be condemned, as many gay activists have done, as an elaborate rationalization of fear, repression, and life in the closet, or whether it is to be seen as a valid, alternative lifestyle choice, is an open debate. “A lot of people look at these DL guys and say they must really be gay, no matter what they say about themselves,” says Chauncey, “but who’s to know? In the early 1900s, many men in immigrant and African American working-class communities engaged in sex with other men without being stigmatized as queer. But it’s hard for people to accept that something that seems so intimate and inborn to them as being gay or straight isn’t universal.”

Chauncey’s scholarship borrows from the work of Michel Foucault, the French scholar who demonstrated in his *History of Sexuality* that homosexuality, as we understand it (and heterosexuality, for that matter), is an invention of the 19th century. Before then, homosexuality was something you *did*, not something you *were*. Just as it would be anachronistic to use the 20th-century term “gay,” with all of its cultural and historical implications, to describe ancient Greek pederasts (men who had sexual relations with younger boys), it may be beside the point to apply labels like “gay” or “closeted” to men on the DL.

Furthermore, race and class are important determining factors in what a gay identity might look like, and paradigms that pertain to white middle-class gay men may not apply to black, Latino, or Asian gay men, or even to working-class white gay men. In 1983, the poet Salih Michael Fisher issued the following powerful warning about diversity in the gay “community” in his poem “Assumption about the Harlem Brown Baby.” Fisher himself was not on the down low—far from it—but his message still applies:
Do not assume I came out on Christopher Street
as the piers and tracks began to heat and dance in the
night

I came out at fifteen in the streets of Harlem and South
Bronx . . .
And back then I was Eschu . . . the trickster . . . a
chameleon
in my identity . . . I played the butch-queen games well
For the period of blood can be a time of confusion . . .
Of direct lines between straight and narrow paths not
taken
. . .
And do not assume . . . you . . . my friend
that the first bars I went to were gay
and had men posing as wax barbie dolls
and twisted g. i. joes

The first bars that I went to find a man
was mixed and three-fourth straight
And the first man I walked out with . . .
had a thirty-eight between his belt
And a road called “sudden paradise”
He was a dope dealer . . . he was a saint
a devil in disguise . . . and he taught me to bleed
at sixteen . . . with the first heart broken
. . .
So do not assume that I was some Harlem brown baby
that came out in your world . . . your ghetto . . . your
constructs
of reality . . . I came out in my own.

—Freedom in This Village: Twenty-Five Years of Black Gay
Men’s Writing, 1979 to the Present, edited by E. Lynn Harris
TWO-SPIRIT

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Say he have a gift to see Things we all can’t. Hear / Messages and things we can’t Quite. . . . Say Sweet boys got a secret of sight.

—Elegua in Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet

The Yoruba deities Eshu/Legba “are often noted as two spirits or twins,” Tarell Alvin McCraney has written. Marcus Eshu, the title character of McCraney’s play Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet, seems to have inherited at least some of the qualities of this kind of being, especially the ability to have dreams and visions of both personal and communal significance. “Two-spirit” is not a Yoruba term; McCraney is referring in this context to a term that came into use among Native Americans in the 1990s as an alternative to “gay” and berdache (the latter is a French word for “homosexual” common among Native American tribes; it was used to identify them by European Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries). Two-spirit refers to the belief that some people embody both a feminine and a masculine essence. Such men also were considered as belonging to “the third gender,” and

“We’wha, a Native American (Zuni), sits and weaves a belt on a backstrap loom, Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico (1880–90). We’wha is a berdache, a man who prefers women’s work and adopts [elements of] female dress; here he is dressed as a woman in a woven manta, moccasins, and squash blossom necklace.” Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, call no. X-30150.
such women to “the fourth gender,” rather than to the traditional binary categories. Although characteristics of two-spirit people differ somewhat from tribe to tribe, their presence (particularly men) has been documented in more than 155 tribes.

Will Roscoe, a historian of Native American culture, has noted that two-spirit people have four common characteristics:

• They are known for their preference for and achievements in the work or activities usually associated with the “opposite” sex (although a number of two-spirit men—and some women—were also known as great warriors and played significant roles in various aspects of warfare, from fighting to directing victory ceremonies).

• They “are distinguished from men and women in terms of temperament, dress, lifestyle, and social roles.” Some would dress in the style of the “opposite” sex; some in a style that was neither traditionally male nor female, including articles of clothing associated with both. Historically, two-spirit people have been considered special and belong to a different gender because they bridge the realms of male and female and move freely in both social worlds. As Roscoe writes: a twin-spirit combines “elements of male and female social, economic, and religious roles.”

• Their identity is considered to be the result of supernatural intervention. Gods have given them the gift of visions and dreams foretelling the future (more often among the tribes of the Plains than others).

• They form physical and emotional relationships with non-twin-spirit members of their own sex.

In contrast with Marcus’s and Shua’s position in the San Pere community (and that of many other black gay men) regarding their sexuality, two-spirit people held places of honor in their tribes. Contact with the supernatural, Roscoe writes, “was believed to bestow skills and luck in activities that resulted in wealth and prestige.” In some cases, they were even feared for their supernatural powers. Among certain tribes, a two-spirit priesthood developed, its members living as a specially recognized group of religious leaders who together fulfilled several spiritual functions.

Tendencies towards two-spiritedness usually emerged in childhood, very often before puberty, when a child showed interest in the tasks or work usually associated with the opposite gender. Such children, Roscoe writes, often were given care and encouragement by their family, even before they had dreams and visions of the future that, among the Plains tribes, ratified their status as two-spirit.
In the 1930s, one anthropologist quoted tribal elders making remarks such as, “If there were no nadle [a Navajo word for two-spirit] the countryside would change. They are responsible for all the wealth in the country. If there were no more left, the horses, sheep and Navajo would all go. They are leaders just like President Roosevelt.” Also, “You must respect a nadle. They are, somehow, sacred and holy.”

Roscoe writes that, “For all these reasons, families welcomed a nadleehi in their midst. According to [anthropologist Willard] Hill, ‘As they grew older and assumed the character of nadle, this solicitude and respect increased, not only on the part of their families but from the community as a whole.” They were given important responsibilities such as managing family property and supervising agricultural and domestic work as well as religious functions. They were at the center of their community.

Those two-spirits who were known for their visions were considered to be mediators between their community and supernatural powers, able to transmit messages from one world to the other, and were important participants in ceremonies meant to connect the two. Among the Crow, for example, a two-spirit would cut down the tree used in the sun dance ceremony. The tree was seen as the conduit between the dancers and the Sun Father.

One of the last traditional two-spirits among the Crow was Osh-Tisch, considered to be a powerful medicine man because of a vision he had as a youth. In the vision, as Roscoe relates, he was taken by spirits underwater, where he was given the ability to mediate between spiritual forces. In his 20s, he, along with some other Crows, fought with the American army against the Sioux and Cheyenne in the wars of the 1870s (why he fought with the army is not known; Roscoe speculates it might have been the result of a vision, or to revenge the death of a loved one, or because the Sioux and Cheyenne were traditional enemies of the Crows) and was so heroic in battle that he earned the name “Finds Them and Kills Them.” He was also renowned among Native and European Americans alike for his skills in turning buffalo hides into clothing and other domestic goods and for making hand-sewn quilts. He won awards for these in the early 20th century at the Yellowstone County fair, as well as for “collections of wild roots, berries, and meats, prepared and dried according to traditional techniques.” He also had a reputation as the best poker player in the region.

In other words, Osh-Tisch was celebrated for many skills, from dreaming to fighting to quilting to gambling. He bridged multiple worlds, and for this he was honored by his people. Marcus, it seems, bridges worlds, too. He sees Oshooosi, who gives him a message to transmit to Ogun; he has seen that “God is about to open his eye wide over the bayou.” In this sense, he is like a funnel through which flows powerful knowledge and insight. At the same time, he is a growing human being in a very real and challenging world.
PLACE: SAN PERE, LA
TIME: LATE AUGUST (DISTANT PRESENT)

If you tell a story you’re already telling it in the past tense. It’s already happened, so it’s in the Distance. But you’re telling it right now, so it’s therefore the present. You’ll never be in San Pere because one, it doesn’t exist, and two, you’ll actually be onstage. Even if San Pere did exist, it wouldn’t exist anymore because Katrina came up and pretty much made sure nothing is there anymore.

—Tarell Alvin McCraney

San Pere, the community where the Brother/Sister cycle of plays takes place, is an invention of Tarell Alvin McCraney’s imagination, but if it were a real place it would, according to him, be situated near the town of Buras, Louisiana. The cultural world of the play, though, is a mash-up of the Liberty Square Housing Projects in Miami, where McCraney grew up, the infamous Magnolia Projects in New Orleans, and the more rural environment that surrounds Buras. When asked about San Pere, McCraney says, “It’s like when they asked Alice Walker where the tribe she wrote for The Color Purple was: ‘There is none. I made it up.’” McCraney adds, “That world can only come alive onstage. It is what you make of it in that moment. If there are hills in San Pere [as there are in The Brothers Size], that’s because you said so and not because there’s some geographical [reason].”

In setting his triptych of plays all in the same locale, McCraney follows in the footsteps of August Wilson, who set nine of his ten Pittsburgh Cycle Plays in that city’s Hills District, and Horton Foote, who set many of his plays in Harrison, a fictionalization of his own hometown in southern Texas. But, says McCraney, his San Pere is “a little different from . . . Harrison. You get almost a singular view of what Harrison is. You keep coming into Harrison in a similar way—a beautiful way, but it’s almost like visiting the same place over and over. San Pere changes in every play, and it’s important to us that it does that.”

McCraney is fascinated by oral traditions and how stories change depending on the perspective of the teller. He has nevertheless placed his fictional town in a very specific landscape with a very particular history. That place is Plaquemines Parish, an area south of New Orleans at the very end of the Mississippi River Delta, where a thin strip of land juts out into the Gulf of Mexico like a big toe testing the water. The Plaquemines Parish government writes on its website, “During the summer months, expect the daily rumble of thunder in the afternoons. Hurricane season is from June 1 to November 30,
and Plaquemines Parish does occasionally have threats from tropical systems, including hurricanes.

Hurricane Katrina made its landfall\(^1\) at Buras in Plaquemines Parish on August 29, 2005. Though in the play, Marcus’s dreams augur a storm of Katrina’s proportions, McCraney has made it clear in interviews that the play’s impending deluge is not meant to evoke Katrina exclusively. There are five major pre-Katrina hurricanes on record for Buras—1893, 1901, 1915, 1965, and 1969—the last of which leveled all but six structures in the town of 6,000. McCraney’s personal experience is with Hurricane Andrew. A category five hurricane with 165 MPH winds, a death toll of 61 people, and damage estimated at near $27 billion, Andrew became the most costly natural disaster in U.S. history (to that point) when it roared across south Florida in August 1992. Hurricane Katrina was a strong category three at landfall, with winds clocking in at 127 MPH. It displaced more than 250,000 people (more than the Dust Bowl of the 1930s); the death toll was more than 1,800 people; and estimated costs have to date reached $125 billion, transferring to Katrina the distinction of most expensive natural disaster in American history.\(^2\)

1. A hurricane “makes landfall” when its center crosses the coastline from the ocean onto the land.
Playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney has given many of the characters in his Brother/Sister Plays the names of Yoruba deities. The Yoruba are a large ethnic group in western Africa who share a common language and culture; the Yoruba religion, which has millions of followers in Nigeria, Benin, and elsewhere, is counted by scholars as one of the world’s major faiths. It was brought to the Americas in the early 18th century, when many Yoruba were forcibly displaced by the slave trade to Spanish, French, and Portuguese colonies around the Caribbean. There, the Yoruba religion melded with other African faiths, as well as the Catholicism of the colonists, and developed over time into a wide range of such New World traditions as santería (Cuba), vodun (Haiti), and candomblé (Brazil). In the United States, these traditions are particularly prominent in Florida (a former Spanish colony with a large Cuban population) and Louisiana (a former French colony with a significant Haitian community).

The Yoruba believe in a supreme deity, Olodumare, as well as divine figures known as orisha. The orisha are seen as particular manifestations of Olodumare: one myth says that they are pieces of the supreme god scattered throughout the universe. As the website of the Ile Orunmila Oshun temple in Oakland puts it, these orisha are “the specific manifestations of the whole of creation, [each representing] a vertical energy pattern vibrating on all levels, from natural phenomena to human consciousness to the hypernatural.” Adherents to the faith may be more or less sensitive to particular orisha, and so various devotional sects—each with its own rites, symbols, and traditions—exist for the worship of the different orisha. Ulli Beier, a scholar of Yoruba religion and literature, explains in Yoruba Myths that, for the Yoruba

the divine spirit is scattered throughout the world, and fragments of it can be found anywhere: in human beings, and even in animals, trees, and rocks. It is the fragment of orisha that each human being carries within himself that make it possible for him to respond to a particular orisha, that makes him capable of being a vehicle for the orisha’s spirit when he goes into a trance.

So in the world of the Yoruba, human beings can resonate with the divine world that envelops them. The devout learn to access and experience the part of themselves that is also orisha, is also an expression of the divine. McCraney draws on director Peter Brook’s theatrical explorations in Africa to elaborate:
While [Brook] was in Africa doing work on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, he found that the Yoruba don’t believe that the deity comes into your body and that you disappear, but that in the moment of possession you are more yourself than you are at any other time in your life. All of the parts of you are more present in that moment than at any other time.

The possibility of this resonance, this heightened presence inspires McCraney’s use of the orisha to name his characters. While the story of *Marcus* is not drawn from Yoruba mythology, there are echoes of the orisha to be found within the people of San Pere.

**YORUBA NAMES IN MARCUS**
The Yoruba say that there are some 401, 801, or even 1,600 orisha. These numbers are conventional; they are meant to show that the divine manifests itself in the world in limitless ways, beyond humankind’s ability to count and understand them all. Below is some basic information about the particular orisha who have lent their names to characters in *Marcus*:

**ESHU** (also known as **ELEGBA** and **ELEGUA**) is a messenger who makes connections between the divine and human spheres possible. He is a go-between, a communicator and interpreter: “He is our at&t,” quips one vodun theologian. Eshu is also the holder of *ashe*, the creative potency of the orisha that makes their word come true. He is said to negotiate between positive and negative forces to ensure the right balance, setting tests and trials for both humans and orisha. As theologian Baba Ifa Karade explains, “Eshu tempts, thwarts, and disrupts, [but] if all tests are passed he recreates.” Early missionaries to Africa saw Eshu as a devil figure because of this role, even using “Eshu” as a translation of “Satan” in Yoruba-language bibles. But this is a misunderstanding of Eshu, not least since Yoruba religion does not operate with the same separation of good and evil as Christianity does. For the Yoruba,

Africans believe that those who go before us make us what we are. Accordingly, ancestor-reverence holds an important place in the African belief system . . .

> *Egun or egun is the Yoruba word used to describe those souls or intelligences who have moved beyond the physical body. The eguns who are existing at another level with the creative energy are treated with loving reverence. . . . In exchange . . . they offer protection, wisdom, and assistance to those who revere them. . . . Our dreams are the most accessible way to communicate with the ancestors. Through our dreams we can create a “secret language.”*

— Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals, by Luisah Teish
Beier writes, “an absolute evil creature is unthinkable.” Instead, Eshu is a trickster god who takes pleasure in chaos but whose transgressive exploits are essential for change and renewal. As such, he is associated with boundary spaces such as crossroads and doorways: places for entrances, exits, and collisions.

Though Eshu does not have his own priesthood, he receives a portion of every sacrifice to the other orisha in recognition of his crucial intermediary role in the Yoruba world system.

In *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Marcus Eshu, Elegba, and Elegua are all sensitive to visions and communications from a dreamworld that transcends ordinary human experience.

**Oshun** is the orisha of love, fertility, and erotic power. She has a double personality: as a river goddess found in fresh water, she moves with grace and fluidity and can heal wounds with a cool splash; but as a spirit of unpredictable passion she can be easily angered. She is the image of a powerful woman in Yoruba society and is sometimes characterized as a confident market woman who drives hard bargains. Just as Shun does in *In the Red and Brown Water*, Osha, Shaunta Iyun, and Shua all have romantic entanglements in Marcus; in Marcus, we see Shun’s short temper.

**Oba**, an orisha found in lakes and rivers, is associated with maternal instincts. She is sometimes said to be the long-suffering legitimate wife of the philanderer Shango, who has affairs with other female orisha, including Oshun. As such, Oba is particularly dear to neglected wives. In patriarchal Yoruba society, she was the model of a dutiful wife who bore silently the betrayals of her husband. In Marcus, Oba has been left to raise Marcus Eshu alone.

**Ogun** is a culture hero akin to the Greeks’ fire-bringing Prometheus: he brought iron to the world and so is revered by blacksmiths, hunters, and all that use his tools. He is known
as a pathmaker; it is said that when the orisha first came into the world, they needed Ogun to cut a way through the jungle with his machete before they could pass. By extension, Ogun is the orisha who helps the faithful clear away spiritual and psychological obstacles. He does have a violent streak; as the bearer of the iron used in weapons, he is closely associated with warfare and bloodshed. But Ogun is a dependable god: he gains his strength from those who worship him, so he makes sure to reward his followers. Ogun is depicted as an imposing man, usually carrying his trademark machete. In *The Brothers Size*, Ogun Size works with metal as a car mechanic; in *Marcus*, he serves as a confidant at a difficult time.

Oshoosi is the bow-and-arrow carrying orisha of the hunt, a kindred spirit of Ogun in that they both bring useful tools to humankind; in the New World traditions, he is even portrayed as Ogun’s brother. According to a santería myth, he mistakenly killed his own mother after she borrowed a beautiful bird he had caught; thinking the bird stolen, he fired into the air and commanded the arrow to pierce the heart of the thief. It did. The grief-stricken Oshoosi became a repentant god dear to those accused of crimes or imprisoned. Over the course of *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Oshoosi Size frequently runs into trouble with the law.

Shango, the orisha of thunder and lightning, is violent, quick to anger, and associated with virility. He was a human king famous for his bravery and his womanizing. After his death, he was elevated to the status of orisha by his loyal followers. Shango is a central character in *In the Red and Brown Water*; the father of Osha, in *Marcus* he has just died in warfare overseas.

With the exception of the first names of Terrell and Marcus, Shaunta Iyun’s second name is the only one in *Marcus* that does not resemble the name of an orisha. Iyun, though, is the Yoruba word for certain bright red and yellow glass beads used as adornments in devotional ceremonies.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The characters in Marcus speak many of the play’s stage directions; how does this influence your connection to the characters and your understanding of the play?

2. Many of the characters are named after Yoruba deities; how do they express the archetypes of this mythology?

3. How does Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet complete the Brother/Sister cycle?

4. How does Ogun Size change over the course of the cycle? What is his relationship to Marcus?

5. How do the characters’ responses to Marcus’s “sweetness” vary? Do any surprise you? What is your own response to Marcus?

FOR FURTHER READING . . .


