

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

African-American, Gay Voices On and Off-Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 9th, 2019

You can count on the fingers of two hands the number of African-American playwrights who have had more than one financially successful play on Broadway in the past few decades (August Wilson and Lynn Nottage are among the few). Add gay and the number gets even smaller or even non-existent, indicating that black queer voices have a difficult time being heard on America's main commercial theatrical venue. Two current productions, one on Broadway and the other off, address the experiences not only of African-American gays, but individuals of varying race, sexuality and gender in interracial relations. Both playwrights offer startling different theatrical experiences and force us to examine hard questions, though one is rougher, rawer, and scarier.



Jeremy Pope (center) and cast in *Choir Boy*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Choir Boy, at Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, marks the Broadway debut of Tarell Alvin McCraney who won an Oscar for *Moonlight* which was based on his play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. It premiered in 2013 at MTC's Off-Broadway space and, like *Moonlight*, focuses on the struggles of being gay in an African-American community. This time the microcosm is a boys prep school where flamboyant tenor Pharus Jonathan Young leads the prestigious gospel choir. Pharus' unabashedly open style of performance and carriage bring him into direct conflict with the homophobic Bobby. But Pharus must also weave his way through the subtle maze of hetero prejudice, accentuated among black straight men because of the almost daily encounters with challenges to their masculinity from white racist attitudes.

In one telling scene, Pharus seeks to expand the appeal of traditional spirituals to include all minorities. Bobby is offended at Pharus' implied conflation of black and gay oppression and therein is the central conflict of the play: inclusion versus separation. Pharus demands openness while most of his peers can tolerate his orientation if only he would tone it down. McCraney explores the myriad variations on this theme in a compelling hour and 45 minutes, staged with economy and passion by Trip Cullman, punctuated by stirring gospel numbers featuring Jason Michael Webb's dynamic arrangements and Camille A. Brown's exciting movement.

Jeremy Pope, who sports amazing pipes, captures Pharus' sparkling fabulousness as well as his tender vulnerability, particularly when he drops the fierce mask and shows his aching need for love. J. Quentin Johnson makes Bobby much more than a bully by infusing his complex motivation for his anger at Pharus with depth. Chuck Cooper brings humor and dimension to the wise headmaster combatting his own biases. Austin Pendleton gives rumpled dignity to the absent-

minded instructor, John Clay III lends compassion to AJ, Pharus' jock roommate, and Caleb Eberhardt captures the tortured soul of David, who shares a painful secret with Pharus. Their voices and those of the playwright make *Choir Boy* a beautiful song of acceptance and struggle.



Paul Alexander Nolan and Teyonah Parris in *Slave Play*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Jeremy O. Harris has not yet achieved the prominence of McCraney, but his premiere work at New York Theater Workshop, *Slave Play*, marks him as a daring and innovative new dramatist. Without revealing too much of the plot twist, suffice to say that Harris explores multifaceted takes on race and sex in a surprising and satiric comedy. The intermissionless play opens with the audience viewing set designer Clint Ramos' fractured vision of an antebellum plantation reflected in a wall of mirrors while sound designer Lindsay Jones' eerie broken-music-box melody plays on a loop. We are then presented with what appear to be three 19th-century master-slave couples engaging in weird amorous play—this is the first play I've ever seen with a credit for "Intimacy & Fight Director," sizzling and sweaty done by Claire Warden. Then one of the participants jarringly calls out "Starbucks!" and the rug is ripped out from under us. We haven't follow down a rabbit hole of time and perception in the tradition of Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* and Jonathan Reynolds' *Stonewall Jackson's House*. What follows is a riotous, uncompromising look at how black and white people see and react to each other, staged with the right balance of outrageous humor and prickly reality by Robert O'Hara who has explored similar territory in his own plays *Barbecue* and *Bootycandy*.

The eight-member cast—another couple joins the sextette halfway through the action—delivers intensely funny and searingly dramatic performances, especially Teyonah Parris as a woman wrestling with racial demons and Annie McNamara in a hilarious parody of Southern bellehood and modern hipness. Gay, straight, black, white, psychological, and sexual issues are given an unscrupulous eyeballing in this uncomfortably laugh-filled play. Harris has another show, *Daddy*, coming up this season in a joint production from the Vineyard Theater and the New Group. It'll be exciting to see what surprises he has in store.

Choir Boy: Jan. 8—Feb. 17. Manhattan Theatre Club at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8-m, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission. \$79—\$149. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Slave Play: Dec. 9—Jan. 13. New York Theater Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., NYC. Tue—Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm & 7pm. Running time: two hours with no intermission. \$99. (212) 460-5475. www.nytw.org.

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