

# Cultural Daily

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## An Engaging and Disarming Head of Passes

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 27th, 2017

Challenging as that may be, Tarell Alvin McCraney's three-part name is one to remember. Until 2016 he was known as very up-and-coming chiefly in theatre circles and chiefly for his popular trilogy, *The Bother/Sister Plays*. But with the breakout of the movie *Moonlight*, co-adapted by McCraney from his play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* with the film's director, Barry Jenkins, McCraney is now all over the place. The latest place being The Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum, where his play *Head of Passes* is having its Los Angeles premiere.

Don't groan when I tell you that this is another dysfunctional family play. It is and, yes, it has its flaws, as so many of them do. But it was inspired by the Book of Job. Issues of faith and belief and the need for absolution are at its core, something that cannot be said about many dysfunctional families or the plays written about them.

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In case you wonder, *Head of Passes* is a steamy destination, "where the Mississippi River meets The Gulf of Mexico," the program tells us. The play itself is slow to declare itself. It is not overly long, but it is overwritten — as are many August Wilson plays, including some of his most outstanding. So don't let that stop you. Imperfection is not an issue. The late great director Harold Clurman had already told us that the history of the theatre is the history of bad plays. *Imperfect* ranks as a compliment in that line-up. And McCraney has made *Head of Passes* an engaging, often disarmingly funny and engrossing evening of theatre.



Phylicia Rashad and J.Bernard Calloway in *Head of Passes* at the Mark Taper Forum.

Like so many dysfunctional family plays it is about living with secrets. (Based on the Book of Job, remember?) It is the tale of a strong and well-meaning matriarch named Shelah (the eminent Phylicia Rashad) who's not well and wants a chance to have a frank talk with her family. But this wish also coincides with her birthday that, ready or not, is going to be celebrated by her family on this very stormy night in this very leaky house — a house, by the way, that becomes its own important symbol and that has been admirably engineered by scenic designer G.W. Mercier. Similar praise goes to Jeff Croiter's lighting and the sound design by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen.

The plot twist here is that, before talking to the family, Shelah wants a private conversation with

the Almighty that the Almighty has been predictably unwilling to provide. The frustrating silence from on high does not stand in the way of the audience's enjoyment of the family comings and goings and the vivid interactions that amplify this rowdy, joyfully flooded and eventful evening.



Phylicia Rashad (seated) and To describe the plot would be pointless. It is not especially Jacqueline Williams in *Head of Passes* at the Mark Taper Forum. rough and tumble of this loud and motley gathering of good people. It includes the semi-surprised Shelah, who finds herself unable to control the onslaught of well-wishers, her sweet sister Mae (Jacqueline Williams in a delicious turn), Shelah's sons Aubrey (François Battiste) and Spencer (J. Bernard Calloway), her stepdaughter Cookie (Alana Arenas), and assorted others, including the cranky but helpful Creaker (John Earl Jelks), his son Crier (Kyle Bertran) and even Shelah's doctor, Dr. Anderson (James Carpenter), someone Shelah would have gladly left out. Not that she isn't fond of them all, but they're really getting in the way of that conversation she's been wanting to have with The Lord, to be followed by the one she still wants with her children.

Rashad, the actor and director who hardly needs an introduction given her memorable achievements in theatre, film and television, is the pivot here as Shelah, and her needs are not exactly met by this unexpectedly wet and raucously improvised birthday party. That she is the "Mama" and does "the telling," as she tries to make clear, doesn't stop any of the celebratory interruptions. As usual, life has its own way of going off the rails when you least expect it, leaving a lot of loose ends and unfinished business...

You may be surprised to learn that, consciously or not, McCraney set out to write a Greek tragedy when he undertook the writing of this play. And while it keeps us boisterously engaged for its longer first half that is bursting with life, energy and fun, it makes a sharp turn in the second half that knocks it — and us? — off balance. Things turn dark and fraught with disaster. Most of that weight lands on Shelah's shoulders and she cannot be faulted for not being entirely able to carry the load, because McCraney gets a little lost in the writing of a final tirade that he clearly intends as a dramatic high point, but that wanders more than it should.



Phylicia Rashad in *Head of Passes* at The Mark Taper Forum. Rashad is caught up in some of the tangled writing, here and there at points in the play, but especially in the operatic aspects of that final monologue. What was no doubt intended as dramatic culmination comes off as overwrought rather than stirring. The speech needs clarifying, but it also needs cutting, which would go a fair distance toward clarification. Pro that she is, Rashad takes it on heroically — perhaps a little too heroically — and the effect is self-defeating. The performance does not avoid a serious tinge of self-consciousness. As both this writer and this actor have demonstrated in the past, they can do better.

In every other respect the play is well served by a top-notch production, with particular commendation for Tina Landau's vibrant and meticulous direction. If she cannot quite overcome the overabundance of drama inherent in the final scenes, she has a powerful cast that keeps the physical action moving briskly at all times — even when the psychological content lags behind and the well-intended resolution poses more questions than it answers.

*Top image: l-r, Kyle Beltran, John Earl Jelks, Phylicia Rashad and Jacqueline Williams in Head of Passes at the Mark Taper Forum.*

*All photos by Craig Schwartz.*

**WHAT:** *Head Of Passes*

**WHERE:** Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue in Downtown L.A. 90012

**WHEN:** Tuesday-Friday, 8 pm; Saturday 2:30 & 8 pm; Sunday 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Oct 22.

**HOW:** Tickets: \$25–\$95 (subject to change), available online at [CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org), or by phone at (213) 628-2772 or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge at [CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS).

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