

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Intriguing Choir Boy at the Geffen

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 1st, 2014

It takes a few minutes to adjust to the language, form and plot of *Choir Boy*, the new Tarell Alvin McCraney play at the Geffen Playhouse's Gil Cates Theatre. You scoop story developments by the handful, rather than following them as a continuous line, but the transitions are gorgeously stitched together by the most beautiful choral singing. That singing also takes care of any fractured plot synapses and, by play's end, you will have it all pretty well pieced together.

In other words, you have to do a little work to absorb the full range of McCraney's meaning. But if the form is novel and alluring, the basic tale is not impenetrable. It tracks events at Drew, a prestigious prep school for African American boys, where Pharus Jonathan Young (Jeremy Pope) is the supersmart and sassy leader of the choir and also the only overtly effeminate student there. He doesn't mind flaunting it, while his sharp mind nimbly maneuvers the necessary twists and turns of life in an all-boy environment.

We get to know the boys through the usual in-house sparring and rough-housing and we learn to distinguish the character traits that unite or separate them. Racial and identity issues are subliminally always at the forefront, emerging briefly in Mr. Pendleton's class, a white teacher played with directness yet tentative care as he finds himself in the position of being in the minority here. Leonard Kelly-Young in the role has just the requisite dignity, intelligence and guarded directness to earn these boys' respect as he turns out to be a healthy stimulus to their evolving minds.



Jeremy Pope, seated, and Michael A. Shepperd in CHOIR BOY.

The predictable morality tale is embedded in this plot, but the scenes that surprise us do so by their muscular frankness, touching on African American history, camaraderie, identity politics, sexuality and spirituality. The truly uniting factor and what we remember best, however, is the beauty of the connective singing, choral and solo, that brings these boys together, smoothing character, expounding on emotion and moving along the story.

McCraney, whose *Brother/Sister Plays* include *In the Red and Brown Water* and *The Brothers Size*, both seen recently at The Fountain Theatre in Hollywood and at San Diego's Old Globe, is a beacon among young playwrights. He received a MacArthur "Genius" grant in 2013 capping an almost overwhelming list of numerous other awards. *Choir Boy*, originally commissioned by Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC), had its first staging as a co-production with English Stage Company at London's Royal Court (2012). A number of the players now in the Los Angeles cast

also took part in previous incarnations of the play in New York and Atlanta and it shows in the seamlessness of the performances at The Geffen.

To single out individual actors becomes almost irrelevant as this is an idiosyncratically ensemble piece in which every one of the actor/singers has his moment in the spotlight, as well as joint ones in the superb choral pieces. They are admirable without exception and, aside from Pope, include Donovan Mitchell, Nicholas L. Ashe, Caleb Eberhardt and Grantham Coleman. Both Michael A. Shepperd as the compassionate and irascible headmaster Marrow, and Kelly-Young as Mr. Pendleton are benevolent linchpins, adding dimension and elucidation.

Deserving the most positive mention are director Trip Cullman and Musical Director and Vocal Arranger Jason Michael Webb. The singing in this play is its sinew. It suffuses and guides the production in exquisitely insidious ways, creating bridges, unifying the boys and providing collateral insight into African American life and history. Cullman skillfully marries the action to the music, but it is Webb's shining work with the singers that closes all the gaps.

This fast-paced 95 minutes without intermission leaves you absorbed, admiring and guessing. Not a bad outcome for any play.

WHAT: *Choir Boy*

WHERE: The Gil Cates Theatre at The Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays 8pm; Saturdays 3 & 8pm; Sundays 2 & 7pm. Through October 26

HOW: Tickets \$39-\$79, available at The Geffen Playhouse box office or 310.208.5454 or at <https://tickets.geffenplayhouse.com/online>

Top image: (l-r) Donovan Mitchell, Caleb Eberhardt, Leonard Kelly-Young, Michael A. Shepperd, Jeremy Pope & Grantham Coleman in CHOIR BOY. All photos by Michael Lamont

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