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Alumnus Profile

DePaul Alumnus Tarell McCraney Awarded MacArthur Fellowship

Genius. It’s both a validating and a daunting word, but those who are awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship—the so-called genius grant—receive a measure of financial freedom to pursue their work. In fall 2013, playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney (THE ’03) got the nod, and no one who knows him was surprised.

At only 33, McCraney has already made a substantial mark. He is an ensemble member of Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company, a resident playwright at New Dramatists in New York, and a member of Teo Castellanos D-Projects in his native Miami. Formerly an international writer in residence for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), he is now an associate artist working on “Antony and Cleopatra,” an RSC co-production with New York’s Public Theatre and Miami’s Gable Stage.

You call your adaptation of “Antony and Cleopatra” a radical production. What does that mean?

We moved the Roman and Egyptian conflict to the Haitian and French revolution of the late 1800s. I think the play asks for a modernization. The trap you can run into is that when you talk about Rome and Egypt, you think togas and pillars. What one doesn’t experience is the visceral understanding of how colonization worked—that Rome was an empire. Whereas, if we move it to the early days of our New World colonization, the idea of colonialism springs forth in a more violent and palpable way.

Do you think Shakespeare meant “Antony and Cleopatra” to be an allegory for the New World exploration occurring during his lifetime?

I can’t say, but I will say that no playwright writes something to exist only in that moment. So even if some might say that’s not the type of slavery he intended—he mentions slavery and bondage and making people free throughout the play—it would be silly to say that, because no person can know what the future holds. When you create art, you are always asking, hoping that it transcends the boundaries of pen and paper.

Please tell us about your background in Miami and how it informs your work.

Miami is extraordinary in that it holds within it the colonial New World and the burgeoning United States. There is an element that is very southern, but also African-American from those who worked in the sugar plantations and traded with the Seminole and Miccosukee. In the 1960s and ’70s, we had a huge influx of people from Cuba, then Haitian immigrants, and then South American and Caribbean influences entered through trade. There is a feeling of being connected to so many different institutions and cultures that you begin to abandon a myopic sensibility.

Your “Brother/Sister” plays encompass the creation myths of the Yoruba culture of western Africa. Do those myths have a personal resonance for you?

Oh, of course, because those stories were told to me. For me, the retelling or the reamplification of those stories was mostly about opening up the world in which these stories existed. The bedrock for my understanding of how the world exists, be it through Christian doctrine or Yoruba cosmology, is that nothing works in a linear, black-and-white way. Things are cyclical; lessons have to be repeated.

How will the MacArthur Fellowship help you?

The attention of it scares me a little. I’ve been here before, where everybody sort of expects something. Being this age, I know that I don’t know everything, and I don’t know enough to sort of go, “Oh yeah, this is what I’ll do with this money.” That was one of the great things about the MacArthur Foundation. They called and said, “This is not money to deter or to change or to shift. This is to deepen your focus.” To be honest, I’ll probably continue to do the same things I’ve been doing.

To learn more about McCraney’s work and his time at DePaul, go to bit.ly/mccraney.