

CHOIR BOY



STUDY GUIDE



GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

CHOIR BOY



WEST COAST PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
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SPECIAL THANKS TO

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Jessica Brusilow Rollins, Ellen Catania, Scott Kriloff and Jamie Mikelich

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SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



WE WELCOME YOU TO THE FIRST PLAY OF THE 2014/2015 Geffen Playhouse season with the eagerly anticipated *Choir Boy* by Tarell McCraney. A play that examines what it means to be an outsider in a world of staunch tradition, *Choir Boy* observes the power a single voice can have in a cacophony of dissent.

We are pleased to have Tarell and director Trip Cullman who collaborated on this play previously at Manhattan Theatre Club and the Alliance Theatre. Together they bring to life a story of boys becoming men in a community that is aching to change while holding fast to educational and spiritual traditions. With an ensemble of breathtaking actors and designers, the world of *Choir Boy* tips between tradition that shapes us and convention that stifles us.

These ideas, dramatized so elegantly by Tarell, have inspired an overarching theme in our season – what does it mean to raise one's voice? In each of the plays we have selected is a resonant idea of how one person has the capacity to create change, sometimes incrementally, sometimes globally.

As artists, we seek to do work that ignites conversation. If we choose wisely, the work should entertain, delight and continue to spark debate long after the curtain call. We have always encouraged an ongoing conversation and this season more than ever. Whether you prefer a post-play discussion on a Tuesday night, during the trip home, or to be heard through social media, we hope you will join us this season as we raise our voices.

SYNOPSIS

Pharus is a gifted 12th grader at an elite boarding school for African American boys. Clearly effeminate, he struggles with his identity – both internally and in relationship to his school community. As the play begins, the school's leader, Headmaster Marrow, is grilling Pharus about why he broke with tradition and paused while performing the school song at graduation. Pharus refuses to be a “snitch” and identify the person who hurled slurs at him while he was singing. As the school year unfolds and Pharus leads the school's choir, he must manage the aggressive behavior of fellow student Bobby, who happens to be the nephew of the headmaster. Pharus finds an ally in Mr. Pendleton, a white teacher who helps students, “think outside the box,” and draws closer to other students in the choir – David, who is determined to become a pastor, and AJ, his athletic roommate. Buoyed by his religious faith and joy in singing, Pharus remains true to himself – no matter what the cost.

RUNNING TIME

Approximately 95 minutes. *There will be no intermission.*

PERFORMANCE NOTE

There is coarse language, including racial and homophobic slurs, and nudity.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

TARELL ALVIN McCRANEY (Playwright)

Plays include: *The Brother/Sister Plays: The Brothers Size, In the Red and Brown Water* and *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*. Other plays include *Head of Passes, Choir Boy* and *Wig Out!* Tarell Alvin McCraney is a 2013 recipient of the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” Grant as well as the Whiting Award, Steinberg Playwright Award, London's Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright, the inaugural New York Times Outstanding Playwright Award, the inaugural Paula Vogel Playwriting Award, the inaugural Windham Campbell Award and most recently a Doris Duke Artist Award 2014. He served as playwright in Residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company and is a graduate from the New World School of the Arts High School, the Theatre School at DePaul University, and the Yale School of Drama. He is an ensemble member of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, a resident playwright at New Dramatists and a member of Teo Castellanos/D-Projects in Miami.

TRIP CULLMAN (Director)

Select NYC: Jon Robin Baitz's *The Substance of Fire* (Second Stage), Tarrell Alvin McCraney's *Choir Boy* (MTC), Julia Jordan and Juliana Nash's *Murder Ballad* (MTC and Union Square Theater), Paul Weitz's *Lonely, I'm Not* (Second Stage), Leslye Headland's *Assistance* (Playwrights Horizons), Adam Bock's *A Small Fire* (Playwrights Horizons, Drama Desk nomination), Adam Rapp's *The Hallway Trilogy: Nursing* (Rattlestick), Headland's *Bachelorette* (Second Stage), Terrence McNally's *Some Men* (Second Stage), Bert V. Royal's *Dog Sees God* (Century Center), Bock's *The Drunken City* (Playwrights Horizons), Weitz's *Roulette* (EST), Jonathan Tolins's *The Last Sunday In June* (Rattlestick and Century Center), Bock's *Swimming in the Shallows* (Second Stage), Gina Gionfriddo's *US Drag* (stageFARM), and several productions with The Play Company. London: Bock's *The Colby Sisters of Pittsburgh, PA* (Tricycle). Select regional: McCraney's *Choir Boy* (Alliance), John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* (Old Globe), Richard Greenberg's *The Injured Party* (South Coast Rep), McNally's *Unusual Acts of Devotion* (La Jolla Playhouse), Christopher Durang's *Betty's Summer Vacation* (Bay Street), Bess Wohl's *Touched* (Williamstown Theater Festival). Upcoming: Simon Stephens's *Punk Rock* (MCC), Halley Feiffer's *I'm Gonna Pray for You So Hard* (Atlantic).

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

SCHOOL CULTURE

AFRICAN AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOLS

Before the 1970s, when public schools became more fully desegregated, there were over 100 boarding schools, created by charitable and religious groups, primarily in the South, to ensure African American young people received a high quality education. These days, there are only four remaining, and some who benefitted from attending such rigorous schools regret their loss as an educational option for African American youth. (diverseeducation.com)

PHOTO CREDIT

JonRidinger (Own work)
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Like other institutions, school communities have values and behaviors that its members are expected to uphold. Typical rules include attending regularly, avoiding violence and completing classwork. Conservative schools usually insist that students submit to the authority of their elders and adhere to specific traditions, such as a strict dress code. If faith-based, students follow a religious practice. Progressive schools often grant students more independence and encourage them to express their individuality through how they think, dress and act. Whatever the orientation, expectations about attitudes and behavior constitute a school's *culture*. Those who are different and are perceived, therefore, as not supporting the group "norms," can be subject to criticism or outright rejection by community members.

At the Charles R. Drew Prep School for Boys, students are supposed to excel academically in order to attend college, respect the headmaster and teachers and live according to Christian principles. Since it is a boarding school where students live full-time, they must follow rules such as not leaving campus without permission and turning off lights at an appointed hour.

Pharus' relationship with his school is complex. He is a committed "Drew man" and a disciplined student who performs well academically. He is also determined to succeed as the lead singer of the school choir and refuses to tattle on classmates who hurt him. Yet because he is effeminate, some members of the school community disrespect and harass him.

DISCUSSION POINT

How would you describe the culture of the high school you are attending or attended? How might it be, or have been, improved?

INTOLERANCE

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A person's sense of identity and related behaviors, based on emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes (American Psychological Association)

THE N-WORD

Along with taunting Pharus for being gay, Bobby calls him the N-word. While Bobby may feel it is within his rights to use this racist slur as he wishes, his use of it evokes a passionate objection from their teacher Mr. Pendleton, who, having participated in the Civil Rights Movement, proclaims he "...lost enough friends behind that word."

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/APASHelpSO
tinyurl.com/PTOrigins
tinyurl.com/WikiHoSe
tinyurl.com/EvangGM

"Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood." — Coretta Scott King

External Struggles: Men and women who are attracted to members of their own sex have long experienced *prejudice* — hostile attitudes and behavior not based on actual knowledge or experience — in how people respond to them, as well as discriminatory policies and laws, such as those that, until recently, prevented them from serving openly in the military and getting married in all 50 states.

Intolerance of homosexuality, also known as *homophobia*, is rooted in irrational fears, religious beliefs, and ignorance. Some people assume that acceptance of non-heterosexuals will destroy the traditional roles of men and women in families and society. Certain religions see homosexual behavior as sinful. Those without connections to gay family members or friends are more likely to see them as radically different from themselves. Engaging in same-sex relationships is often considered a lifestyle choice, rather than the result of sexual orientations into which many feel born.

While some, especially those affiliated with extremely conservative religious and political groups, remain opposed to according lesbian and gay people full social acceptance and legal rights, attitudes have been changing. As the push for gay marriage has shown, many same-sex couples want to live as parents with children in traditional families, and support for their doing so has grown. Recently, some evangelical Christians have refuted interpretations of the Bible that condemn homosexual relationships; others believe that enacting Christian principles includes extending love to all, no matter how different. Knowing gay and lesbian individuals helps people appreciate them as fellow human beings. While no definitive conclusions have been drawn, scientific studies have explored genetic, hormonal, and brain-based causes in the search for a likely biological basis for different sexual orientations.

Internal Struggles: For Pharus, being gay is just the way he is. In addition to feeling like, "... the lil Sweet Boy they been trying to straighten out for years..." he must handle the anguish he feels inside. Because of his religious beliefs, aspirations as a "Drew man," and painful experiences with rejection, he sometimes veers away from self-acceptance into shame. His visible struggle inspires unexpected, loving support; another classmate, who is even more conflicted and private, ends up acting out and ruining his chances to continue his schooling at Drew.

AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/SpiritProj
tinyurl.com/FDGourd

PHOTO CREDIT

PD via clker.com



Playwright Tarell McCraney has woven religious folk songs known as spirituals throughout *Choir Boy*. Sung without accompaniment, they serve as musical interludes in which we get to know the work of the choir. The songs also provide a window into the oppression of the students' African American ancestors, and echo the struggles that Pharus and his classmates face as they come of age in an environment that challenges their right to be different.

Slavery in the United States: After the boys' teacher Mr. Pendleton assigns the "hefty" discussion topic of "The Rise of Capitalism and the Atlantic Slave Trade," he points to a particularly insidious aspect of slavery, citing, "... the pain and suffering and the calculating. That's the ugly part. People had to distance themselves, build a system that eliminated personhood in order to begin counting and thus writing people into jurisdiction as commodity."

DISCUSSION POINT

How have songs provided comfort or uplifted you in your life?

Origins of Spirituals: Enslaved Africans and their descendants created spirituals based on stories from the Bible and European hymns they encountered when they were converted to or chose to embrace Christianity. According to *The Spirituals Project* at the University of Denver, it is believed the songs flourished from the late 1700s to, “the end of legalized slavery in the 1860s.” The songs affirmed the slaves’ Christian faith and at the same time expressed their, “deep longings for freedom” and determination to survive. Their rich African cultural heritage had a strong impact on the rhythms and forms of the songs. Some are based on a call-and-response structure, in which an individual leads and a group responds. In the following excerpt from *Choir Boy*, we encounter this pattern, as well as the promise of hope embedded in the lyrics.

PHARUS

*Paul and Silas, bound to jail
Had no money for to go there bail,*

BOYS
Ooooh

PHARUS & BOYS
*Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on, Hold On*

PHARUS
Hold on

BOYS
Hold on

PHARUS
Hold on

BOYS
Hold on

Pathways to Freedom?: For a long time, certain spirituals were thought to have provided coded information that helped slaves escape to freedom. The most well-known song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” alludes to the star formation known as the Big Dipper, which has the shape of a gourd – a hollowed-out squash – that was used as a water container. It points to the North Star, which, along with rivers mentioned in the song, runaways would supposedly follow from the Deep South to freedom in the North. Upon closer examination, it appears that the song’s lyrics were set well after slavery ended, and that most escaped from states such as Kentucky and Virginia, which bordered free territories in the North. It is also unlikely that those involved in guiding and housing freedom-seekers in the Underground Railroad would have used fixed pathways, when they were known for having employed flexible routes to elude those hunting for runaways.

In *Choir Boy*, Pharos appreciates the power of spirituals to uplift the spirit. Citing the lack of substantive proof that the songs contained secret information, he asks, “Why do we never pass down what we know to be true? That these songs forged in the shame and brutality of oppression are diamonds that glint and prove true that hope and love can live, thrive, and even sing.”

RESILIENCE

SOURCE

tinyurl.com/EDResil

PHOTO CREDIT

PD via hdwidescreendesktop.com/free-nature-sunshine-high-resolution-hd-widescreen-wallpaper/



Through his humorous responses to classmates, his willingness to help them succeed, and his dedication to excelling as a student and singer, Pharus is a model of *resilience* – the capacity to overcome hardship and to thrive.

Those who have experienced the trauma of war, crime, natural disasters, extreme poverty or abusive circumstances in the home, have been helped by this innate ability we all have to live healthy, productive lives. We enact resilience by relating effectively to others, problem-solving, becoming aware of, “structures of oppression (be it from an alcoholic parent, an insensitive school, or a racist society),” and developing ways to transcend them. We have a strong sense of our own identity, believe we can have a positive impact on our lives, and, “keep our eyes on the prize,” by aspiring to achieve our long-term goals.

Research has shown that resilience in young people can be fostered in schools, if they engage in caring relationships with teachers and peers, are expected to meet high standards, and are given opportunities to participate in determining how they learn and experience school life. In these ways, they can learn to, “believe in themselves and their futures.”

DISCUSSION POINT

In what ways have you been resilient in your life? What internal qualities or actions helped you overcome hardship?

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S VOICE

PLAYWRIGHT

The term “playwright” was coined in the 1600s, at which time “wright” was a term for a craftsman. Playwright means someone who crafts plays. Though such an artist writes to create a play, there is no connection between “write” and “wright.” They are simply homophones – two words that sound the same but have different meanings.

When we read plays, we often focus on the “voices” of the characters. How they speak and what they convey help us understand what kind of people they are, as well as their backgrounds and intentions.

Playwrights have distinctive voices, too. They use rhythms and make word choices and construct language in ways that make the dialogue unique. “Voice” also communicates their attitudes towards the people and themes they are bringing to life on the page.

In Tarell McCraney’s *Choir Boy*, Pharus calls home. Read the excerpt below carefully. Be sure to pause when Pharus does to “hear” what his mother is saying in their conversation.

PHARUS

I know, I know Momma... I’m not going to embarrass anybody
It will be good. Maybe... I don’t know if I am going to
Be singing this year.
I just called to say, ‘hey’, really. I mean its getting close
I didn’t even really believe it would happen
I mean I did, I know you would have killed me but...
Mama that’s not Christian. Or lady like. I’m sorry
I’m not trying to tell you how to be a woman. What?
I... right... right. He’s good. He asked about you the other
Day. No that’s, that’s, David he’s the one going to be
A minister. Anthony is my roommate. On the ...right
On the baseball team. Mama please don’t let nobody catch
You saying that Anthony is a phyne ass lil boy. They will!
They will put you in jail. No... I don’t know what they doing for
Graduation prolly just walking like I’m is...I am.
You ... you coming, right? I know you got a lot but I
Just asked. Right you don’t have to be here to
Know I graduated. Hope you proud. You will be...
You will be.

DISCUSSION POINT

How would you describe the overall style of the dialogue? What did you notice about the rhythms, word choices, and construction of the language?

How does playwright McCraney feel about Pharus and what he is experiencing with his mother?

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA BRUSILOW ROLLINS

What is your official title and how long have you worked at the Geffen?

I am the Director of Education Partnerships & Donor Relations and have been at the Geffen since the fall of 2007.

What are your primary responsibilities?

I support our relationships with education partners, such as UCLA and The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, as well as our elementary and high school partners. As part of the development department, I help cultivate relationships with our Board of Directors, Advisory Board and individual donors, as well as corporate and foundation supporters. I work closely with Ellen Catania, our Director of Major Gifts & Corporate/Foundation Partnerships, to assist her with grant proposals and reports to these major donors, many of which fund not only our art onstage but also our education and outreach work in the community.

In what key ways does the development department support the theater?

Since the Geffen Playhouse is a non-profit organization, our subscriptions and single ticket sales only cover a little over half of our operating expenses from one season to the next. Our department is responsible for raising the funds that allow us to end

each season with a balanced budget — a crucial goal for us to achieve at the end of every fiscal year. Thanks to our leader, Chief Development Officer Regina Miller, our department has been the driving force behind many innovative fundraising campaigns, events and education initiatives that have not only helped us surpass our fundraising goals every season, but have also helped us serve our community in more impactful ways.

What is your education background? What work led you to the Geffen?

I have a Bachelor of Music degree in classical voice and have taught private voice lessons, which led to my interest in working with kids. Right after college, I began working at Big Brothers Big Sisters in Boston, supporting the mentors' relationships with their mentees. Upon moving to Los Angeles, I transferred to Big Brothers Big Sisters here and became the Manager of School-Based Mentoring Programs. I was on different elementary school campuses every day, supporting the agency's relationships with the schools, while also matching mentors and mentees. It was powerful to see how the students changed dramatically over the course of the school year. I realized then how much I loved being a part of the life-changing programming for these students, who came from such



poverty and had no hope, no positive influences or relationships in their lives. Coming from an artistic background, I wanted to use the arts to have this kind of positive, life-changing impact on those who need it most. And that's when I came to the Geffen, to work for Regina and Ellen, both of whom I worked with at Big Brothers Big Sisters.

What do you find most challenging about your work at the Geffen?

The work is intense and fast-paced, and we have deadlines for multiple projects that keep us on our toes. While we follow a regular schedule of tasks and events, we must also remain responsive to opportunities that arise unexpectedly.

What do you find most satisfying?

I love working on such an amazing team where we are encouraged to work together, dream big and learn. I can't imagine having more passionate, brilliant leaders than Regina and Ellen, who are fearless, thoughtful and creative. We are all so excited about the 2014/2015 season! ■

SECTION 4

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette,” or how to behave at the theater.

The audience plays an essential role at the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members’ concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring the performance to life.

Since the actors can hear and see the audience, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them – and fellow audience members. These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- Unwrapping candy or cough drops
- Touching or leaning on the stage.

Audience Awareness Activity: Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television.

DISCUSSION POINT

If you were onstage performing a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to the questions suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then, ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the play? Engaged? Put off? Entertained? Tense? Bored? Excited? What made you feel this way?
- What was the most powerful moment in the production? Upsetting? Funny? Heartwarming? Describe each in detail.
- Compare and contrast your experience of high school with that of the characters in *Choir Boy*. How would you describe the key similarities and differences?
- With which character did you identify the most? The least? Why?
- Why do you think Bobby was so mean to Pharus? Back up your reasons with evidence from the play.
- What did you learn about racial and sexual prejudice from watching the play?
- Think about where the characters were by the end of the play. How will Pharus experience life as an adult? Bobby? AJ? Why?
- How did hearing the songs make you feel? How did they contribute to the impact of the play?
- What did you appreciate about the performances by the actors? Share the details.
- How did the set, props, costumes and lighting add to your understanding of where the action was taking place, and what the characters were experiencing?
- What did you keep thinking about after seeing the play?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LEARN about playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney in a news feature in the *Los Angeles Times* that highlights *Choir Boy* at the Geffen Playhouse, at tinyurl.com/LATMcCraney.

WATCH playwright Tarell McCraney and director Trip Cullman speak about *Choir Boy* during its production at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City at tinyurl.com/YTcbMTC.

LEARN about the prevalence and affect of sexual prejudice at tinyurl.com/SXPredj.

LEARN about the history of African American spirituals from slavery through to the Civil Rights Movement at tinyurl.com/SpiritProjHist.

WATCH and **LISTEN** to spirituals and commentary about their import at tinyurl.com/PBSSpirChoir.

LEARN how the rich cultural heritage of enslaved Africans had a profound impact on American culture at tinyurl.com/NaGeoAfCul.

WATCH the dance masterpiece *Revelations*, choreographed to African American spirituals by Alvin Ailey, on the DVD *An Evening with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater* (available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)).

LEARN what resilience is and how to cultivate it at tinyurl.com/PBSResil.

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