



**GABLESTAGE  
AT THE BILTMORE**

**STUDY GUIDE**

# Choir Boy

**By Tarell Alvin McCraney**



**Joseph Caleb Auditorium**

February 24<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> at 10am

**GableStage at the Biltmore**

January 24<sup>th</sup> - February 22<sup>nd</sup>

**Presented by Special Arrangement with Dramatists Play Services, Inc, New York**

## About the Playwright – Tarell Alvin McCraney:

Best known for his acclaimed trilogy *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Tarell Alvin McCraney has been described as the heir to August Wilson's legacy and “without question, the hottest young playwright in America” by the *Chicago Tribune*. His play *Head of Passes* recently premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, where he is a member of the ensemble, and the 33-year-old Miami native celebrated Manhattan Theatre Club's New York debut of *Choir Boy* on July 2, 2013 at New York City Center Stage II. McCraney has forged an international reputation, including an association with the Royal Shakespeare Company and London's Royal Court Theatre.



“I like to deal with things in equal opposites. For example, the black male and the notion of coming of age: I’ve explored it in a couple of other plays, but in *Choir Boy*, I wanted to do it in the setting of institutions that the black community holds dear. We hold education very dear, and we also hold religion extraordinarily close to the heart of the community; not just because of its spiritual uplifting but also because of the political grounding that it has had. The black church serves as a spiritual anchor and a political anchor for the black community. And, in that tradition, we pass down a lineage of music, of an oral tradition, through young men who often must be duplicitous in nature.” – *Broadway Buzz on Broadway.com*

McCraney attended the New World School of the Arts High School, (Miami, FL) receiving the exemplary artist award and the Dean's Award in Theater. He matriculated into The Theatre School at DePaul University and received his BFA in acting. In May 2007 he graduated from Yale School of Drama's playwriting program where he received the Cole Porter Playwriting Award upon graduation.

“Everything has an equal balance; we pass down Christian morals, what it means to be black and male and good and upstanding in America, and with those morals come all kinds of complications, not just spiritual. Pharus, the main character in *Choir Boy*, speaks about his individual faith, his faith in this Negro spiritual, as hope and joy in meters, in measures, but then in the next thought about what it means to be a man, to be human.”  
– Ibid

As an actor he has worked with directors such as Tina Landau of the Steppenwolf Theater Ensemble Chicago, IL, David Cromer and BJ Jones artistic director of the Northlight Theatre (where he co-starred in the Chicago Premiere of Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*), and began a lasting working relationship with Peter Brook and Marie-Helene Etienne of the Bouffes du Nord, Paris. McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water* was winner of the Alliance Theatre's 2007 Kendeda Graduate Playwriting Competition with productions at the Alliance Theatre and the Young Vic, the 2007 Paula Vogel Playwriting Award from the Vineyard Theater and a 2007 Whiting Writing Award. The Young Vic production of McCraney's *The Brothers Size* was nominated for an Outstanding Achievement by an Affiliate Theater Olivier Award in London, UK. He was also named the International Writer in Residence for the Royal Shakespeare Company 2008-2010, the Hodder Fellow at the Lewis Center for the Arts 2009, Princeton University and a seven-year-residency at New Dramatist Center in New York, NY. He is a member of Teo Castellanos/D Projects in Miami.

### **About the Producing Artistic Director / Director – Joseph Adler:**

Joseph Adler is now in his seventeenth season at GableStage.

Adler previously directed at many South Florida Theatres including: Coconut Grove Playhouse, New Theatre, Area Stage, Hollywood Boulevard Theatre, Players Theatre, Ruth Foreman Theatre, Florida Shakespeare Theatre, City Theatre, Hollywood Playhouse and Shores Performing Arts. Active in South Florida's film and theatre community for many years, he has directed hundreds of television commercials and industrial films – winning many awards, including the Clio. Other directorial credits include several independent feature films, a video version of the Broadway hit comedy *Doubles* and a cable TV series.

Since he became Producing Artistic Director, GableStage has been the recipient of 55 Carbonell Awards and 187 Carbonell Nominations. Adler has been nominated twenty-four times (seventeen at GableStage) and ten times won the Carbonell Award for Best Director: *The Shadow Box* (Coconut Grove Playhouse); *The Killing of Sister George* (Players Theatre); *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Edward Albee's The Goat*, *Frozen*, *The Pillowman*, *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Blasted* and *Ruined* (GableStage), and twice for Best Director of a Musical: *James Joyce's The Dead* and *Adding Machine* (GableStage). Adler was awarded the prestigious George Abbott Award for "significant contributions to the artistic life and cultural development of greater Miami, Fort Lauderdale and the Palm Beaches." He has received many Best Director awards (CurtainUp, SunPost, NewTimes) and a Remy Award from the Theatre League of South Florida, as well as The Heart of the Arts Award presented by New World School of the Arts. He was awarded the Arts and Entertainment Community Service Award presented by the South Florida International Press Club, and the Truth Award from the Human Services Coalition. He received a Silver Palm Award for his "Outstanding Support of the South Florida Theatre Community, the Theatre League and the Theatre Festival, as well as his Consistent Outstanding Work at GableStage and his Commitment to an Educational Outreach Program in Miami-Dade County".

He was recently appointed to the Dean's Leadership Advisory Board at Florida International University's College of Architecture + The Arts. Adler studied drama at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and graduated from the Film Department at NYU.

### **About the Music Director - Christina Alexander:**

Christina Alexander is overjoyed to be working with GableStage on this production of *Choir Boy*.

A Miami native, she is an alum of New World School of the Arts. Christina earned her BM from Barry University and holds an MM from University of Miami. Previous Music Director credits include: *Five Guys Named Moe*, *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues*, and *Crowns*. Her experiences with directing various choirs and bands over the last 10+ years have prepared her for these wonderful MD opportunities. Christina is also the Artistic Director of G-Rock Music, a project that creates and promotes unique opportunities for Emerging, Renowned, and Legendary Women in Rock. She co-hosts a weekly radio show in Boston called *G-Rock Radio* that explores various aspects of women and Rock music. An accomplished performer, writer, and educator, Christina can also be found in the halls of local Middle/High schools building Chorus and Drama programs as well as on various South Florida stages as a cast member (most recently at New Theatre in their production of *The Gospel According to Jerry* as Nia). She was named Best Actress by *Miami NewTimes* for her work as Billie/She/Her in *Harlem Duet*.

**About the Vocal Arrangements - Jason Michael Webb:**

Dove Award winner, two-time Stellar Award nominee; Arranger: “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (2013 Inauguration of President Barack Obama); Broadway (Associate Musical Director): Motown: The Musical, Leap of Faith, Memphis; Off-Broadway (Musical Director) Pasek & Paul's Dogfight (2econd Stage); Pianist: Michael Bolton, Queens Symphony, Chaka Khan, Fantasia (2007 Tony Awards), Mariah Carey “Oh Santa!/All I Want for Christmas” [Island Records]); Orchestrator: Jacksonville Symphony, Nashville String Machine, Carnegie Hall; Composer: songs recorded by Israel Houghton, Martha Wash, Jonathan Butler, Mario Cantone, Reeve Carney; Producer: Brooklyn Tabernacle (three albums), Tshidi Manye (Disney's The Lion King on Broadway); Ephesians 3:17-19.

**GableStage Credits :**

- Set ..... Lyle Baskin**
- Lighting ..... Jeff Quinn**
- Sound / Music ..... Matt Corey**
- Costumes ..... Ellis Tillman**
- Props ..... Beth Fath**
- Technical Director ..... Carlos Rodriguez**
- Stage Manager .....Kristen Pieski**

## **GableStage 2014-2015**

### **Educational and Outreach Programming**

Our Educational Programming has addressed the cultural enrichment of Miami-Dade County Public School students since our founding as Florida Shakespeare Theatre in 1979. Our programs - including the Page-to-Stage School Tour, morning Mainstage productions and our various outreach performances - have been seen by over one million students.

This season, with support from the sponsors listed below – including major funding from John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts – we will reach thousands of Miami-Dade County public school students with free morning performances of this production of *Choir Boy* at the Joseph Caleb Auditorium in Liberty City. It will then move to the legendary and historic Lyric Theater in Overtown, which was recently restored -- where we will present three free performances for the community. The play will provide students with an unprecedented opportunity to see one of theater's most important new works -- and also give them a chance to have an open discussion with their teachers and peers on many of the play's timely and sensitive topics. Of all of our many programs, nothing is as fulfilling as our ability to provide these unique cultural opportunities for youth within the community.

### **Our Education and Outreach Programming is made possible through the generous support of**

Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs  
The Mayor and Board of County Commissioners  
Youth Arts Enrichment Program  
Miami-Dade Tourist Development Council  
Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
Cultural Passport Program  
Foundation for New Education Initiative  
John S. & James L. Knight Foundation  
City of Coral Gables  
Coral Gables Cultural Affairs Council  
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Bernard & Jessie Wolfson Family Foundation

## Synopsis of *Choir Boy*:

**Place:** Charles R Drew Prep School For Boys

**Time:** A School Year, Last Year.

*Choir Boy* follows a group of young, black students at Charles R. Drew Prep School for Boys as they struggle with issues of identity and sexuality. Pharus is the vivid central character, a bright-eyed, smart and enthusiastic Drew student. His pride in singing the school anthem at the graduation ceremony is sullied by the gay slurs hissed at him from one of his fellow students in the audience.

Pharus may not speak of his sexuality, but he's not really hiding this beaming light under a bushel, either. The action begins as he refuses to divulge the name of the boy who taunted him, maintaining that this would be a breach of the school's honor code. Even under the threat of expulsion, Pharus insists on behaving "as a Drew man should,"

But Pharus also knows that he can exact his own private revenge. Gospel music at Drew is a tradition as old as the school itself, and that tradition is embodied in its choir, where Pharus stands out and be different without fear – because he's the choir's best. And as leader of the choir, he has the power to decide who can and cannot sing. And in the choir's first school year meeting, after a few tart exchanges the boy he believes humiliated him, Pharus flares into righteous mode and kicks Bobby out. – *The New York Times*

*Choir Boy* is a coming of age story... a story about responses to human differences and to bullying, by multifaceted characters whose lives hold together by the Gospel music they sing beautifully together and the humanity they and we all share.

## Characters:

(in order of appearance)

**HEADMASTER MARROW**, Headmaster for the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is Paternal Uncle to BOBBY MARROW

**PHARUS JONATHAN YOUNG**, an effeminate young man. Begins the play a junior at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys and the Lead of the School's famous choir. He is roommates with AJ JAMES.

**MR PENDLETON** white male, professor at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys.

**BOBBY MARROW**, a junior at the Charles R Drew Prep School, and member of the School's Choir. He is also nephew to HEADMASTER MARROW

**JUNIOR DAVIS**, a junior at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is a member of the School's Choir.

**ANTHONY JUSTIN 'AJ' JAMES**, athletic young man, a senior at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is a member of the School's Choir and the Schools Baseball Team. He is roommates with PHARUS YOUNG

**DAVID HEARD**, a senior at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is a member of the School's Choir.

## GableStage Cast:

Junior Davis:	Vlad Dorson
David Heard:	Samuel Enmund
Bobby Marrow:	Melvin Cox
Pharus Jonathan Young:	Din Griffin
Mr. Pendleton:	Peter Haig
Anthony Justin James:	Datus Puryear
Headmaster Marrow:	James Randolph

## Scenes from the GableStage Production:



## Interview with Playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney in MetroWeekly (1/8/15)

**METRO WEEKLY:** *How would you describe Choir Boy?*

**TARELL MCCRANEY:** It's a coming of age play about a group of African-American boys in [a prep school] and their journey into becoming young men and leaders in the community. The school's choir has yielded some financial gain but also a sort-of branding for the school. And at the start of the play we watch a very effeminate young man with an extraordinary gift become the lead of that choir.

**MW:** *Was this informed by your own experience?*

**MCCRANEY:** I didn't go to a preparatory high school. I went to a performing arts high school actually. And I was never the lead of anybody's choir. I can't sing.

**MW:** *What inspired this play?*

**MCCRANEY:** I was interested in the cross-section of African-American young men growing into manhood in today's society. And oftentimes there's this depiction of sort-of their more physical and urban life, but not necessarily what it's like for them to handle the traditions passed on to them from African-American culture, and what they're expected to hold and hold on to when becoming men. I was interested in that portrait, in how we prepare people who are constantly told to remember they're part of a particular group but also asked to be individuals. Are we allowing their individuality or are we hampering it? How do we connect with young people and ask them to flourish and be our leaders of tomorrow? Are we allowing them the space to do that? Are we really understanding their needs and connecting to them as young people? Are we allowing them to be children, or are we hampering them by putting way too many restrictions on their ability to grow by asking them to take on so many responsibilities?

.....  
**MW:** *Returning to Choir Boy, I wanted to ask specifically about the character Pharus. Do you identify with him?*

**MCCRANEY:** Whether I identify with him or not, I think he's amazing. Those people like Pharus who can, in the middle of a place that is basically telling them to be something else [and yet] they remain truly themselves, and somehow try to flourish within that — that's just, I think, spectacular. And I also love people who have generosity for others who may not be being generous to them. I think that's fascinating. To be able to somehow find empathy for people who are oppressing you, or being mean to you, I think that level of generosity is saintly.

Of course he's not perfect. He's not an angel-born saint, he's a human-born saint. He has his flaws. But at the same time, still, in his situation most of us would sort of bristle and either shut down or try to remove ourselves from, he remains. And also finds kindness and/or openhandedness and in some cases love from people who are hurting him. And I think that is noble. That's inspiring. That is something to be protected, something to be cherished and examined in a closer, more intimate way.

**MW:** *Is the character informed by your own experience? Did you suffer taunts and resistance from other kids who maybe didn't understand you?*

**MCCRANEY:** I definitely was bullied as a kid. I think the distinction is that I am not like Pharus. He's much more fascinating. He is resilient. Do I know people like Pharus? Yes I do. Many people who choose to *remain* who they are regardless of pressures around them. And not in any sort of flagrant or flamboyant way. Not in the way of like I'm showing off who I am. But more so I am being my most true self in every moment that I can. Because at the end of the day that is what we all hope and wish we are, right? Most of the time we're not — we're throwing on masks, we're running around trying to do this and that for everybody else. We're living in double-triple consciousnesses. But for a person to say, "Look, this is at root who I am and I am going to try and enact that in all of the things that I do," that's amazing. That's powerful. And I think it sometimes scares people. It's enviable. I wish I could be zero-to-one-hundred myself all the time.

.....  
**MW:** *You've also spent a couple years working in London and specifically for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). Have you always enjoyed Shakespeare?*

**MCCRANEY:** From 13 on we were exposed to Shakespeare, at least on the page. I didn't see a lot of Shakespeare. There's not a lot of Shakespeare done in Miami. But my grandmother would recite it to us. Monologues that she remembered from school. So yeah. I mean, I love theater. There are very few things in theater that I don't like.

**MW:** *As part of your work with RSC you adapted two Shakespeare works for children, Hamlet and Anthony and Cleopatra. Do you hope that such efforts could help inculcate more appreciation for Shakespeare?*

**MCCRANEY:** I think Shakespeare is one of those resources that we don't use enough to generate interest in the arts. It's timeless, in lots of ways. It has a lot of interest points that can draw people in. As artists, especially theater artists, our brand — theater — is not easy to make, and it's also sometimes cumbersome to keep going. So Shakespeare is a fantastic way to bring interest and focus.

## **Further History and Backstory:**

### **Black Boarding Schools**

Black Boarding Schools are a distinct tradition that sought the best education possible for Black children during the segregation era. The tradition belongs to historically Black boarding schools, of which there were more than 100 in the United States prior to the 1970s. – *Diverse: Issues In Higher Education*

Nearly 100 African-American boarding schools once existed across the United States, according to St. Petersburg Times columnist Bill Maxwell. As of 2013, however, only four remain. The schools range in location from upstate New York to southern Mississippi. Together, these schools constitute the membership of the Association of Historically African-American Boarding Schools. These four schools are 1) Pine Forge Academy in Pine Forge PA, 2) Redemption Christian Academy in Troy NY, 3) The Piney Woods School in Piney Woods MS, and 4) Laurinburg Institute in Laurinburg, NC. (*Margaret Miceli 2013*)

### **Boarding School Stereotype**

Boarding Schools are also known as prep schools. Their most common stereotype is that boarding schools = rich kids. This is not completely true. Today, all have academically deserving less affluent students enrolled thanks to financial aid. However historically Black boarding school have always had some form of financial aid for academically deserving, less affluent students, thanks to work/study programs in addition to funds raised from outside sources.

### **Charles R. Drew Academy's Namesake**

African American surgeon Charles Richard Drew (1904-1950) has been called "the father of the blood bank," for his outstanding role in conceiving, organizing, and directing America's first large-scale blood banking program during the early years of World War II. While best known for the blood bank work, Drew devoted much of his career to raising the standards of African American medical education at Howard University, where he trained a generation of outstanding surgeons, and worked to break through the barriers that segregation imposed on black physicians.

For his life changing doctoral research, Drew set out to assess the blood and transfusion research to date, and to apply his findings to a trial blood bank program... In August 1939, he and [John] Scudder obtained funding and authorization to set up an experimental blood bank at Presbyterian Hospital [New York] to work out the organization and best collection protocols for such an operation... Their experiment, which ran for seven months, was a success, and served as the basis for Drew's dissertation, "Banked Blood," for which he received his doctor of medical science degree in June 1940.

Although Drew didn't "discover" plasma as a blood substitute, his expertise and leadership were largely responsible for World War-II's Blood for Britain program's success. When it concluded in January 1941, Blood for Britain had collected 14,556 blood donations, and shipped (via the Red Cross) over 5,000 liters of plasma saline solution to England. Drew's final report on the project, issued by the BTBA [Blood Transfusion Betterment Association] in January 1941, established him as a leading expert on blood procurement and processing. Drew returned to the Howard University College of Medicine faculty in April 1941, after he had passed the American Board of Surgery exams. ("Profiles in Science: The Charles R. Drew Papers" 2013)

## **Unfamiliar Words or Phrases in *Choir Boy*:**

**BOARD:** To provide with regular meals and lodging usually for compensation, e.g. Room and Board

**BOARDING SCHOOL:** A school in which pupils are boarded and lodged as well as taught

**BOOKER T. WASHINGTONIN:** To surrender rights like this African-American statesman's Atlanta Compromise agreeing that 1) Southern blacks would work meekly and submit to white political rule, 2) Southern whites guaranteed that blacks would receive basic education and due process in law, 3) Blacks would not agitate for equality, integration, or justice, and 4) Northern whites would fund black educational charities

**EXCOMMUNICATION:** Exclusion from fellowship in a group or community

**HEADMASTER:** A man at the head of the staff of a private school usually having some teaching duties but mainly concerned with administration, discipline, and counseling

**PREROGATIVE:** a special right or privilege belonging to a person, group, or class of individuals

**PHARUS:** Greek name for lighthouses

**POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE:** 1) The Graduation Walking March, 2) A formal ceremony, 3) an ostentatious display of wealth or ceremony

**STCH:** A sound made to say "He's not"

**STOOL PIGEON:** A spy living among or sent into a group to report often to the police on the activities of its members

**TRADITION:** An inherited or established way of thinking, feeling, or doing

# ***Choir Boy in The Classroom***

## **Pre-Show Questions**

1. Is there something about Charles Drew's work that might correlate to some aspect of the play? Note the number of times the word "blood" is used and its different meanings.
2. What stereotypes do you associate with boarding schools?
3. How would you imagine a school day in a boarding school?
4. What pressures for group conformity... everyone expected to be like everyone else in some way... can you list? Which on your list are intentionally meant to hurt? How many might hurt without intention?
5. How long could you and your best friend remain friends, if you lived together 24/7?

## **Post-Show Questions**

1. Was there a relationship between Pharus' name... it means lighthouse... and the role of the character's relationships in the play?
2. Was there a relationship between the school's name and some aspect of the play?

## **Creative Writing Prompts**

1. Did Drew's students know more about one another than you do about your classmates? If so how did it impact their friendships?
2. Have you ever been teased or bullied because of something that is unique about you?
3. Have you ever teased or bullied someone because of something unique about them?

## **South Florida Community Organizations**

### **Pridelines**

9526 NE 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave  
Miami Shores, FL  
305-571-9601

**<http://pridelines.org/>**

### **Safe Schools South Florida**

PO Box 24444  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33307  
305-576-2126  
safe@safeschoolssouthflorida.org

**<http://safeschoolssouthflorida.org/>**

### **Yes Institute**

5275 Sunset Dr  
Miami, FL 33143  
305-663-7195

**[www.yesinstitute.org](http://www.yesinstitute.org)**

### **Alliance for GLBTQ Youth**

1175 NE 125 St Suit 510  
North Miami, FL 33161  
305-899-8087

**<http://www.glbqtalliance.com/>**

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