



Rites of Passage: an interview with director Dee Covington

Dee Covington is one of the founders of Curious Theatre Company. She has appeared in over 20 productions at Curious, leads Curious New Voices Education Program, and has directed several plays, including The Brother Sizes and In the Red and Brown Water from The Brother/Sister Plays by Tarell Alvin McCraney. She sat down with fellow Artistic Company Member, Christy Montour-Larson, to talk about directing The Brother/Sister Plays, as she began rehearsals for the final play of the trilogy, Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet.

Our audiences at Curious know you as an actor and as a director. Not many people know about your movement and dance background and how it plays a significant part in how you approach *The Brother/Sister Plays*.

Movement has always been a part of my vocabulary, even though I would never call myself a dancer. In my 20's I taught theatre at Perry Mansfield Arts School and Camp in Steamboat Springs. As faculty we were able to take classes in the other disciplines. I always took the modern and jazz classes. Typically the only classes available given my teaching schedule were the advanced classes. I was way out of my league and my comfort zone, but I was there pushing myself to keep up. I was not a dancer but a theatre person who loved dance and movement. I was so committed to learning that when I was in Kansas City I quit acting for over a year just to dance. Through that process, I kept finding myself getting invited into movement groups that created improvisational dance works. The journey into movement lead me to the Naropa University to pursue my graduate work in dance/movement therapy.

You didn't know you would end up directing the entire trilogy when you first directed *The Brother Size* in 2013. Now that you are in rehearsal for the last of the three plays, what are some of the discoveries you have made along the way?

In all of the plays, the characters grow up before our eyes through rites of passage. In *The Brother Size*, in order for Oshoosi to have a life as a man, he has to leave his home and go out into the world. In *In The Red and Brown Water*, Shango has to stop being a player and go to war, Oya loses her mom and Elegba has a baby. All rites of passage. And that is one of the places that pain comes from in all of these plays. I think our culture in the United States lacks a conscious way of transitioning our young people into adulthood. So the characters in these plays run around trying to create these experiences for themselves and figure out for themselves how to grow up.



I also find it interesting how we see a lot of moms, but there are no fathers in any of these plays. By the time we get to the last play, Marcus is specifically dealing with what it means to not have a father to help him understand who he is. When people say Marcus is just like his dad, he has no idea what that even means. When I put my mind to this topic, suddenly I am seeing interviews with major athletes who say, "I wish I would have had a father." Once I started listening for it, it started coming up everywhere.

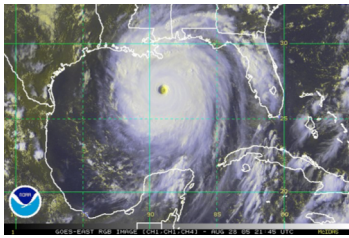
As he began writing plays, Tarell Alvin McCraney's interest in the Yoruban myths inspired his trilogy. How have the Yoruban deities (Orishas) informed your understanding of the characters?

I think McCraney put the characters into relationship with the Orishas so we understand the god-like quality in ourselves. Everyone in these plays are coming into their own. What does that mean to me as a person? How do I carry the warrior of thunder and metal or the gatekeeper to the ancestors? How does it inform how the character walks through the world?

The characters in all three plays will sometimes speak their own stage directions, as in "Ogun enters." How have you decided to approach this unique trait?

They are interesting, because we can see a character enter, we are going to watch him do exactly that. He could just do that without telling us, "Ogun enters."

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A Storm for the Ages

- Hurricane Katrina was the largest and 3rd strongest hurricane ever recorded to make landfall in the United States.
- In New Orleans, the levees were designed for Category 3, but Katrina peaked at a Category 5 hurricane, with winds up to 175 mph.
- The final death toll was at 1,836, primarily from Louisiana (1,577).



- Hurricane Katrina affected over 15 million people in different ways varying from having to evacuate their homes, rising gas prices, and the economy suffering.
- Hurricane Katrina caused \$81 billion in property damages, but it is estimated that the total economic impact may exceed \$150 billion.



- Hurricane Katrina impacted about 90,000 square miles.
- The region affected by the storm supported roughly 1 million non-farm jobs, and still, hundreds of thousands of local residents were left unemployed by the hurricane.

Rites of Passage: continued

Therefore, I realized the spoken stage directions must be revealing.... or add another layer of complexity to the moment while directing inviting the audience into the play. I think they are an opportunity for the characters to play a little subtext or add another layer of complexity to the moment.

I think of these plays as poetry. So when a character reveals to the audience a stage direction before they act on it, for instance someone says, "He wipes a tear," and then literally wipes the tear this sequence of saying before doing actually heightens the poetry and physicality of the gesture. It draws our attention acutely to the moment. It is a character calling his or her full worth into the space. It means I am here now. I am the one occupying the moment.

When it was decided to present the entire trilogy, *The Brother Size* was remounted this past summer so audiences could experience all the plays in order, as part of Curious' serial storytelling initiative. What was that like for you?

Some aspects were different and really grew. In some of the movement sequences we added some steps because we could... However, there were some aspects of the work where we challenged ourselves more physically and emotionally because it felt like there was ore there waiting for us.

What changed the most for us was our relationship to the rest of the community. When we worked on *The Brother Size* the first time, we had to create the off stage people for ourselves to tell the story. When we went back the second time, after having worked on *In the Red and Brown Water*, those characters now actually existed for us. The storekeeper, O Li Room, was no longer a 100-year-old white guy with a walker. He was now the character played by actor Ed Cord, wiping his brow looking like he would have a heart attack at any moment.

How is *Marcus* different than the first two plays of the trilogy?

Marcus has a lot more direct address, characters speaking directly to the audience. The play

starts with direct address. Marcus takes the audience with him on this journey. "Do you want to watch while I figure this out?" His relationship with the audience as they witness his difficult quest for identity is written very specifically. He needs their help.

I also think Marcus is much more contemporary than the others because the next generation is now telling the story. *In the Red and Brown Water* had a chorus of elders tell the story of Oya, a sad story about a sad girl. *Marcus* belongs to the kids. It is still "the distant present". But this present has a newer generational consciousness to it.

Specifically, *Marcus* is set in early September 2005 – just before Hurricane Katrina hits the Gulf Coast in the midst of the Iraq War. How does this setting increase our understanding of what *Marcus* is about?

In early drafts of *Marcus*, there used to be a lot more reference to Hurricane Katrina. Although McCraney has since softened the relationship to it - it is still there. For me, it connects to the vulnerability of this world. The people in these three stories are some of the most vulnerable people in a very vulnerable place in the world. Opportunities are limited and resources are almost non-existent. Because of all these factors, when it starts to rain, what do they have?

What do you think you will be feeling after *Marcus* opens?

It is definitely a privilege. We didn't just get this show open, we got a trilogy told and that just feels like an accomplishment. I keep thinking to myself, "Don't forget to appreciate the fact that this is happening." Some of us have been with each other for so long on this journey. Sometimes, I need to remind myself that once this opens we won't see Ogun again and Cajardo Lindsey and I won't be doing this together anymore, which is pretty huge for us considering how intense and personal and creative it has been.

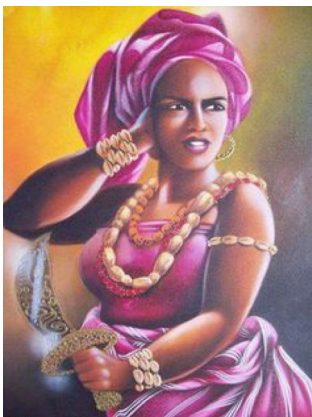
The Orisha of Yoruba: More than a Name

The Brother/Sister Plays draw from the cosmology of the Yoruba people of West Africa. Yoruba culture first spread across the Atlantic when West Africans were sold in the slave trade. Today its influence is felt throughout countries ranging from Haiti to Brazil to Cuba to the United States. Practiced in various forms by millions today, Yoruba religious traditions embrace a rich pantheon of orishas, or spirits, that reflect one of the manifestations of God and whose life forces animate and inspire their followers.

McCraney's use of Orisha names gives us a unique insight to the characters of his plays. Here's a glimpse into the features of certain characters' orishas.

Eshu (aka **Elegba** and **Elegua**) is the orisha of chance and uncertainty. Known as the "trickster," he lurks at gateways and doorways to introduce chaos and accident into the lives of humans. He is also seen as the "divine messenger," delivering messages and sacrifices between the natural and spiritual worlds, and is known for his sexual exploits. In *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Marcus Eshu, Elegba, and Elegua all have divine visions or insights.

Oba is the Yoruban goddess of rivers. Oba's themes are protection, manifestation, movement, energy, restoration and flexibility. She is known as the protector of marriage, the orisha of action, and one of Shango's wives, along with Oshun and Oya. Her symbol is water. In *The Brother/Sister Plays* Oba raises Marcus on her own.

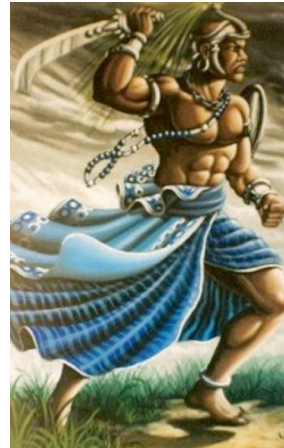


Oba

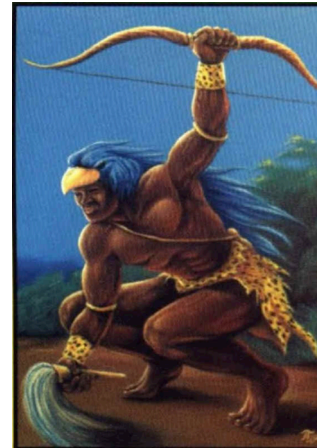


Elegba

Ogun is the orisha of war and iron, Ogun gave the secret of iron to the humans and taught them how to shape metal tools and weapons. He is also powerful, fierce warrior who defends his people, fights against injustice and whose retribution is to be greatly feared. He is dependable and helps overcome spiritual and psychological obstacles. Ogun is also the only character appearing in all three of *The Brother/Sister Plays*.



Ogun

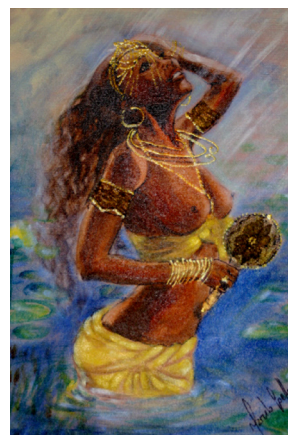


Oshoosi

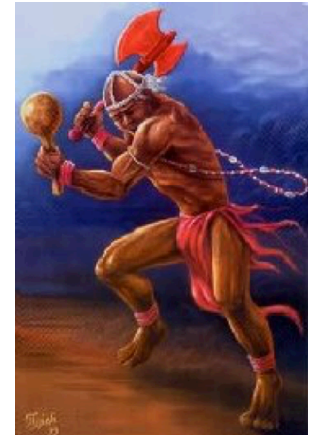
Oshoosi is the Orisha of the forest and a divine hunter. He is representative of both human and divine justice and rules over jails, judges, and lawyers. He is intelligent, cunning, and cautious, and is known as the wanderer. Along with Ogun and Elegba, Oshoosi is the third of the "guerreros", or warrior Orisha.

Oshun is the orisha of sensuality, beauty, and fertility. She has the power to heal with water, and is often called upon to cure female ailments. Oshun is a strong and confident woman, but she also has a passionate, easily angered spirit. In *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Shun, Osha, and Shaunta Iyun all have characteristics of this orisha.

Shango is the orisha of masculinity, virility, warriors, thunder and lightning, and fire. He has three wives, Oya, Oshun, and Oba. He is said to be able to transform ordinary items into something pure and coveted. In *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Shango is a soldier in Iraq who woos several other characters.



Oshun



Shango

The Family Tree: *The Brother/Sister Plays* Ensemble



Kristen Adele
Oya



Adrianna Coleman
Shun (Water)



Ed Cord
OLi Room, The Man From State



Geri Crawley
Elegua (Water)



Laurence Curry
Egungun, Oshoosi Size & Shua



Jada Dixon
Mama Moja, Nia, Woman Who Reminds You & Oba



Damion Hoover
Elegba & Marcus Eshu



Isaiah Kelley
Terrell



Cajardo Lindsey
Ogun Size



Sheryl McCallum
Elegua (Marcus)



Tanisha Pyron
Shaunta Iyun



Brynn Tucker
Osha



Simone St. John
Shun (Marcus)



Theo Wilson
Shango

The mission of Curious Theatre Company is to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre.

Tickets for *Marcus*; or *The Secret of Sweet* can be purchased by calling 303.623.0524 or at curioustheatre.org.

Curious and Curiouser is prepared for Curious Theatre Company by Christy Montour-Larson. Special thanks to Dee Covington, Tim David, Meghan Anderson Doyle and Shannon McKinney.
