

Claire's mind into our own experiences. At the same time, the Traverse premiere was an international collaboration coproduced by the Norwegian company Brageteatret and Germany's Schauspielhaus Wien, as well as the English Actors Touring Company and the Young Vic Theatre, underscoring the universal resonance of Claire's futile search for answers in the face of the mass shooting that, unfortunately, feels all too relevant across the globe.

The impossibility of Claire's quest for forgiveness was emphasized by deliberate distancing in the dramaturgy and staging choices. Neve McIntosh led as Claire, while Rudi Dharmalingam played all the other roles (from Claire's partner Catriona, to a local politician, to the murderer himself) in a masterly contained performance without changing costume or vocal inflection (sometimes his shift in character happened mid-scene and took a while for audience members to catch up). This disorientation was deliberate, as it became clear that no matter to whom Claire looks to for explanation or comfort, she only and always sees the same face.

An actual local community choir played the role of Claire's church choir, singing musical interludes with scripts in hand. Greig's play specifies some of the music (hymns and popular songs that again locate us in Scotland), but also allows for some of it to be chosen by the featured choir. The effect of having a choir of nonactors onstage was disarming and highlighted at once both the truth of the event and the artifice of our recreation of it. It was both the best example of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* that I have experienced and the purest example of an onstage chorus as the representation of a collective of citizens. We were swept into the emotional harmonies of well-known Christian hymns like "How Great Thou Art," and then promptly pulled out of the action by the choir's clearly unchoreographed movements around the stage and reading of lines. Like the characters played by Dharmalingam, the choir members were often cast randomly and sometimes deliberately playing against gender and racial presentation. They represented the Scottish choir that Claire lost on that fateful day, but they also served as a more universal representation of people who cannot be replaced.

Although vastly different in form and subject, *Ciara* and *The Events* each extended a deeply personal and localized moment so that its effects reverberated. Both stories brought their protagonists on a journey through multiple versions of the past to a place where they had to fight to be able to stand on their own and left them on the brink of this uncertain present moment. While neither refer directly to Scotland's imminent referendum, it is reflected in the question marks with which we are left. The plays

were at once fresh, contemporary pieces grounded in modern Scotland and meditations on the classic and universal themes of theatrical tradition. With several other similarly exciting new plays in development at the Traverse alone, it is no wonder that O'Loughlin has proudly proclaimed this to be a golden age of Scottish playwriting.

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HEAD OF PASSES. By Tarell Alvin McCraney.
Directed by Tina Landau. Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago. 3 May 2013.

The world premiere of Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Head of Passes* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company further exemplified the playwright's commitments to exploring the richness of the African American experience through imaginative retellings of classic stories and myths. As with his celebrated trilogy *The Brother/Sister Plays*, which remixes elements of Yoruba cosmology and blends them with an idiom and dramaturgy born from bayou cultures and hip-hop sensibilities, *Head of Passes* again witnessed McCraney synthesizing the old and new to offer a dynamic investigation of the lives of ordinary folk. Moreover, inspired by the biblical Book of Job, the play also witnessed McCraney's continued willingness to stretch the boundaries of theatre through experimentations with form and content.

Head of Passes initially appeared to be a typical American family drama. Set in a once bustling though rapidly sinking house located in the marsh-



Tim Hopper (Doctor Anderson), Ron Cephas Jones (Creaker), James T. Alfred (Spencer), Cheryl Lynn Bruce (Shelah), Jacqueline Williams (Mae), and Glenn Davis (Aubrey) in *Head of Passes*.

(Photo: Michael Brosilow.)



Cheryl Lynn Bruce (Shelah) in *Head of Passes*. (Photo: Michael Brosilow.)

lands at the mouth of the Mississippi River (a place affectionately called the “Head of Passes”) and unfolding in “the distant present” (a time between “now” and “then”), the play centers on Shelah (Cheryl Lynn Bruce), a mother, widow, and former proprietor of a boarding house that at one time provided shelter and home-cooked meals to men drilling for oil in the wetlands. In the first act, McCraney shrewdly deploys the formal principles of realism to plot a surprise birthday gathering for Shelah orchestrated by her youngest son, Aubrey (played by an affecting Glenn Davis). A terrible storm raging both outside and inside the house threatens to dampen the celebratory mood, however. Shelah’s failing health—she spends much of the act battling a bloody cough and psychically readying herself for death—casts an additional pall over the celebration, as do the many devastating family secrets that resurface during the gathering, secrets that caused Shelah, much like the virtuous Job, to experience multiple crises of faith. Indeed, McCraney captivantly extended the Book of Job’s interrogation of righteousness and suffering in the play as a way to make evident Shelah’s metaphysical quandaries, as well as to bring into relief some of the contemporary existential concerns of African American families.

Shelah, whose name aurally signifies on *selah*—an exclamation that punctuates many of the psalms of the Old Testament and serves as a reminder to pause and meditate—contends with tremendous tragedy in *Head of Passes*’ elegiac second and third acts. Indeed, the unanticipated deaths of her three adult children, Spencer (James T. Alfred), Cookie (Alana Arenas), and Aubrey, coupled with the further collapse of her home into the marshland, forces Shelah to plunge through the depths of her memories and reflect on what perhaps had wrought such suffering. What was revealed in these suspended moments of self-interrogation—moments that explicitly conjured Job’s tussles with God—were the ways in which Shelah’s blind faith had produced many blind spots: most troublingly, an inability to recognize that it was years of sexual abuse at the hands of her deceased husband, Big Aubrey, that turned Cookie toward drugs and away from the family. Anchored by Bruce’s breathtaking performance in the role, Shelah’s retreat into her own thoughts in act 3 decidedly shifted *Head of Passes* away from a typical family-destroyed-by-secrets drama into the realm of the mythic. Powerfully, her direct appeals to God for relief, in addition to offering some of the production’s most arresting monologues, again

demonstrated McCraney's talent for exploring both the precariousness of, and the beauty in, human vulnerability.

Director Tina Landau, a fellow ensemble member and frequent collaborator with McCraney at Steppenwolf, redeployed the play's fresh, sometimes challenging renderings of human vulnerability as an artistic resource in the premiere production. In remarkable ways, Landau and her cast—notably, Arenas as Cookie and Ron Cephas Jones and Kyle Beltran as the always bickering father/son duo Creaker and Crier—managed to foreground the nuances in the play's wildly divergent formal and tonal shifts from the mundane to the mythic, while also accenting the grace notes in McCraney's lush language. The addition of Beltran's honey-toned tenor to various sung interludes, along with Bruce's emotive renditions of several traditional hymns, certainly helped to accentuate both the mythical and musical dimensions of the playwright's evocative dramaturgy.

The physical production, particularly David Gallo's scenery, also added to Landau's keen explorations of human vulnerability. In an effort to call attention to the unpredictability of the environment surrounding it, Gallo designed a towering, well-appointed home for Shelah that, at the end of the first act, slowly collapsed into the presumably unstable ground on which it was built. Beyond underscoring the severity of Shelah's crumpling world and, of course, showcasing the vastness of the directing and design teams' theatrical imagination, the descent of the home into the ground helped to reemphasize an aspect of McCraney's dramaturgy that frequently goes unremarked: namely, the complex ways that the playwright often renders the relationship between his characters and their environments. If *The Brother/Sister Plays*—notably *Marcus, or the Secret of Sweet*—first displayed McCraney's willingness to engage in eco-conversations, *Head of Passes*, aided by Gallo's spectacular design, evidenced the playwright's increasing and intensifying desire to take up questions of ecology in his work.

Directed, designed, and performed with finesse at Steppenwolf, *Head of Passes* proves to be McCraney's most ambitious play to date. The premiere production at Steppenwolf offered absorbing meditations on family, faith, and grace. Significantly, in engaging an aesthetics of recycling—that is, in reviving and revising a classic story to dramatize the pleasures and perils of contemporary African American life—McCraney, a 2013 recipient of the "Genius Grant" from the MacArthur Foundation, further distinguishes himself as one of the most boldly unconventional playwrights producing new work for the American theatre.

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HUNGRY WOMAN. By Josefina López. Directed by Corky Dominguez. CASA 0101 Theater, Los Angeles. 29 June 2013.

Boyle Heights, an East Los Angeles neighborhood known for its large immigrant population, is home to the vital and flourishing community theatre CASA 0101. Josefina López, the Chicana playwright, screenwriter, and novelist most famous for *Real Women Have Curves*, founded CASA 0101 in 2000 and serves as its artistic director. Operating out of a converted bridal shop for its first eleven years, in 2011, CASA 0101 moved a block away to its current location, a ninety-nine seat theatre with an art gallery in the vestibule. At a time when many community theatre projects fail due to the difficulties of financing them, CASA 0101 has been successful in providing its community a space for theatre, film, art, and even education through generous support from local foundations, endowments, and individual donors. Such funding allows the theatre to keep its ticket prices as low as about \$20 for general admission and \$15 for residents of Boyle Heights.

CASA 0101, then, was the ideal space for the 2013 world premiere of López's new play, *Hungry Woman*, adapted from her 2009 novel *Hungry Woman in Paris*. (The play's title seems to pay homage to fellow Chicana playwright Cherríe Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman*.) López's play starts with George W. Bush's reelection in 2004, when the protagonist, Canela Guerrero (played by Rachel González), a young Mexican American woman, finds herself in a state of despair brought on by the political climate. Troubling her also are the haunting memories of her cousin's recent death from problems related to diabetes, which we later find out was actually a suicide. Calling off her wedding, Canela uses her ticket for what would have been her honeymoon to fly to Paris, where she enrolls in a culinary arts school in order to be allowed to stay in Paris for nine months.

Hungry Woman features twelve actors, most whom are Latina/o, playing thirty-one different roles. Only Canela remained onstage at all times, where she often spoke directly to the audience and narrated her memories or acted them out with the other characters. As the *Hungry Woman* of the title, her centrality cemented the identification of the audience, many of whom were Latinas, with her character. Canela's worldview as a first-generation Mexican American resident of Boyle Heights represented that of the community in which CASA 0101 is based. She faces both the rigid gender roles prescribed by her Mexican American culture and family, which insist on her marriage to a man who can care for her, as well as the xenophobic governments in France and the United States, where immigrants take to the