Tarell Alvin McCraney, in His Own Words

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Interview with Sharrell D. Luckett, David Román, and Isaiah Matthew Wooden

EDITORS: At this point in your career, you've been asked to do countless interviews. One of the questions, it seems, that hasn't been asked, at least not directly, is: Who is Tarell Alvin McCraney?

MCCRANEY: "A strange beginning: 'borrow'd majesty!'" That's one of the first lines from *King John* [by William Shakespeare], and the first time I heard it—out loud—I knew I was in trouble . . . not like read it on the page but heard it from someone's mouth, from Eleanor to the court in defense of her son? I knew I was in trouble. Talk about a phrase that summed me up, that got me together, as the "kidz" and older church folks might say.

A strange beginning?

Indeed. My first memory is of me being beaten to a pulp by my mom and actual dad; they took turns because I had touched my cousin or brother's butt in the bathtub. I was four. Some of my other earliest memories are of the Challenger exploding; my little brother caressing the babysitter's breast, and her laughing and thinking of him as more manly than me; the man who I wished was my father being killed during a weekend while I was away, my mother explaining that he was dead and that I would never see him again; my mother pregnant with his child and being hospitalized for overdosing; the threat of being taken from my mother, the wish that I had never gone to call the police, the feeling that, if we were taken, then it would have been all my fault.

That was all by the age of six.

Borrow'd majesty . . .

I wish for the grace of my peers. When I meet with Kyle Abraham, I wish he could spin me into the brush strokes he paints with his choreography. When I walk with Jamar Roberts, I hope he will, for a moment, move next to me in such a way that someone will see grace in me in the way that I do in them, on them, with them.

My mother was graceful. Her mother was Grace. Then again, so was my father's mother. Grace. They taught me majesty: the King of Kings from Grace Ann, who taught me to know and fear God, and the King of Thought from Grace Rebecca, who taught me that knowledge was power. None of it feels like I wield it properly. I am neither a great worshiper, though I am reverent, or a great scholar, though I hold onto thoughts, ideas, and remembrances. I am lazy in that, if I must undo myself, disturb myself, in order to understand a thing, I retreat. I'd rather peace. Or maybe that's just the Venus in me . . .

I'd rather peace.

One time, on 43rd Street in New York City, in front of a rehearsal hall, I couldn't find my Uber. I was late to see my godson and was with a friend who I had offered a ride . . . if we could just find the right black car—in a sea of black cars—that day. I kept checking the phone, and checking my friend, and checking the cars until *finally* I found the correct one and popped in. My friend said, "Wow, I hope I never get like that!" I asked what he meant, and he went on to describe a scene of me ignoring the hell out of someone, a young person, who was trying to get my attention by calling my name. He said they seemed like a fan of my work.

In that instance, I was two things: relieved that I had missed out on having to live up to a stranger's expectations of me *and* really sad that the poor person might have thought I was ignoring them. Then the sadness won out. I started feeling so bad in the car, and calling myself all kinds of names. *Look at you acting like you are better than somebody.* But I wasn't. I honestly didn't hear them. But just like that I spiraled back to the first time I mistakenly or curiously went looking at something and got beat by two parents.

Even at thirty-seven, I was still four.

EDITORS: How would you describe your artistic development? Were there notable moments that inspired you to pursue theatermaking?

MCCRANEY: Thanks to Hurricane Andrew, I ended up in an arts magnet program at Mays Middle School. Thanks to my mom being in rehab, I met a man running a rehab-prevention theater program named Teo Castellanos,

and that profoundly furthered my artistic development. Thanks to the retirement of an old stalwart, I got into New World School of the Arts High School in Miami. By that point, I was locked in . . . I've been all about theater and storytelling ever since.

My mom died when I was twenty-two, before I got to the Yale School of Drama. I wrote *The Brothers Size* and "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue" in the wake of her death. Lucky for me, both of those pieces have brought me back to Miami and Homestead.

EDITORS: What does your creative process look like? What practices and/or rituals do you engage in as you write?

MCCRANEY: Writing doesn't begin until I know the end. To find the end—as with any journey—you have to follow a path. Sometimes the path is before you. Sometimes the path is covered or hidden. Sometimes the path moves under you. But if you know where to stop or where to rest, then the path is all that matters.

EDITORS: Are there experiences that proved challenging that you would not change because they've indelibly shaped who you are?

MCCRANEY: I'm not sure that I would not change them. I think the powers that be are smart enough to give us limits on what we can change, and gives us the power of acceptance and wisdom to know that this is for our own good. Still, there is so much pain I would change.

EDITORS: What are some of the essential ingredients for a successful collaboration with you?

MCCRANEY: . . . Ask my successful collaborators.

EDITORS: What's unique about creating work for the theater (as opposed to film or television)?

MCCRANEY: . . . If you can see it—the story—then it's film. And if you can hear it, it's a play. The live interaction with the audience is *the* thing in theater.

EDITORS: How would you say the "distant present" differs from the present?

MCCRANEY: You are always telling a story. As you are telling it, it means it's already happened. It's distant. It's not quite present.

EDITORS: Do you feel the "burden of representation" as a black queer playwright?

MCCRANEY: Nothing is free. I write for the twelve blocks that make up Liberty City and, by doing so, feel I have to represent the truth of that place as best I can. I hope that truth resonates . . . and agitates more dialogue. But you have to always have an audience in mind when making dramatic stories.

EDITORS: How has teaching impacted your writing process?

MCCRANEY: Teaching is incredible because you get to remind people every day of the things that you wish someone would remind you of when you are working.

EDITORS: How has being a company member at Steppenwolf Theatre impacted your artistic development?

MCCRANEY: Steppenwolf was where I got my equity card. I became a card-carrying actor at Steppenwolf. I worked with Tina Landau on most of my early work, and Alana Arenas and I grew up together. Any place where I get to continue to work with them feels like home.

EDITORS: The world has come to know you as a writer, director, actor, and professor. What's something about you that we perhaps don't know?

MCCRANEY: I take Horton and ballet dance classes often at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where I once went for summer dance intensives.

EDITORS: What is the work that keeps you up at night?

MCCRANEY: I don't sleep, so all of it.