
Choir Boy

By Tarell Alvin McCraney

Study Guide

Created by Alliance Theatre Institute for Educators and Teaching Artists Staff

Choir Boy opened Off Broadway in 2013 at the Manhattan Theater Club City Center - Stage II in New York City.

The play can be seen on the Hertz Stage from September 20, 2013 to October 13, 2013.



Jeremy Pope in the Manhattan Theatre Club production of *Choir Boy*. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Reviews

“...[Choir Boy] sings with smarts and heart.” — *Variety*

“...registers with potency, examining its themes with a mixture of poignancy and humor...it soars.” – *New York Post*

“As Pharus, [Jeremy] Pope gives a magnetic, moving performance...” – *The New York Times*

“‘*Choir Boy*’ is [McCraney’s] crispest and most confident work.” – *New York Daily News*

“Greatly affecting! Give over to the deeply felt performances and the rich emotional landscape.” – *The Village Voice*

“History and secret histories, the things that free us and the things that tie us to the past are all examined in this exhilarating, multi-layered new play from Tarell Alvin McCraney.” – *The Guardian* (U.K.)

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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.

Synopsis of *Choir Boy*

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.

Director

The Manhattan Theatre Club's world premiere was directed by Trip Cullman and the Atlanta production is directed by Trip Cullman.



Trip Cullman received his MFA from Yale School of Drama in 2002. By 2006 he was referred to by one journalist as “Off-Broadway’s It director... and a name you must know.” A self-proclaimed “king of high school musical theatre,” he studied acting as an undergraduate at Yale and began to direct at Off Off-Broadway houses like Nada and The Piano Store soon after...



“I always find they [critics] just say ‘well-paced’ or ‘crisply directed by,’ ” he says. “These adjectives that are sort of meaningless and have nothing really to do with what I’m actually contributing to the work... If a playwright is the author of the text, the director is the author of the production — anything you perceive on stage is part of a long and arduous decision-making process,” he explains. “I’d venture to say that the more problematic texts directors are given, when they then make [them] into viable productions, that’s the incredible amount of work on the director’s part.” – *Downtown Express*

Actors

Original Off Broadway Cast

Junior Davis: Nicholas L. Ashe
David Heard: Kyle Beltran
Anthony Justin James: Grantham Coleman
Mr. Pendleton: Austin Pendleton
Pharus Jonathan Young: Jeremy Pope
Bobby Marrow: Wallace Smith
Headmaster Marrow: Charles E. Wallace

Alliance Theatre Cast

Junior Davis: Nicholas L. Ashe
David Heard: Caleb Eberhardt
Bobby Marrow: Joshua Boone
Pharus Jonathan Young: Jeremy Pope
Mr. Pendleton: Scott Robertson
Anthony Justin James: John Stewart
Headmaster Marrow: Charles E. Wallace



Characters

(in order of appearance)

HEADMASTER MARROW, late 30's, early 40's man of Color, Is the Youngest and latest Headmaster for the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is Paternal Uncle to **BOBBY MARROW**

PHARUS JONATHAN YOUNG, late teens, an effeminate young man of color. 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 late 60's, 70's, white male, professor at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys.

BOBBY MARROW, mid to late teens, a young man of color, **BOBBY** is 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 teenage young man of color, and a junior at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is a member of the School's Choir.

ANTHONY JUSTIN 'AJ' JAMES, in his late teens, athletic young man of color, 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, in his late teen, a young man of color, a senior at the Charles R Drew Prep School for Boys. He is a member of the School's Choir.

Unfamiliar Words and Phrases from *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

COLOMBO: The Colombo organized crime family

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: 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

Tarell Alvin McCraney's Play *Choir Boy* is a coming of age story.

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*

Place: Charles R Drew Prep School For Boys

Time: A School Year, Last Year.

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*)



1 Pine Forge Academy



3 Piney Woods School Musical Groups



2 Redemption Christian Academy



4 Laurinburg Institute

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.

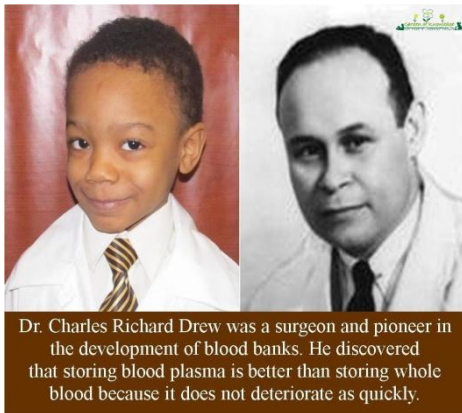
Choir and Musical Traditions in One of Today's Schools

The Pine Forge Academy Choir consists of over 90 members representing talented, experienced and dedicated young men and women ranging from ages 13 through 18, who not only excel musically, but academically.

Choir members come from all over the United States and other countries of the world. Each member brings to this organization his or her own unique personality and background. Blended together, they project an outstanding musical excellence that elevates and inspires listeners. The choir is noted for its full, rich and powerful harmonious quality. They proclaim God's goodness through spirituals, gospels, anthems and a classical repertoire. ("Pine Forge Academy" 2013)

Charles R. Drew Academy's Namesake

Who was Charles R. Drew and what did he do, that might have prompted Tarell Alvin McCraney to name his fictional boarding school after this internationally celebrated American hero?



1 - USNS Charles Drew (T-AKE-10)

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)

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?