



Octavio Solis on Tarell Alvin McCraney

An interview with Jayne Benjulia

Tarell Alvin McCraney grew up in the projects of Liberty City, Miami, and to this day, although he works in London, New York and Chicago, Miami is his home. He started his life in theater writing and performing shows in rehabilitation centers for juvenile delinquents.

*The reason *The Brothers Size* was written was because for me, there was a hard time finding stories about men of color, especially poor men of color, that had to do with intimate relationships... There were a lot of people who weren't being seen on stage. Especially because I was in the theater, I've been to the theater all my life, and I just kept thinking to myself, well there is a Chekhovian equivalent in the projects. I don't see why people don't see that or why that voice isn't being heard, so it became important to me to do it.*

Tarell doesn't miss the little things that make life livable. Even in the projects, there is joy, and cracking open even the deepest dynamics of family can be liberating.

We told stories that were about our own parents or about the brothers and sisters that we lost... and that is the way we made a link to these people in the audience... to find a way

to use the theater to draw in those people who feel like the theater has become too elite for them.

Tarell's passion to draw people to the theater affects the stories he tells and the way he tells them.

Now oftentimes I say that Brothers Size was meant to be performed in the project's courtyard, and it's very true: The first place we rehearsed was in the projects I grew up in, in Miami, just in the courtyard in the middle of it to see how it worked, and that's why the stage directions are so integral to the play, because they allow for the actor to call to the audience and invite them into the space and remind them that this can't happen without you. You belong here with us; if you're not here, this is rehearsal.

At the end of the first week of rehearsal, Director Octavio Solis and Director of New Play Development Jayne Benjulian sat down to talk about *The Brothers Size*.

JB What is it like to work on Tarell's play?

OS The script has given me and given our actors such delight. The situations are as comical as they are lyrical, and every moment we probe yields more insight into family, manhood and brotherhood. We find parallels in our relationships with our own siblings. And we are reminded, page-by-page, that this work is a love story. A love story between men with larger hearts than they know how to express.

JB It's a masculine play.

OS It's muscular, and I like the kind of work that connects to the visceral core, works that have that kind of edge. I'm attracted to characters that are disenfranchised and angry. I'm attracted to resentments, characters who hold things inside. I'm interested in people who don't know they harbor secrets; they keep them and hold their cards very close to the chest—and don't even know they're holding cards. And this play's full of them. All these characters don't know their own secrets, but they protect them anyway. And the play is filled with moments where they realize that.

JB When Oshoosi asks Ogun about Oya.

OS I don't think Ogun is thinking about her consciously. I don't think he's thinking about her very much anymore, but inside, in his soul, that's all he thinks about: how she broke his heart. How that other guy swept her off her feet and brushed him aside. It's done; it's history, but underneath, he thinks about her all the time. And he doesn't realize it until Oshoosi asks him, Hey, how's Oya? It pricks him, and it makes him think about her. He's had it inside of him, and he's had no one to talk to about her and how broken his heart is over her.

JB She's lost.

OS And everybody knows that. Fecundity: it means so much. I'm attracted to characters who have an anger that is so diffuse because they can't hold onto it, but still it's intense. They're angry young men. There's rage, a kind of brutal, animal male rage. I even like that kind of brutal animal rage in women characters. As a playwright, I'm drawn to women characters that are like that: two-fisted women who can hold their own; they're warriors, and they do what they need to do to get the satisfaction or resolution that they need. And all the women in the Brother/Sister Plays are like that. Especially the older ones: get out of their way.

JB *The Brothers Size* is set after *In the Red and Brown Water* (roughly the 1990s) and before *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* (2005). When does *The Brothers Size* take place?

OS Some time between now and the 1990s. I don't want anything in the play to speak to a specific year. One of the actors wanted to wear a Michael Jordan shirt; it became clear that was too specific.

JB Is that what Tarell meant by setting the play in The Distant Present?

OS Yes. It's mythic time.

JB Do you think there's anything timely about *The Brothers Size*? Why this play now?

OS When I read this play, I was also dealing in my mind with Oscar Grant, the man who was shot in the back by the BART police New Year's Eve. They just had a trial and the policeman was found guilty of manslaughter. He's a BART policeman, and he's authorized to carry a gun. The fact that they found a policeman guilty in the state of California is a huge thing; it's rare, and it's a big step forward. That was on my mind, especially during the passages in *Brothers* with the sheriff, where they have to dance around. He's really good with the white folks, but with us, he's just a dick. White or black, once you put on a uniform, a chasm opens up between that person and everyone else because he's got a handgun, but an even wider chasm opens up between that officer and the African American community. Racism is just a part of any African American story, and I think it's in the fabric of any story being told by African American writers now. Even in the plays of August Wilson—he nixed the white characters altogether. He said, these characters aren't in my world; Caucasians are not in my community. And still the racism stamped itself on his characters' motivations; it's at the core of a lot of things, and it's mind-crushing, soul crushing. I think some of that's present here. But also, there's something else going on.

JB How men love each other. And how challenging it is for blood and non-blood family to express that love for each other.

OS Tarell deals in a humane and compassionate way with characters who are trying to figure out their questions about sexuality. What is a man? What is a woman?

What is a man when he loves another man? What does it mean—in the African American community, where it's so taboo, where it doesn't exist? And it's true also for the Latino community. I know people who have been in the closet for years. Years—and their parents still don't know.

JB In San Francisco? Because we live in a bubble here.

OS Oh, yeah, this is an island. I know people who have been out here for years, but they are too afraid to come out at home. That's the big thing he's dealing with in this work. I think it is what is at the heart of this play, as Tarell states in the Proverbs quotation at the start of this play: there is closeness between brothers, but man, there is an even closer bond between two lovers who are brothers and are so close that a blood knot can't unravel it. So I think that makes it a very powerful work. He's one of many young artists of color who are addressing that question directly. I want to deal with it too, and I'm straight, and I still want to deal with those issues. I think it's powerful. But that is the question at the heart of this play: What is a man? What is a black man? And Ogun wants Oshoosi to be this kind of black man and Elegba says, no, you're like me; you're this kind of black man. And I think that's what Oshoosi is trying to figure out. Where does he stand? In which place? Does he have to go all the way back to Madagascar to figure it out? Not literally, but in history as a black man: does he have to go all the way back to Africa to figure out? That's what makes it timeless. Those questions can never be fully, satisfyingly answered. But Tarell is not afraid to ask them, which is why I think this play feels so elemental. And I'm glad that it's grounded in this Yoruba myth with Yoruba names in the dream world because it allows each man to play out those things he can't articulate in the waking world. When they dream, all that shit comes out. It's sexy; it's erotic to have those dreams. This work needs to be sexually present. The secrets are playing out in their dreams.

JB There are three men in this play; it's intense. In that sense the other two plays are more diffuse.

OS This play is so taut, so muscular, and so dangerous. I think there's the danger that at any moment one of them will just say, *get the fuck out of my life forever*. Or do something worse. The real danger is in revealing the truth about each other and about themselves.

JB How is the narrative device having the actors speak their stage directions used dramatically?

OS The audience is close. The characters know there is an audience, and they speak to the individuals in it. We are going to keep the lights on all the time so that they feel like they are spectators. That they're witnesses to a ceremony. In church, you don't turn off the lights. The priest gets to see every face out there. You can't perform the ceremony without people there. You can't do a play without somebody there to give you back the energy to continue. It's a reenactment of a ceremony that is repeated, but it's fresh and new every time because the witnesses are new; the eyes are new. It's like a basketball game: the audience feeds the

performers in the same way that spectators feed a basketball team. Playing on your home court makes a huge difference. We need the responses of the audience, like you would in church.

JB There is a deeply spiritual element to this play.

OS The characters all have Yoruban names and are grounded in Yoruban folklore and mythology. This is a play about demi-gods. They're walking and suffering, and they have human emotions, recognizable emotions, but they're larger than life. And so, when something happens in their world, the heavens resonate with their choices. Ogun is a car mechanic, but he is also the god of iron. Elegba is the god of the crossroads, of decisions. He is always telling the truth when he's lying, and lying when he's telling the truth. Oshoosi is fecundity, life. They feel personal and cosmic at the same time.

JB Mythic.

OS All myth is about desire. The desire to live outside of our bodies. The only way we can do that is through sex, desire. Love is a direct expression of that desire to transcend our own skin. That's how we transcend ourselves. And all mythology is concerned with that. You look at Greek mythology, and all the gods are horny bastards. They're all trying to seduce and rape humans disguised as other humans or disguised as animals, whether it's a swan or bull. That's what the characters have to contend with in this play. It's really about us, but the emotions are large and fill the space. And the loneliness is big, ceremonial, epic. The choices resonate in the universe like big, epic cycles.

JB Which ones come to mind?

OS When I think of the Trilogy, I think of the *Oedipus* cycle by Sophocles: *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus*. They each feel like they were written 20 years apart, when he was in different stages in his own life. They feel like they were responding to the kind of person he was then. There is something in these works that feel as if they are totally stand alone works, and yet, there's an umbilicus tying one to the other. Even if it's tenuous, it's still there. One is informed by the other. You cannot deny them.

JB We know that *In the Red and Brown Water*, *The Brothers Size* and *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* are intimately related. We know that there are some of the same characters at different times in their lives. But this is not a trilogy in the way we expect the parts of a trilogy to relate to each other. Tarell says, "the plays lie to each other." What does his statement mean to you?

OS It means he wrote these plays in different states of mind. He's working with emotional truths rather than with any historical narrative or continuity. You know, Shakespeare didn't care about that in writing the Henry VI plays: they don't line up historically at all. And even the continuity within the play, two people

shouldn't be talking to each other. They're sixty years apart. One of them should be dead, or both. Shakespeare is more concerned with emotional truth than he is with that kind of narrative continuity.

JB Chronologically, *The Brothers Size* is the middle play in what we call (or don't call) the Trilogy.

JB Is it central in other ways?

OS Yes, it's the play he wrote first, so it's the play out of which the first play and the third play emerge. It feels to me the most grounded in the present rather than in the past or looking forward to the future. There's a visceral urgency to this work that is rich and deep.

JB *The Brothers Size* is about three brothers and a rite of passage—universal in scope. Tell us how it's also an African American play.

OS It is a brilliant play, an American play. But it is also, because Tarell was born with a voice, an African American black play. Tarell has a sharpened voice that he was born with. It's been honed through generations of the conditions of his people, and the strife that they've had to endure from slavery on down. It's not about entitlement. He knows the wail. He hears the wail, and he knows how to tap into it. It is in the soul of black America, and it's the key of the Negro spiritual, it's the wail of lamentations, the wail of soul music, James Brown, hip hop. And now through his work, it's also the wail of black, gay America.

JB Is there anything that surprises you in *The Brothers Size*?

OS What surprises me is how realistic the dialogue feels. How real the characters feel in a play that is anti-naturalistic. It surprises me how Tarell can still write real, gritty, flesh and blood characters who don't come off as wooden, or archetypal, or who do not feel like devices. It's brilliant that way. He didn't cheat or skimp on that.

JB You write, you direct, you even acted. Did you grow up wanting to be in the theater?

OS I always wanted to be an artist. When I was a little boy, I read a lot, I wrote a lot, I even did silly plays when I was in elementary school. I grew up in El Paso, Texas. And then in high school I thought I should be a painter, but I couldn't get into any of those electives, but they threw me into drama. *Oh, shit, I don't want to be with those drama fags.* And then I became one. It didn't take long. I got cast in a play, and I resisted it. I wouldn't go to auditions. I didn't go to callbacks. Finally the teacher said, I'm gonna fail you in this class if you don't go. And I loved it: *The Diary of Anne Frank.*

JB Who did you play?

OS I played Peter. My first kiss was a stage kiss. I never looked back. I said I want to be an actor. But always I kept exploring literature and writing. I wanted to be a poet, but I thought, that's so stupid... I don't know any professional poets. You can't be a professional poet nowadays... I love poetry. Poetry is my first love. But I wanted to be an actor. I thought, well that will make me money, and I can do poetry on the side. At some point, I started writing plays to show off my acting talent.

JB Like Sam Shepard, John Kolvenbach, Lydia Stryk.

OS People liked my acting and they liked the writing. You're OK, they said, but really, the writing is interesting. I didn't want to give up acting. You kind of hold onto those dreams longer than one should. Eventually at some point, my agent sent me to an audition in Dallas. I walked in there. I saw twenty to twenty-five actors who looked exactly like me—except they were buff. And they wanted it. You could tell it in their eyes. A stupid Coors commercial. I wanted to get it over with and leave and go back to writing my plays. And that's when I left.

JB What is the most important choice you made in directing this play?

OS To have as little on stage as possible. To try to work as often as possible with just actors and text in an empty space. It's a challenge to try to keep it that way. The tendency you have immediately is to try to fill it with stuff, like color, instead of simply trusting the language and the actors' own emotions to be sufficient furniture for the work. Sarah Sidman (lighting designer and co-set designer with James Faerron) repeated a nomad saying to me: That which is not a necessity is an encumbrance (quoted in *A Handmade Life* by William S. Coperthwaite). That really landed with me. I thought we'd need a table. We don't need a table. Take it away. I thought we'd need chairs. We don't need chairs. Guys working under a car. Do we need a car on stage? No. What do we need to establish a garage? Nothing. They say it's a garage. Shakespeare says these guys are hanging around a fountain in Verona. Do we need a fountain on stage? They just need to say that's where we are. Leave it to the audience to make their own imaginative choices. Let them ink it in. Even a child can imagine. Movies do all the work for the audience. All we have to do is look and say, wow, how did they do that? Instead of saying, I imagined a garage, and it was there. Tarell's written a play where you gotta take all that stuff out. Movies are about verisimilitude.

JB Even fantasy movies?

OS Yeah. Have you seen *Inception*? You've still gotta get in a car. In theater, you get a milk crate, you sit on it, and we'll believe it's a sofa. But you can't do that in the movies. People say, *What happened, you're too cheap to buy a car?* I saw a movie called *The Moderns* about Hemingway and all the artists in the 1920s and 30s in Paris. It was made by Alan Rudolf (1988). When they got in the car and drove, it was a painted set. So you knew they were in a fake car with a moving background. It was never shot in a real place. You see very few movies that are

that theatrical. Nowadays you have to shoot on location or look like you're on location if you're not. In the theater, the audience is called on to finish all that. The audience has a contract. And the contract in this play is calling on the audience to see things that are not there. Because Tarell doesn't care. He doesn't care for those details. The thing that is real to him and must always be real are the emotions of these characters and the characters themselves. They have to be real—they replace the furniture and the props. And that's totally in keeping with my aesthetic. It all goes back to Shakespeare, because Shakespeare did it. To do a Shakespeare play, you just need a bare floor.

JB How has directing *The Brothers Size* affected what you want to direct?

OS I want to do plays that are visceral, raw, poetic and profane. Plays that call on the magic and mystery of the universe rather than on technique and style—that call on the full interaction with the company of actors. This project is heaven.

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