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THEATER REVIEW | 'WIG OUT!'

Families Come in All Shapes and Hairstyles

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

The Fates 3, the voluptuous trio that sings a mean backup to daily events in a place called the House of Light, say that “Vogue is the official language” of their world. But though the poses of high fashion figure flamboyantly here, this pronouncement doesn’t begin to do justice to the richness of the lingo spoken by the characters in “Wig Out!,” the new play by the astonishing young dramatist Tarell Alvin McCraney, which opened on Tuesday night at the Vineyard Theater.

The outcasts in this gutsy, pulsing portrait of uptown drag queens and the men who love them have reinvented the world from the ground up — no, make that from the Garden of Eden onward. These are people with their own heroic guiding myths — of creation, nation and divinity — and their own intricate and inviolable rules for what constitutes a home, a family and a sexual identity.

Their talk is replete with the pop, hip-hop and glamour-goddess references you might expect from folks who live to dress (and just, as important, walk) fabulously. And the program for “Wig Out!,” directed by Tina Landau, includes a glossary to explain argot like to “throw shade” (which means to diss or derogate).

But there are reverberant echoes of Homer, Milton, the Bible, [Shakespeare](#), vintage Hollywood and homespun American melodrama. Like most writers of worth, Mr. McCraney, whose “Brothers Size” made the American theater prick up its ears when it was presented at the [Public Theater](#) last season, is a hard-core linguistic scavenger. And he has blessed each of his characters with the authority of playwrights who beg, borrow and steal lustrous words to re-shape the world in their own images.

Though its centerpiece is a competitive drag ball, and it features the expected extravagant clothes and lip-synching routines, “Wig Out!” is not a cross-dressing revue or comedy of the sort familiar to downtown audiences. Instead it is a thorough and original anatomy of an alternative universe. The backdrop of James Schuette’s set establishes the tone: it depicts a galaxy exploding out of a mirrored disco ball.

Lest the audience feel lost in space, Mr. McCraney immediately provides us with an expert set of guides: a sort of Supremes-meets-Destiny’s-Child Greek chorus called the Fates 3. Deliciously embodied by Rebecca Naomi Jones, Angela Grove and McKenzie Frye (all, for the record, natural-born women), these bouncy earth goddesses keep the show in motion with a running, annotative narrative, both spoken and sung.

The rhythms of that narrative sometimes correspond to those of a strut-and-freeze runway walk. (“Always Movin’/Movin’ /Movin’/STOP!,” chant the Fates, as the action onstage matches the words.) In the opening scene they set the cadences for the brusque seduction in a subway car of Eric (Andre Holland), an angel-faced homeboy, by Ms. Nina (a.k.a. Wilson, played by Clifton Oliver), a bewigged glamazon.

“Where you going?” asks Nina. “I could take you there. I could go with you.”

Nina is something new for Eric, who is gay but has never had much interest in cross-dressing men. Nina woos him, beds him, murmurs poetic pillow talk and takes him home to meet the family.

Eric becomes our stand-in in our initiation into the House of Light, a loosely strung yet intensely connected clan presided over by a Lucifer-like father figure named Lucian (Erik King) and a stern but loving mother named Rey-Rey (Nathan Lee Graham), who memorably leads the family in prayer:

“Heavenly femme father, I am trying desperately to hold together the tired and fraying edges of a house. ...”

It goes without saying that every member of the House of Light — which also comprises the willowy but feisty Venus (Joshua Cruz) and his lover, Deity (Glenn Davis) — has his own back story, and each is given the chance to relate it in a monologue. Each soliloquy begins with the same sentence — “My grandmother had a wig”— and then spins off into a different remembrance of a gender-shaping moment in childhood.

Gender is as individual as a fingerprint in “Wig Out!,” and Mr. McCraney is never coy about the forms of his characters’ sexuality, which do not always hew to stereotype. The man on top isn’t necessarily the one who wears the pants. I can’t think of another recent play that deals as explicitly and compellingly with how erotic permutations define identity, in ways that both limit and liberate.

This topic, large enough for a multivolume encyclopedia of sex, is woven into a larger fabric of themes and poetic conceits of so many multicolored threads that you can’t believe it won’t unravel. It’s true that at times “Wig Out!” sags beneath the weight of its assorted subplots and relationships, harnessed to the arching story of a midnight drag ball face-off between the House of Light and its rival, the House of Di’Abolique.

But Ms. Landau, a member of the [Steppenwolf Theater](#) who has been known to err on the side of excess, here strikes an admirable balance between clarity and chaos, sincerity and spectacle. And her cast members create distinctive portraits, right down to the way they fill Toni-Leslie James’s sensational costumes. Mr. Oliver, in particular, finds a spectrum of shades of meaning in the way he wears his drag.

“Wig Out!” also features the supersize Daniel T. Booth (who appeared on “Project Runway” under the name of Sweetie) as the sinister Serena, mother of the House of Di’Abolique, and the pencil-thin, Gumby-flexible Sean [Patrick Doyle](#) as his henchman, Loki. To watch these two work the runway together is to enter a twilight zone where the natural laws of physics and biology seem to have melted and mutated.

Like the eager but naïve Eric, most audience members for “Wig Out!” are likely to experience head-spinning disorientation. “This whole scene, it’s ... I mean, don’t you get confused?” Eric asks Nina toward the play’s end. Nina shakes her head. No, she doesn’t.

Mr. McCraney makes it clear that for all their self-dramatizing and genuine sadness, the members of the House of Light know very well who and what they are. As they should. They are, after all, their own divine creations.

WIG OUT!

By Tarell Alvin McCraney; directed by Tina Landau; sets by James Schuette; costumes by Toni-Leslie James; lighting by Peter Kaczorowski; sound by Robert Kaplowitz; hair, wig and makeup design by Wendy Parson; production stage manager, Barbara Reo; associate director, Kim Weild; production manager, Ben Morris; general manager, Reed Ridgley; associate artistic director, Sarah Stern. Presented by the Vineyard Theater, Douglas Aibel, artistic director; Jennifer Garvey-Blackwell, executive director. At the Vineyard Theater, 108 East 15th Street, Manhattan; (212) 353-0303. Through Oct. 19. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Daniel T. Booth (Serena), Joshua Cruz (Venus), Glenn Davis (Deity), Sean [Patrick Doyle](#) (Loki), McKenzie Frye (Faith), Nathan Lee Graham (Rey-Rey), Angela Grovey (Fate), Andre Holland (Eric), Rebecca Naomi Jones (Fay), Erik King (Lucian) and Clifton Oliver (Ms. Nina).

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