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'Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi' opens at SMC tonight

By Lou Fancher



Justin Howard and Angelo Chukwudebe

manistic love, respect for other people's dignity and family relationships reborn after barren, "winter periods," the play suggests that empathy requires imagination. Through empathy and imagination, transformational futures have potential to be realized. "When I was growing up, for a real-life example, I was told there would never be a Black president," says Prestininzi. "It was a failing in my imagination that I accepted that. Lo and behold: Barak Obama. Imagination isn't fantasy or pretend, it's a way of creating a future that we want. Marcus doesn't see imagining as escape. It's learning how to create the future that should be here, could be here. Theater is a public square, a safe place where we come together to imagine, to practice our emotions as a group."

People also come to theater to be entertained and "Jesus Moonwalks" provides multiple mechanism, most visibly in the character of Mississippi the River. Embodied in more than one person in the Saint Mary's iteration – Gardley gave Prestininzi full permission to "play" with the play – three actors are joined onstage by vocalists Michelle Jacques and members of her five-person a capella ensemble, Chelle's Juke Joint. "The songs are a living presence; the music is like a coded telegram," says Prestininzi. "You sing 'Wade in the River' because you are telling runaway slaves to go into the river to escape the dogs who are following the scent." In songs other than known, published spirituals, Gardley provided the lyrics and the actors created an original, melodic line.

In rehearsals, the students have worked to master Gardley's athletic language that demands agility to capture the musicality and specificity of various textures, tones of physical manifestations and other attributes. Prestininzi has chosen at times to voluntarily give up authority. "I'm a white man and don't know how a line will feel to a young black woman, for example. I need to allow her to try it out and tell me how it feels. Having Marcus's spirit present in the room reminds me that you can have imaginative, transformative energy. That's affirmative for me."

If there is paradox in Gardley's work, it is this: For history and people to move forward and capture reconciliation and healing, we must acknowledge and live with loss. Hope requires as much imagination as does empathy, which is why the best imagined future is one in which the work of Gardley and writers like him is preserved.

If there is a 21st-century voice that continues to be heard for centuries or decades, we might hope it is the voice of Oakland-born playwright Marcus Gardley. Like the writing of William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, John Steinbeck, James Baldwin, August Wilson, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and others, Gardley's layered language carries the heft of mythology, history and imagination while capturing the lexicon of an era, a community and a culture. Characters in Gardley's works for theater express with uncommon grace and without ostentation the power and poetic prose of conversation. Well-designed but organic-to-the-ear phrases exhibit human nobility, dignity, humor, pain, poisonous prejudice and most often, relentless pursuit of connection to a spiritual or actual "other." The African-American experience in the United States is deeply embedded in Gardley's work.

Lamorinda had the opportunity in late summer 2017 to experience Gardley's poignant, explosive re-envisioning of Homer's "The Odyssey" in California Shakespeare Theater's West Coast premiere, "black odyssey." Performances at Orinda's outdoor Bruns Amphitheater set attendance records; sold-out shows and audience response prompted the company to announce a return of the production as part of the 2018 season.

Upcoming, Gardley's "Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi," is presented Nov. 1-5 by the Performing Arts Department at Saint Mary's College. Written in 2010, the play retells the story of the goddess Demeter, who in mythology longs for her daughter, Persephone, who was taken from her by Hades to be his wife in the Underworld. Transposed, the narrative has a father searching in 1863 on the banks of the Mississippi river for his daughter, Po'em. Wrapped within the Civil War and Black experience – a frame that reverberates from

early slavery to the 1960s to current social and civil rights justice issues – "Jesus Moonwalks" features a distinctive score that includes traditional spirituals and gospel music.

The Saint Mary's production is directed by guest artist Ken Prestininzi, who during the 2017-18 term teaches playwriting and performance at the college. Prestininzi is an associate professor of theatre at Connecticut College and former artistic director of the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theatre.

"Marcus and I had a meeting with the students in this production," says Prestininzi. "He talked about our responsibility to bring these stories forward. How we heal and imagine something by the way we tell and claim the story. You have a reckoning while you bring the truth forward. He told them that every day you must love a stranger and forgive a friend. That's his mantra, every day. He stressed every day."

Based on a story told to Gardley by his great-grandmother, the play bears the imprint of generational storytelling. "Like his 'black odyssey,' it's a continuous public dreaming," says Prestininzi. "Myth is not a throwback. He uses myths, his religious upbringing and family storytelling – and then adds a part of himself to the story."

With themes that include hu-

