

WIG OUT!

by Tarell Alvin McCraney directed by Nathan Singh

On the Fullerton Stage

Dramaturgy by
Trisha Mahoney,
BFA3/Dramaturgy/Criticism

Cinderella in Chicago - A Short History of the Ball Scene

The Grimm Brothers wrote the story of *Cinderella* in 1857, but people have always expressed a desire to don their glass slippers and ball gowns to have a ball. The queens from Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Wig Out!* are no exception. The underground drag ball community in McCraney's production is not fiction. Today, there is a thriving populace in Chicago that has a history reaching as far back as the infamous story with a midnight deadline.

In the earliest iterations of the ball in 1896, the aldermen team comprised of John Coughlin and Michael Kenna threw the "First Ward Balls" at the Chicago Coliseum. These balls were frequented by prostitutes, drag queens, and pickpockets, who began the festivities with a Grand March through the ward. Taking place in impoverished neighborhoods, these gatherings had to be held on Halloween and New Year's Eve, the only times when it was socially acceptable to dress up as the opposite gender without fear of getting arrested.

In the 1930s, African-American business owners in Chicago began to host an increasing number of these events, with even more of a following. These events were particularly popular on the Chicago's South Side. To those who attended, it was a trend-setting party that provided a cheap escape from rough day-to-day realities. To the rest of the population, these were explained away as costume parties, since a man dressing as a woman was still a punishable offense.

The most famous of these balls were run by Alfred Finnie, a gay Black man who began holding events in 1935 in the basement of a Chicago South Side nightclub. These balls cost 25 cents to attend and became one of the most popular Halloween events of the South Side, with attendance of up to 1,000 people.



Sir-Honey Davenport
(Photo from Vogue It)

Slowly, the balls progressed from parties to competitions. The documentary *Paris is Burning* gives an in-depth look at the ball community in New York which was relatively unknown until the documentary's premiere. *Wig Out!*, which was first produced in 2009, explores the same competitions with an increased focus on the familial aspect of the ball houses. In these modern balls, individuals are judged on "realness," or how these Cinderellas could pass as princesses in everyday life. Contestants would walk, similar to a runway, in categories such as Business Executive Realness and Butch Queen, to demonstrate their fierce moves and killer personalities to win prizes and acclaim, with the ultimate goal of becoming legendary.

These princes and princesses by night have built a community that affords them the opportunity to express themselves and create a family. The drag balls, though still underground, are going on regularly today. Chicago has branches of many legendary families, such as the House of Ninja. For many in the Chicago area, this community has become a refuge where they are free to express themselves in any manner they choose, even after the clock has struck midnight.

About the Playwright, Tarell Alvin McCraney

Tarell Alvin McCraney, an alumnus of The Theatre School's BFA performance program and the Yale School of Drama's MFA playwriting program, has gained acclaim in the United States as well as internationally. Originally from Miami, McCraney has been an International Writer in Residence for the Royal Shakespeare Company, an ensemble member at Steppenwolf, and a resident playwright at New Dramatists. In 2013, McCraney was awarded the MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship.

McCraney is passionate about writing plays that tell untold stories in African American history. He has said that for him, writing *Wig Out!* was “a way to explore how all marginalized communities — in an effort to thwart modernity or the center of societies — push out to the fringes and create hierarchies within themselves.” These themes prevail in his other works, including *The Brother/Sister Plays*, *Choir Boy*, *Head of Passes*, *American Trade*, and *Again and Again*.

Wig Out! was originally produced at the Sundance Theatre Institute and has since been performed at the Royal Court and Vineyard Theatre, where it received the GLAAD Award for Outstanding Play. As McCraney told Sophia A. Jackson from *Afridiziak Theatre News*, “Each play is different. With *Wig Out!* the idea was more of a way into a world we don’t think of. People would say that they didn’t know this world existed, so it was about bringing that world to theatre. It’s about dialogue and engaging people, and if I can bring forth issues that concern, make you go home and think, or make you angry, then I’ve done my job.”



Tarell Alvin McCraney
(Photo from the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)



Nathan Singh
(Photo by Ashley Singh)

Interview with the Director, Nathan Singh

Trisha Mahoney: *How did you find *Wig Out!*, and what drew you to direct a production of it?*

Nathan Singh: I didn’t find *Wig Out!*; it found me. I spent the last few years investigating plays within the LGBTQ cannon that told stories about queer people of color. There weren’t many. Only within the last fifteen years have a small handful of plays come out. I knew I wanted to tell these stories because I often gravitate towards plays about individuals and communities who I don’t often see in theatre. I also knew that I wanted to spend my last production at DePaul directing a play that is a big spectacle in its vision but deeply human at its core. That pretty much sums up who I am as an artist. While reading it, I became really energized by its highly theatrical style and found it to be incredibly complex in its portrayal of identity and community.

TM: *Why do you think that this is an important story to tell now, in this season, in this school, in Chicago?*

NS: I am honored and excited that *Wig Out!* is included in this powerful and conversation-starting season. All the plays on the Fullerton Stage this season wrestle racial issues within contemporary America. *Wig Out!* adds to the conversation by tackling race through the lens of gender, sexuality, and queerness. This is a new type of play that shows us where the discussion about race and gender is going in the American theatre.

TM: *It can be assumed that the regular theatre-going audience may not have an intense familiarity with the Chicago ball scene. What would you like your audience to gain from seeing this production?*

I go to the theatre (and make theatre) to learn. And if I’m being entertained or having an emotional experience while I’m learning — that makes the perfect theatrical event. There is no other play, to my knowledge, that really educates people about the ball culture (or underground drag culture) than *Wig Out!* Besides the documentary film *Paris Is Burning* and a few limited resources, there is not a lot of information out there about this culture except first hand experiences from people who are part of that community. This play not only educates audiences about the history, rules, language, and lifestyle of ball culture but makes the information incredibly personal by having it come from specific members who are living within the culture. We are being educated about this culture by each member of the “House of Lights” family. Not to mention that the play helps us learn through the iconography of gay culture concepts like voguing, drag performance, camp, throwing shade, and so much more.

TM: *This play deals with a very specific group of people: drag queens in the ball scene. What in this play will a wider audience relate to?*

NS: At its core, *Wig Out!* is about young adults finding their own identity within their family. It’s about people who are looking for love and acceptance; whether it be from their family, their culture or from themselves. We can all relate to this.