

# Charles Randolph-Wright's *Cuttin' Up* at Pasadena

By Tom Provenzano

“WHEN I WAS IN LONDON people kept telling me, ‘Your bio is very British,’ because in London actors, writers and directors work in film, television and theatre at the same time. In America we are very compartmentalized—you’re not supposed to cross into the other world. Sometimes it’s a problem here but I refuse to be categorized.” To that end writer-director-actor-producer Charles Randolph-Wright is constantly moving in and out of all entertainment media, which also keeps him globetrotting.

*Night of the Child*, was developed in Pasadena Playhouse’s Hothouse Series which nurtures plays and playwrights. He excitedly sets the scene, “It’s what I call my ‘Brazil play.’ A woman from Brookline, MA with three kids experiences a tragedy when her son commits a heinous crime. The victims are people she’s known her whole life and she feels trapped; then she runs away to Brazil which has always been her fantasy. It is a collision of these worlds. I got the idea after *Columbine*. What happens to the parents when a

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Currently Randolph-Wright is in the midst of rewrites for Pasadena Playhouse’s production of his barbershop play *Cuttin’ Up*, following a successful premiere at Washington DC’s Arena Stage. He felt it needed some sharpening. He explains, “I wanted to turn it more into a play. The barbershop is about storytelling but it was too heavy in monologues, so I came up with a main story to be the cohesive element.” Though barbershops have been the setting for scores of African-American plays, films and television shows, this one takes a different course. “This is really about the drama of camaraderie. The owner of the barbershop in the play calls it the final black frontier—the last place black men can go to be separate. Things happen there that happen nowhere else. The humor is there but it is more balanced with history and how history is told.”

Randolph-Wright’s last outing at Pasadena Playhouse was his Arena Stage hit *Blue*, based on his family who ran a funeral home for nearly 100 years. “The black funeral home represents the elite family, quite different than the family in *Six Feet Under*. They are arbiters of style—you know they have money because people always die. The play is about the bizarre energy when you grow up with death as your occupation. Also I really wanted to see an upper-class black family.” Randolph-Wright discusses how thrilled he was to have two of America’s top black stars in the play at the Arena and at Pasadena, “Seeing Phylicia Rashad and Diahann Carroll doing this play was like watching the Williams sisters play tennis.”

Randolph-Wright’s next theatrical venture,

child does something that horrible? Everyone who came said, ‘You have to do this play!’”

While these theatrical forays are an enormous part of Randolph-Wright’s life, he is also extremely busy as a filmmaker, currently in pre-production on his adaptation of *Mama I Want to Sing*, which he will also direct. His directorial debut *Preaching to the Choir* was a big winner in the American Black Film Festival. He continues to write, direct and act prolifically on the large and small screens. Still it is theatre which always brings him back. His early stage experiences included the original Broadway cast production of *Dreamgirls*. He laughs as he describes his reaction to the new film version, “The first hour was so close to the original, I felt like changing my clothes—we had so many costume changes. If I heard ‘Effie you’re getting fatter’ I’d know I had to get the green tie on and the silver shoes. I have one minute to get to stage. It was quite amazing to have that. Michael Bennett was one of my greatest influences. He said he directed it like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It had that kind of energy. Consequently a lot of my work is influenced by that energy.”

Suddenly a memory bursts from Randolph-Wright. “Phylicia and I met in the chorus of *Dreamgirls*. She and I were partners in the second act. Michael had us on stage the whole time to look active. So she and I would assign each other existentialist books to read that we would discuss on stage. Jimmy Early would be dropping his pants and Phylicia and I would be saying, ‘Well I think that Camus actually meant...’”

With his remarkably varied career in full swing and moving between Los Angeles, New York, London and Brazil, it is difficult for Randolph-Wright to decide where he actually resides. He laughs, “I live in the airport now!” ■

## CUTTIN’ UP

Opens March 16;  
Plays Tues.-Fri., 8 pm;  
Sat., 4 and 8 pm; Sun., 2 and 7 pm  
Closes April 15  
Tickets: \$31-\$60  
Pasadena Playhouse  
39 S. El Molino Ave., Pasadena  
626.356.7529 or  
[www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org](http://www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org)