

Dominique Morisseau, Detroit, and Theatre as Resistance

Dominique Morisseau is from Detroit, MI. She is *proud* to be from Detroit, MI. Through her plays she tells the stories of her city and of African American experiences in Detroit, and she brings us along for the ride. She is a powerful, smart, funny, successful woman of color who uses her talents as an artist and performer to raise awareness, spread goodwill, and encourage activism in her communities. Morisseau uses her words to share with us her characters, her city, and her irascible commitment to make the world a better place.

Morisseau grew up in Detroit's Lasalle College Park neighborhood, a neighborhood with a crime rate nearly three times higher than the national average. She earned a BFA in Acting from the University of Michigan, returned to Detroit after graduation and began her career as a poetry performer in Harmonie Park, known as Detroit's music hub. After moving to New York, Morisseau transitioned to a career as both an actor and playwright, where she found great success. She was recently a Playwright of New York fellow and a recipient of the Emerging Leader Award from the University of Michigan. For representing her communities, Dominique's hometown has honored her with the Spirit of Detroit award, and she is also a two-time NAACP Image Award winner. Significantly, Dominique won the prestigious Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama in 2014. Her plays include *Sunset Baby*, *Follow Me To Nellie's*, and *Blood At The Root*. She believes "wholeheartedly in the power and strength of community." This belief is powerfully reflected in her *Detroit Projects* plays, focusing in on her hometown community: not just its problems, but its triumphs and the strong, indefatigable people who live there.

THE DETROIT PROJECTS

Like August Wilson's *Century Cycle*, which depicts life in Wilson's hometown of Pittsburgh, Dominique Morisseau theatrically represents her hometown with her critically acclaimed *Detroit Projects*. The first play of the cycle, *Detroit '67*, premiered at the Public Theater in 2013, and also played at the Classical Theatre of Harlem in association with the National Black Theatre. The play delves into the 1967 Detroit Riots, otherwise known as the "12th Street Riots" or "The Great Rebellion," where over four days 1,700 stores were looted, 1,400 buildings were burned, and there was more than \$50 million in damage, leaving around 5,000 people homeless. Additionally, more than 7,000 people were arrested, and 43 were killed as African American citizens rioted in retaliation against police brutality, segregation in housing, the disparity in employment levels between black and white citizens, and other oppressive structures. The second play of *The Detroit Projects*, *Paradise Blue*, premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2015. It focuses on Blue, a trumpeter who is deciding whether to sell his jazz club in the Blackbottom neighborhood of Detroit, a predominately African American neighborhood, known for music, which was demolished in the early 1960s. The play analyzes how we can go about building our own legacy while still acknowledging those who have laid the foundation we stand on, set amidst an ever-changing urban Detroit of 1949.

Skeleton Crew is the third and final play of the *Detroit Projects*. It premiered at the Atlantic Theater Company in 2016. The play transports us to the relatively recent past, when 2008 Detroit became a microcosm of the failures of the American economy.

DETROIT IN 2008

In 2008, Detroit's unemployment rate was 9.9%. In 2009, that number would climb to 16.2%. In a poll compiled by *Forbes* magazine, Detroit was named America's most miserable city. In December of that year, General Motors and Chrysler were both given a bailout totaling \$17.4 billion by President George W. Bush. However, the next year both companies declared bankruptcy.

Skeleton Crew is theatre as activism. It asks us to reflect on and acknowledge what happens to the people who don't control the money, when the people who do make decisions that aren't successful.

THEATRE AS ACTIVISM

Morrisseau's work showcases her belief that theatre can make change in communities.

Skeleton Crew reminds us that behind every political action and economic decision are people that have to live with those decisions. Through her plays, she invites us to resist the oppressive structures she presents.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines resistance as "the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument." In this way, creating theatre can be an act of resistance. It can be an act that refuses to comply with societal norms, with decisions and beliefs that those in power try to force on the world. Live theatre can show us that there is more to the world than hatred and intolerance, that Americans

are not just one race, that anyone can make a difference in their community. Theatre creates communities that can resist oppression. Such theatre has become increasingly vital.

Morisseau writes, "If anybody is still talking about how we'll survive this... regime by any other way than resistance, completely and utterly, with ZERO playing ball.... then they haven't been paying attention." Morisseau uses her theatre to resist. Through making theatre we create communities as she does, supporting each other and lifting each other up, telling the stories that need to be told, of people whose stories are in danger of being suppressed. Together, we resist.