

SETTING
TIME & PLACE

TIME: July, 1967
PLACE: Detroit, Michigan



MEET
THE PLAYWRIGHT



Dominique Morisseau

Playwright/Actress

“Dominique is more than a playwright from Detroit, she is a force for social justice across all boundaries.”

— Kamilah Forbes

Dominique Morisseau is an alum of the Public Theater Emerging Writer’s Group, Women’s Project Lab, and Lark Playwrights Workshop. Credits include: *Skeleton Crew* (Sundance; Lark Barebones; Atlantic Theater Company (Scott Rudin); *Detroit '67* (Public Theater, Classical Theatre of Harlem/NBT); *Sunset Baby* (Gate Theater; LAByrinth Theatre); *Follow Me To Nellie’s* (O’Neill; Premiere Stages). She has produced other original works with the Hip Hop Theater Festival, Penn State University, American Theatre of Harlem, and The New Group. Her 3-play cycle, entitled “The Detroit Projects” include *Detroit '67*, *Paradise Blue*, and *Skeleton Crew*. *Paradise Blue* premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in July 2015 starring Blair Underwood and directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson. Dominique is currently the Story Editor on the Showtime series *Shameless*. Awards: Jane Chambers Playwriting Award, two-time NAACP Image Award, Primus Prize commendation, Stavis Playwriting Award, Spirit of Detroit Award, U of M Emerging Leader Award, Weissberger Award, PoNY Fellowship, Sky-Cooper New American Play Prize, The Graham F. Smith Peace Foundation Award, and the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama.



Above: Actor One and Actor Two in *Sunset Baby* at Kitchen Theater, © 2014 Dave Burbank. Right: Jason Dirden and Nikiya Mathis in *Skeleton Crew* at Atlantic Theater Company, Photo by Ahron R. Foster. Below: De'Adre Aziza, Kristolyn Lloyd and Blair Underwood in *Paradise Blue* at Williamstown Theatre Festival, Photos by T. Charles Erickson.





Photo by Cassandra Miller

DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU tells it like it is

Where does Detroit '67 sit in your recently completed three-play cycle, *The Detroit Project*?

It was the first completed, but is the second chronologically—between *Paradise Blue* (set in 1949) and *Skeleton Crew* (set in 2008). People hear that it's a cycle of related plays and ask, which characters flow through or continue from one to another? My answer is Detroit: Detroit is the character these plays have in common. I guess I've been looking at a single community in different eras, exploring how that place and its people have changed over time, and with time. I didn't write this particular play to be current—only now do I recognize how “now” it is, really.

What would you say was your goal in creating it?

First, I had been reading all the plays of Pearl Cleage—she's from Detroit originally—and was blown away by how she captured Black women's voices. She gives us voice in a way that August Wilson gives men voice. Then I decided to read through all of someone else's work, and turned to Wilson. Reading his Century Cycle, I imagined how the people of Pittsburgh must feel seeing themselves, their city and their history, in those plays; they must feel so seen! Simply put, I wanted to do that for Detroit.

Next, I realized that the only narrator for Detroit tends to be the media, and that's a sloppy, inaccurate, usually biased narrator. The Detroit I grew up in and understand was built on the backs of these small communities made up of real people. And I wanted to tell a story from that perspective.

I wanted to bring the soul of that into the national conversation about Detroit. I wanted to give Detroit a voice of its own. Not to look good or bad, but to look human, in all the complicated ways that that happens. My job is not to fix a people, or to fix ‘my’ people; my job is to let these people speak for themselves and see what happens. I just need to let ‘em talk.”

Why this piece of Detroit specifically?

Aside from me and my entire family being from Detroit, I wanted to dive into Detroit's history and look at the important moments that changed the landscape of our city. And 1967 was definitely one of the more definitive moments. So many people don't grow up learning about what happened. It's not taught in schools. It's not kept alive through conversation. So I went out to learn about it on my own. And when I found out that it was sparked by these after-hours parties, I got very excited about the idea of putting an after-hours basement party on-stage. Because I knew they were a big deal in the '60s, and I had never seen that world before.

How do you feel about this play having its Detroit premiere at Detroit Public Theater?

So many people have asked me, when are you coming to Detroit? When are you bringing this play to Detroit? I knew how to take my play home, and how to do it the right way; I've been open to bringing it home and staying involved throughout in the right way, and that way just wasn't right until now. More and more small theaters are there, trying to make a

start, to make it work—my hope for this production moving on is to be part of that. My goal (among many) is to support this ambitious new theater company [Detroit Public Theater] in their inaugural season. So many good pieces are lining up, so many good people getting involved, to make this possible at last. It feels right.

KL: It seems like music is a really big part of your life, not to mention the play. Can you talk a bit about the music in the piece?

DM: Music helps to give me a sense of the world within a play. Whenever I write, I use music as the backdrop. It informs the world, gives me a local color, a language for the period, the attitude and the spirit of what I'm writing. Motown is definitely a no-brainer when it comes to Detroit in the '60s. But my instinct was to look for groups or singers that I wasn't already hip to. What people listened to on a record in 1967 is not necessarily the song that was the most popular. I wanted these characters to listen to music that had a particular message or point of view that spoke to where they were or what they were going through, not just what was the most popular. “My Baby Loves Me” transports me to another world whenever I listen to it. It reminds me of my mother. Somewhere subconsciously, that song lives in my mind and in my heart. It's like this song is family.

Compiled from conversations at Center Stage rehearsal and from Northlight Theater.

“Lover of mine gone to a faraway land / serving your country on some faraway sand / If you should get lonely / remember that your heart belongs to me.”

–The Supremes, “Your Heart Belongs to Me”

MOTOWN

Production Dramaturg,
Lauren Imwold

“Detroit was jamming.
Detroit was alive.” – Marvin Gaye



Detroit’s Motown style emerged from the diverse cultural melting pot of “The Motor City”—including the city’s many waves of immigrants. The industrial center’s growing Black middle class embraced and generated music of all genres, which could be heard in countless performance halls as well as all over the streets:

“Detroit was a real music town. You heard it everywhere, from radios and record players, outside the doors of the clubs that kids like us were too young to enter legally, from guys and girls standing out on the street singing. It sounds like a scene out of a musical, but that’s truly how it was.”

– Otis Williams, The Temptations

In 1959, visionary entrepreneur Berry Gordy established the Motown record label, housed in a small home sporting the optimistic sign “Hitsville USA.” Within a year, Gordy’s family of artists were dubbed “the Sound of Young America.” An exciting amalgam of passionate vocals; the call-and-response of the African diasporic tradition; and a fusion of all-American pop, jazz, and Rhythm and Blues, Motown was revolutionary in successfully marketing Black music across racial boundaries and around the country. Celebrated chiefly for up-tempo love songs and toe-tapping tunes, the label also featured lyrics that increasingly reflected the changing times.



“We just had this family of people coming in—all purposeful, and all a part of this. They felt like they were coming in to a magical place and it did turn out to be magical.”

–Berry Gordy, Motown Records

“Motown really transcended America. All of a sudden, there was a sound that everybody could relate to. It was just really good music that we go dance to and sing to, and it was just a good thing. And I really do think that Motown contributed not just to a wonderful thing in the music world, but to the civil rights movement.”

–Rick, a Detroit native

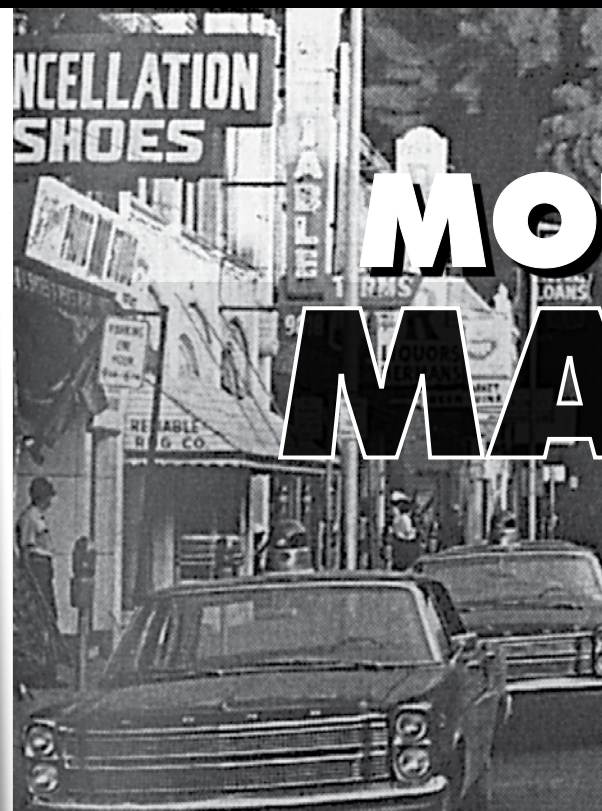
“When listeners would call me to request a certain song, they would refer to the various artists by their first names. It was like they were personal friends. That’s how close the fans felt to Motown, and all of its artists.”

–Tom Shannon, Radio Host

“Father, father /
We don’t need to
escalate /
You see, war is
not the answer /
For only love can
conquer hate /
You know we’ve
got to find a way
/ To bring some
lovin’ here today”

– Marvin Gaye,
“What’s Going On”

MOTOR CITY MADNESS



“By midnight on Tuesday, July 26, Detroit’s skyline was scorched red with burning gas fumes. A ball of confusion swept through the Motor City, and the local music scene came face-to-face with forces it was powerless to contain. Sixties soul would continue its bittersweet journey for many years to come, but something happened in the brutal month of July that changed Detroit’s image forever.”

–Stuart Cosgrove, *Detroit ‘67: The Year That Changed Soul*

Around 4 a.m. on Sunday, July 23, 1967

—against a background of long-simmering tensions—plainclothes police officers raided a “blind pig” (an illicit after-hours bar) in Detroit’s 12th Street neighborhood, a hub of Black nightlife. The officers expected a few patrons, but instead found 82 people celebrating the return of two Vietnam veterans. The situation quickly escalated, and by mid-afternoon, the first fire broke out. Over the following five days—as state police, then National Guard, and finally Army paratroops—were called in, as many as 10,000 people joined in the violence while 100,000 more gathered to watch. By week’s end, 43 people died, 473 were injured, and over 7,000 (ranging in age from four to 82) were arrested. Some 2,500 stores were looted or burned, and 400 families rendered homeless.

“The first hours were just like a holiday. All the kids wandered around sayin’, real amazed like, ‘The fuzz is scared; they ain’t going to do nothin’.’ All the guys who’d been sittin’ on us—‘specially those shopkeepers who charged us 60 cents for a 45-cent half-gallon of milk—they got some dues paid.” –A young Detroiter

“Man, how can you call this place a home? This ain’t no motherfucking home. This is a prison. I’d just as soon burn down this damn place as any other.” –A Detroit resident

“With the amount of shooting going on around here, we’re lucky 430 weren’t killed.” –A Detroit resident

“The cat on Twelfth Street can look a hundred yards away and see another black cat living in an eight-room house with a 1967 Pontiac and a motorboat on Lake Michigan. It’s all so close, and yet it’s all so far away, and the frustration just eats them up.” –A Detroit schoolteacher

“That’s why I am reaching out my hand to be your friend / This unrest between races has got to come to an end / Don’t let the color of my skin confuse you”

–The Temptations, “Ungena Za Ulimwengu (Unite The World)”

Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours – Stevie Wonder Please Mr. Postman – The Marvelettes War – Edwin Starr