TIME: July, 1967
PLACE: Detroit, Michigan

Dominique Morisseau is an alum of the Public Theater Emerging Writers 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.

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

Dominique Morisseau
Playwright/Actress

DOMINIQUE MORRISSEAU

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.

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 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 1962 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.
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.

—Ollis Williams, The Temptations

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 over all the streets:

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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 diaspora 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.”

—Benny 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”

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

“The first hours were just like a holiday. All the kids wandered around saying, ‘real amazing 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 Detroit resident

“We’re lucky 430 weren’t killed.”

—A Detroit resident

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

“The cat on Twelfth Street can look a hundred yards away and see this ain’t no motherfuckin’ home. This is a prison. I’d just as soon burn this damn place as any other.”

—A young Detroit resident

“This unrest between races has got to come to an end! Don’t let the color of my skin confuse you”

—The Temptations, “Ungenya Za Ulimwengu (Unite The World)”

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