

Playwright Dominique Morisseau Can't Forget the Motor City

By Alexis Soloski

Dec. 30, 2015

A few years ago, the playwright Dominique Morisseau and her husband, the musician James Keys, traveled back home for a wedding. On their way into the reception, they saw a woman sitting in a car packed with possessions. When they left, she was still there. Knocking on her window, they asked if they could help. The woman accepted some money and told them she'd be all right. "It's a rough time right now, but I'm going to get through it," Ms. Morisseau recalled her saying.

She and her husband then drove away, upset by the conversation. "It felt perverted," said Ms. Morisseau, 37, who like her husband was born and raised in Detroit. "This is the Motor City. This is where people make cars. Now it's become a city where people are living in their cars."

She already had many friends and relatives affected by factory closings or house foreclosures. From their stories and from that encounter, she started to construct "Skeleton Crew," the final play in her prizewinning Detroit trilogy, which begins previews on Wednesday, Jan. 6, at the Atlantic Theater Company. Set in 2008, it centers on several workers and a manager in the last small auto plant standing.

Ms. Morisseau's plays include the earlier entries in the trilogy, "Detroit '67," which was staged at the Public Theater and won the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, and "Paradise Blue," which is set in 1949 and played the Williamstown Theater Festival last summer. "Sunset Baby," a contemporary play about a father jailed for activities in the black power movement and his grifter daughter, was produced by the Labyrinth Theater Company in 2013.

Her plays are both angry and empathetic, forthright about the faults of the characters they describe while ready to honor their desire, ambition and essential decency. "I can't write a story until I know what my characters are willing to fight or die for," she said on a recent evening after rehearsal, a few days before Christmas. "Then I know who they are."

Ms. Morisseau often wears her hair piled atop her head and has a penchant for hoop earrings nearly as big as dessert plates. On this night, she wore a sweatshirt from the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center over a pink T-shirt emblazoned "Soul Detroit."

You can hear echoes of August Wilson in her work, of Lorraine Hansberry, of Tennessee Williams, of Anton Chekhov, but also a voice — seductive, poetic, comic, tough — that is unmistakably her own. Her plays overflow with sensory detail: the music that excites and soothes her characters, how they dance, what they wear, what they eat.



A scene from "Detroit '67" at the Public Theater in 2013. From left, De'Adre Aziza, Michelle Wilson, Francois Battiste and Brandon J. Dirden. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

And as befits a writer who just finished a season on Showtime's "Shameless," a series that wrings comedy from poverty, her plays have an acute focus on economics — who is living large, who is living out of a car, what it costs (financially and otherwise) just to get by.

Ms. Morisseau, who now splits her time between apartments in Bedford-Stuyvesant and North Hollywood, is a persuasive speaker who used to pay her rent with her winnings from performance poetry slams. She is outspoken, too. In her acceptance speech for a Steinberg Playwright Award in November, she thanked the committee for "allowing our rages to not be criminalized or become tools of shame."

Sign up for the Theater Update Newsletter Every week, stay on top of the top-grossing Broadway shows, recent reviews, Critics' Picks and more. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

She recently published an essay on the website for American Theater magazine called “Why I Almost Slapped a Fellow Theater Patron, and What That Says About Our Theaters.” A white woman who had donated a ticket to Ms. Morisseau tried to quiet her enthusiastic response to a play. After the show, the two had an argument. Asked why she hadn’t sought to calm or defuse the encounter, Ms. Morisseau, in a follow-up phone conversation, replied: “People are always asking people of color to have some kind of superhuman patience. That is not reasonable.”

Ms. Morisseau grew up in the College Park neighborhood of Detroit, in the same house where her parents still live. (This is the first year she didn’t make it back for Christmas, a consequence of the rehearsal schedule.) She performed in plays at her father’s church and danced with her aunt’s troupe, the Detroit City Dance Company. She developed a crush on Shakespeare in middle school and starred in musicals throughout high school.

But when she arrived at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, just 40 miles from home, she encountered a theater department “that did not do a lot of nontraditional casting,” she said. Roles in campus plays were few, and she had to dig to find acceptable work for her scene study classes.

Eager to create a role for herself, and having read, she admitted, a little too much Ntozake Shange, she wrote and directed her first play, “The Blackness Blues — Time to Change the Tune (A Sister’s Story).” What was intended as a three-character piece soon swelled to a cast of 20 as African-American women from all departments clamored for a chance to represent themselves onstage. “I had dancers. I had extras. I had people just walk onstage and just do nothing,” she said.

Even now she tries to remember that model. “Everybody needs to see themselves,” she said. “We have to make space.”

Still, it took her several years to return to playwriting. After graduation, she moved to New York and danced, briefly, but soon decided she would never be a star. (She may underrate herself. A video of her wedding dance, to an eight-minute medley ranging from hip-hop to boogie-woogie to “(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life,” has half a million hits on YouTube.) For a while, she made the performance poetry scene, until she started to feel that her art was suffering. “I was just writing poetry to win slams,” she said.

She began working with the Creative Arts Team at City College, creating educational theater highlighting social issues. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the writer and star of “Hamilton,” was one former colleague. Inspired by her peers, she began writing one-act plays, which eventually gave her the confidence to try a full-length, “Follow Me to Nellie’s,” based on an aunt who had run a brothel in Natchez, Miss. In 2011, she joined the Emerging Writers Group at the Public Theater, where she first conceived the Detroit trilogy.



Jason Dirden and Lynda Gravatt rehearsing “Skeleton Crew” at the Atlantic Theater Company. Ramsay de Giv for The New York Times

She’d been reading August Wilson’s 10-play cycle. She got chills, she said, thinking about how people from Pittsburgh must feel when they encounter that work. “They have to feel so documented, so like they matter,” she said. “They have to feel so important. And I wanted to do that for Detroit.” Ten plays seemed like a lot, but she thought she could manage three.

Sometimes, in the first two plays particularly, the demands of plot overwhelm the characters and environments Ms. Morisseau creates. (Though, really, you could say the same of Chekhov.) Ms. Morisseau doesn't necessarily see this as a fault. "I don't know why we are so scared of drama," she said. "I love the drama. The more dramatic the better. I want to scream with the actors."

The actors want to scream right back, joyfully. Lynda Gravatt, who has known Ms. Morisseau since her student days and who played the lead in "Follow Me to Nellie's," underwent a quadruple bypass last summer. But she wouldn't let a little thing like heart surgery stop her from starring in "Skeleton Crew."

"I'm always very eager to go when she calls," Ms. Gravatt said. "Because I know there will be something for me to put my teeth into. The work is so tantalizing."

In "Skeleton Crew," Ms. Morisseau immersed herself in the music of the factories and the choreography of the assembly line. "It's beautiful," she said. "It's fricking theatrical; it's gorgeous."

Faye, the seasoned worker played by Ms. Gravatt, speaks of her connection to the plant. "The walls talk to me," Faye says. "The dust on the floors write me messages. I'm in the vents. I'm in the bulletin boards. I'm in the chipped paint. Ain't nobody can slip through the cracks past me up in here."

Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who directs "Skeleton Crew" and also directed "Paradise Blue" at Williamstown last summer, spoke admiringly of such richly textured speech and of Ms. Morisseau's ability to create complicated and absorbing characters. "She shares the language and the rhythms of the people, the salt-of-the-earth, blue-collar people," he said by telephone.

Ms. Morisseau has made it a mission to put onstage people of a race and class and type that much mainstream theater might ignore or demonize. The characters of "Skeleton Crew" include an unmarried pregnant woman, a gun-packing young man, a middle-age homeless woman. She has compassion for all of them, these fusions of aunts and uncles, of cousins and friends, the people she remembers from her upbringing and those she's barely glimpsed on the street, people who are, she said, "being monstified by the rest of the country."

"I love them and I want to write them," she said.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: Don't Forget the Motor City