

BWW Interview: Playwright Dominique Morisseau Shameless-ly TOO PROUD of Her DETROIT CREW



Prolific playwright **Dominique Morisseau**'s *SKELETON CREW* begins June 5, 2018 as the next **Geffen Playhouse** production. *SKELETON CREW*, the final play in Dominique's three-play cycle *THE DETROIT PROJECT*, focuses on four co-workers of an auto factory about to go under, circa 2008.

We had the chance to catch Dominique in between her multi-tasking of writing on her multitude of projects, including Showtime's *Shameless* and the upcoming *AIN'T TOO PROUD* scheduled for a Broadway run.

Thank you, Dominique, for taking time out for this interview!

What catalyst originally sparked your writing of *THE DETROIT PROJECTS*?

Three things. The ongoing way in which people would respond to me with fear, bias or pity when I told them I was from Detroit. I thought they must be getting a very misguided

narrative on what it means to be "from Detroit." Also **August Wilson's** PITTSBURGH CYCLE. I read the CYCLE back-to-back as an exercise and got overwhelmed with the gift that it was for the people of Pittsburgh. The way he was immortalizing and honoring them. I wanted to do that for Detroit.

And **Pearl Cleage**, one of my paradigms as a playwright. I read her volume of work and saw myself so beautifully in it. She is from Detroit and scribes Black women with such love that I also wanted to do that for Black women.

Do you ever think of combining your trilogy into one sitting (i.e., ANGELS IN AMERICA)?

Absolutely. I'm just patient on finding the brave theater visionary who will take it aboard with me!

How do you rate these communication factors in starting to write a play - To start a dialogue? To inform/teach historical events? To elicit an emotion (happiness/sadness)?

1. To start a dialogue

2. To elicit an emotion

3. To inform/teach history. (This is probably never really my focus. I'm not "trying to teach" anything. I'm exploring for myself and you're welcome to join the ride...)

Once your scripts are published and productions booked, do you allow for any tweaks or changes in your words?

Not after publishing. It's time to move on from the play and allow for the next journey. I'll only allow tweaks in very extreme circumstances. But the play is what it is, beautiful and imperfect. And that's fine by me.

How involved do you get with productions of your script? Do you ever go sit through rehearsal and give notes?

For the world premieres and the New York premieres, I am very involved. I do this for the love of collaboration. I like building the world with a team and so I like working with directors that don't think of me as a piece of wallpaper. We have to vibe with each other and with the cast. I'm an actor's writer. I like talking to my actors in solidarity with my directors. I give notes. We're a team.

Has any audience reactions to early performances of *SKELETON CREW* sway you to make small changes to your script?

*Maybe not audience reactions. I don't like to create to reaction. I feel it cheapens my work. But I do make changes based on what I perceive is an audience's sense of clarity around the story. I definitely did with *SKELETON CREW*. And I try to read what's landing or not in terms of story. The humor working or not is mostly whether the story works or not, and not so much because I need to make a joke funnier.*

What was the most unexpected audience reaction you received from a production of *SKELETON CREW*?

Laughter when Reggie tells a potentially violent story. I have learned a lot about what that laughter means. It isn't what I thought. It's not from lack of investment or belief. It's out of shocking truth. People laugh at some weird uncomfortable places sometimes. It's also cultural. We can have different reactions to the same thing based on our life experiences. Those who have been in Reggie's position or wanted to do something unhinged that Reggie does, those are the ones who more often laugh. It's catharsis and familiarity.

You started out as an actress before tackling writing. Who were your acting and writing idols growing up?

*Keisha Knight-Pulliam was someone I loved as a child. I wanted to be her friend on *The Cosby Show*. That's ironic as hell to me now.*

*I've always been a fan of Sally Fields. I just think she's got a million and one people inside of her, and I've long admired her for it. Also, **Jasmine Guy** was just a genius artist who I was mesmerized by. **Sophina Brown**, a fellow alum and friend from U of M and one of my favorite actors. And **Sophie Okonedo** has always blown me away with her vulnerability.*

*Writers are more than can be counted. Playwrights are **Pearl Cleage**. **Ntozake Shange**. **Aishah Rahman**. Cheryl West. PJ Gibson. George Wolfe. Nubia Kai. **Alice Childress**. Poets are **Maya Angelou**. Nikki Giovanni. Sonia Sanchez. **Langston Hughes**. Claude McKay. Novelists are Mildred D. Taylor. **Breena Clarke**. Alex Haley. **Richard Wright**. Nathan McCall. Ann Petry. And **Rosa Guy**. To name a few.*

Is there any particular one character in your collection of plays that those close to you would identify as "That's really Dominique!"?

Too many of them. Definitely. Shanita. Chelle. Nina. And Silver, all have pieces of me. As do the men. Damon. Dez. P Sam.

Have friends and associates recognized themselves in your plays? Or do you try to mash up friend's characteristics to keep everyone guessing?

Friends and family have seen themselves in my plays, no matter how I mash it up (and I always mash)! I tell 'em, it's my right to write them. They shouldn't impact me so much if they wanna stay out of my work.

*If there was a casting call sheet for a "**Dominique Morisseau**-type," how would she be described?*

Oh,Lawd! I have no idea. Maybe just "bad assed and not a group-thinker. Hilarious and silly. Sensitive and tough. And also very, very loveable."

You made the American Theatre's Top 20 Most-Produced Playwrights of 2015-16, tying **Eugene O'Neill** and besting **Tom Stoppard** and **Terrence McNally** among many others. Congratulations! What was your reaction to that distinction when you found out?

Right on! And go Detroit!

You have received a plethora of awards and honors. Any particular one made the little girl deep inside you just wanna scream for joy? (Your first? Or they all made you wanna scream at the time?)

They are all valuable because of the people involved in seeking to honor me. As Miss America as that is, I mean it sincerely. But for reasons I'll never explain, the Kennedy Prize made me scream out loud. And the Spirit of Detroit Award made me breathe the greatest sigh of relief.

Will your very next project be *Tempting you to Broadway*? Or do you still have other commitments, *Shameless* or otherwise, to fulfill?

There are definitely Broadway-bound projects that I'm working on and very proud of. And I definitely have other commitments in TV and film at the moment that have me very excited for the next leg of my journey as a writer. But truthfully, regarding Broadway, it will be the right place for me when it becomes a more inclusive, diverse and democratic space. I'm looking forward to being part of the vanguard of making that happen.

What would you love the Geffen audiences to leave with after *SKELETON CREW*'s curtain call?

A deeper love and respect for the working class and the people of Detroit.

Thank you again, Dominique! I look forward to experiencing your life in a Detroit auto factory.

For ticket availability through July 8, 2018; log onto www.geffenplayhouse.org