

THREE PLAYS, THREE ERAS: *THE DETROIT PROJECT*

BY LAUREN HALVORSEN



Downtown Detroit.

Dominique Morisseau's ambitious three-play cycle, *The Detroit Project*, was born from the playwright's deep-seated, hometown curiosity. "I wanted to explore three eras in my city's history that I felt were transformative, that changed the landscape of the city," says Morisseau, "But also, I just wanted to learn more about the people that were living through some of the crises that happened."

Morisseau was also influenced by master playwright August Wilson's landmark 10-play *Century Cycle* (1982–2005), a decade-by-decade exploration of the African-American experience in twentieth-century Pittsburgh. As a native of a similarly maligned Rust Belt city, Morisseau recognized a geographic kinship: "I thought how affirmed [Pittsburgh] must be when they read his work; they must feel so visible. I wanted to do that for Detroit, mostly because I felt that the narrative I know about the city is not visible. And I want to address the stuff that has been a conflict for us in the way that August Wilson did, and be a griot, a storyteller for them."

The Detroit Project is comprised of three dramas set in 1949, 1967, and 2008, but Morisseau didn't write them in chronological order. The first, the Motown-infused *Detroit '67*, unfolds during the explosive riots of its titular year—but, like *Skeleton Crew*, the play is concentrated,

focused on two siblings running an after-hours club in the basement of their newly inherited home, and an unexpected interracial romance that threatens their fledgling operation. The play debuted at the Public Theater in 2013, in association with Classical Theatre of Harlem and the National Black Theatre. *Detroit '67* has received dozens of subsequent productions, and was awarded the prestigious (and lucrative) Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History in 2014.

Paradise Blue, set in the gentrifying neighborhood Blackbottom in 1949, premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2015. The jazz-fueled, post-World War II drama traced a tormented nightclub owner hungering for a fresh start as a looming urban renewal project threatens the community. The play will receive a new production at the Signature Theatre in 2018, inaugurating Morisseau's five-year residency with the company.

Skeleton Crew is the third installment and the most contemporary, set during the late-aughts economic downturn. And though she's completed the cycle, Morisseau remains committed to reclaiming the histories and untold stories of Detroit: "Wherever my creativity lies, it is always rooted in the soul of the elders from which my stories are born." ♦