

*Through the Riots, Motown Kept the City Dancing...*

# DETROIT '67

by **Dominique Morisseau**

directed by Tom Jones

**OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 10**

at the **WELLS THEATRE**



VIRGINIA  
STAGE  
COMPANY  
— AT THE —  
WELLS THEATRE

# STUDY GUIDE

Created by Virginia Stage Company

# WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM VSC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

## Our Teaching Philosophy

We've witnessed firsthand what the creative process nurtures in children, teens and all lifelong learners:

- excitement, enthusiasm, and openness to explore their own creativity
- critical-thinking and problem solving skills
- enthusiasm for teamwork
- empathy and support toward peers
- strength in their ability to listen and express themselves effectively
- healthy self-image and awareness

Because it has such positive and far-reaching outcomes for our students, VSC's education model emphasizes process over product. We believe that students will emerge from their time with VSC's educational programs with skills that will serve them well in all areas of life.

## Benefits for Students

Students enrolled in VSC's education programs will:

- develop leadership qualities
- enhance communication skills
- develop an appreciation for the creative process
- learn to take ownership of their own ideas and concepts
- increase their knowledge of theatre terms
- develop greater confidence through the creative play experience
- develop a spirit of curiosity
- learn to develop and appreciate the value of kindness
- develop or expand spatial awareness
- use dramatic prompts to create imaginative movement
- cooperate with others in group sessions
- learn how to use their voice safely and effectively
- learn how to use their bodies effectively with character development
- work with peers to write scripts
- explore characters and settings
- rehearse in a positive, supportive environment
- practice respectful critique of others' work
- put it all together to create original theatre for others.

Virginia Stage Company's production adheres to the following Virginia's English Standards of Learning requirements for grades 5-12:

**Reading and Writing** – 5.4, 5.5., 5.7, 5.8, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.8, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.8, 8.5, 8.5, 8.7, 8.8, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 11.3, 11.4, 11.5, 11.6, 11.7, 12.3, 12.4, 12.5, 12.6, 12.7

**Theatre Arts** – 6.15, 6.16, 6.17, 6.20, 6.21, 6.23, 6.24, 6.25, 7.17, 7.18, 7.19, 7.20, 7.21, 7.22, 7.23, 8.15, 8.16, 7.17, 8.18, 8.19, 8.20, 8.21, 8.22, 8.23, 8.24, 8.25

**Introduction to Theatre** – TI. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

**Theatre Arts II Dramatic Literature and Theatre History** – TII. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

# What To Expect In This Guide

To learn more about the show, source material, and find classroom activities

## Contents

**4 Theatre Etiquette**

**5 About the Playwright**

5 Dominique Morisseau

**6 The Rules**

**7 About the Play**

7 Synopsis

7 Characters

**8 *Detroit '67*: Historical Context**

8 1967 Race Rebellion

9 60s Motown

**10 *Detroit '67*: About the Show**

10 Dominique Morisseau & The Landscape of America Theatre

11 The Setting of *Detroit '67*

12 Director's Note

12 About the Director

12 About the Scenic Design

**13 Cast & Creative Team**

**14 Words from Dominique Morisseau**

**15 *Detroit '67*: An Essay**

**Created by Virginia Stage Company**

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# Theatre Etiquette

There are simple rules that all audience members should follow to make the play as enjoyable as possible. Remember, a live theater performance can be very exciting. All of the people involved in the production, both cast and crew, work very hard to be sure they give a great performance. It is the job of the audience members to help the performers give their best performance possible. The audience can do this by practicing the rules of theater etiquette.

- Arrive at the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone or, if it must be on, put it on vibrate. Do not speak on the phone OR text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to many shows about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance...whispering is still speaking, so only in an emergency. Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in Musical Theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It is prohibited by law and can be very distracting to the actors.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment...rude to the actors and your fellow audience members.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater. If you must have a cough drop, or something of that nature, do not make noise with the wrapper.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Do not angle your head together with your "special someone" as you obstruct the view of the people behind you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over...this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great.
- Do not whistle or scream out to the performers.

# About the Playwright

## Dominique Morisseau



Dominique Morisseau is a playwright whose works portray the lives of individuals and communities grappling with economic and social changes, both current and historical. With a background as an actor and spoken-word poet, she uses lyrical dialogue to construct emotionally complex characters who exhibit humor, vulnerability, and fortitude as they cope with sometimes desperate circumstances.

Her plays juxtapose beauty with destruction, hope with despair, and bring to light the complicated realities of urban African American communities. *The Detroit Project*, a trilogy of works inspired by August Wilson's *Century Cycle*, paints an authentic picture of the city at three moments in time. Set during the riots of the summer of 1967, *Detroit '67* (2013) delves into the bond between a brother and sister and the difficult, life-altering decisions they must make against a backdrop of chaos and economic instability. *Paradise Blue* (2015) dramatizes the lives and music of the jazz community in a Detroit neighborhood in 1949, where legendary artists performed and flourished before urban renewal policies forever altered the landscape. The final play in the trilogy, *Skeleton Crew* (2016), is set in 2008 in an automotive stamping plant during the worst of the recession and centers on characters wrestling with conscience, identity, and the instinct for economic survival. Music features prominently throughout *The Detroit Project*, with Motown, jazz, and hip-hop tracks serving to accentuate a mood and underscore dialogue, while Morisseau captures the city's distinctive

rhythms of speech to further convey the specificity of place.

Other works include *Sunset Baby* (2012), a raw, potent look at a daughter's relationships with her estranged revolutionary father and her drug-dealing boyfriend, and *Pipeline* (2017), which explores a mother's desperation and fatalism as she witnesses her black son's seeming inability to avoid the "school to prison pipeline." Still early in her career, Morisseau is a powerful storyteller whose examination of character and circumstance is a call for audiences to consider the actions and responsibilities of society more broadly.

(Adapted from <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/1018/>)

# The Rules

When Morisseau worked on Pipeline at Lincoln Center Theatre she asked to have the following “rules” included in every playbill. She believes that audiences should be free to respond to her work in the way that they feel comfortable, and even says her work requires audible interaction. See the list from that playbill below.

## PLAYWRIGHT’S RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

You are allowed to laugh audibly.

You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response.

My work requires a few “um hmms” and “uhn uhns” should you need to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize.

This can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.

This is also live theatre and the actors need you to engage with them, not distract them or thwart their performance.

Please be an audience member that joins with others and allows a bit of breathing room. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “amen” should you need to.

This is community. Let’s go.

—Dominique Morisseau

# DETROIT '67: About the Play

## SYNOPSIS



*Detroit '67* tells the story of conflicting siblings against a backdrop of the race riots that shook Detroit, Michigan, in the summer of 1967.

Chelle and Lank are brother and sister who share their recently inherited childhood home. They work together, scraping enough money to make ends meet. To supplement their small inheritance, they have converted their basement into a small private club. Although the siblings are close, Lank, a dreamer, has secret plans for the money raised by their little nightclub: he and a friend want to buy a real bar together. Lank knows that his more conventional sister will object--she has a son at college who needs her financial support.



After Lank and his buddy Sly find a badly beaten white woman on their way home one night, their situation becomes further complicated. Chelle reluctantly agrees to let Caroline (the mystery lady) stay if she pulls her weight by working in the basement—a decision she comes to quickly regret when she notices the chemistry between Caroline and her brother.

From <https://stageagent.com/shows/play/7841/detroit-67>

*Photos of Virginia Stage Company's DETROIT '67, 2019. Pictured: Freddie Fulton, Shenyse LeAnna Harris, Bryce Michael Wood, Lisa Tharps, Suzannah Herschkowitz. Photos by Samuel W. Flint.*

## CHARACTERS

### CHELLE (MICHELLE)

Black woman, late 30's, strong, steadfast, firm, and not easily impressed. A widow, mother, and sister. A loving heart beneath her pride.

### LANK (LANGSTON)

Black man, early 30's, cool, loving, and charismatic. A dreamer. Has a special effect on women – but not a womanizer. Chelle's younger brother.

### BUNNY (BONITA)

Black woman, mid-late 30's, fun, spunky, sexy, and joyful. A friend and sometimes a lover... Never lets nothin' get her down.

### SLY (SYLVESTER)

Black man, late 30's, hip, slick, and sweet-talking. An honest hustler and numbers man. Fiercely loyal. Lank's best buddy.

### CAROLINE

White woman, late 20's/early 30's, beautiful, quiet strength, troubled, soft, and mysterious. There is a world of danger behind her eyes.

From: <https://www.samuelfrench.com/p/12567/detroit-67>

# DETROIT '67: Historical Context

## What Happened?

### The Events of the 1967 Race Rebellion

The 1960s promised good fortune for the city of Detroit. The automobile industry was taking off, the population had peaked in the previous decade, and the mayor at the time was considered to be the most progressive mayor in a major American metropolis. Nevertheless, there were early signs of trouble. The city was undergoing economic stress and there was an influx of white Detroiters leaving the city. Similarly, despite the fact that 40% of Detroit's population was black, only 5% of police officers were. Black Detroiters were constantly voicing their frustrations with the dangerous, violent, and racist policing practices that were being executed by white officers. These frustrations over police brutality and racial profiling came to a head the morning of July 23rd, marking the beginning of the 1967 Race Rebellion.

While *Detroit '67* does not focus on the 1967 Race Rebellion specifically, the story unfolds with the uprising as the backdrop and the events of the play are consequently influenced by the events of the Rebellion. To enhance students' understanding of the play and to foster a personal connection to the world in which it's set, ask students to explore The Detroit Free Press' timeline of the events of the 1967 rebellion in Detroit (linked below). They can review the timeline as a class, individually, or in small groups. You may even want to assign select portions of the timeline to individual groups to engage with. Encourage students to click through the yellow-highlighted sections to read the annotation from historians and experts.

#### The Detroit Free Press – Detroit '67 Timeline

<https://www.freep.com/pages/interactives/1967-detroit-riot/>





# DETROIT '67: Historical Context

## 60's Motown: When An Independent Detroit Record Label Ruled The World



Motown was founded in 1959 as Tamla Records, and it acquired the name Motown in April 1960 – the ideal time to launch a record company built on black music. In the early 60s, the music industry was rapidly expanding. African-American singers would soon reach a bigger audience than ever before. The Civil Rights movement meant that black people's interests were being voiced and white people were beginning to listen – and music would be a medium for that message.

As the new decade dawned, an emerging black middle class had disposable income to spend on records – some of which was refined, smooth, “uptown” music that record labels began to target. White people began to appreciate R&B and soul, a new expansive music that had grown out of it, providing free-spending

fans. Across the Atlantic in Europe, influential bands became fans of soul and R&B, including four lads from Liverpool who were admirers of The Marvelettes and The Miracles; and the bands that followed The Beatles, such as The Who and The Dave Clark Five, included soul songs in their repertoire. There were still battles to be fought, arguments to win, wars to stop, injustices to put right. But the 60s was a time of expansion. If a record label could establish itself, the world was its oyster.

From: <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/60s-motown-history-music/>



### Motown Playlist on Spotify

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5mByrIFuUzwKk8H6XnE5BZ?replay=1#\\_=\\_](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5mByrIFuUzwKk8H6XnE5BZ?replay=1#_=_)



# DETROIT '67: About the Show

## Director Thomas W. Jones II on Dominique Morisseau & the landscape of American Theatre

*Detroit '67* is written by one of the most emerging, phenomenal artists of our generation, Dominique Morisseau, who is a part of a handful of African American women who are redefining and creating a Renaissance in the theatre. Women like Dominique, Katori Hall, Lynn Nottage, and a host of women are redefining and re-establishing in the American Theatre what it is to look at the African American community.

Dominique looks at this community going forward by going back to a time in our history when there was a great fissure in this country; when there was almost a civil disturbance that divided the country in two sides--not unlike today. Houses were divided over something called the Vietnam War, where dreams were being made, where we were growing up (because I grew up in that era) with televised assassinations, where every couple of years you sat around with your family and grieved in America over watching your heroes die. Whether it was Robert Kennedy, or John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Medgar Evers, or the students at Jackson State, or the students at Kent State, there was something that you grieved over. Where you watched on a nightly basis body bags being brought back from Vietnam and our country being divided. I went to a school in the Upper Westside of New York where a lot of students were protesting and going downtown and being beat up by construction workers because it was a country that was ravaged by this conversation. It was a world that was trying to emerge with new values, with a new consciousness, with a new way of looking at itself.

What Dominique does very well is tell that story without overtly telling that story. She invested in the lives of 5 human beings that were dreamers. And it was Langston Hughes that said something like, "One has to hold onto dreams because if you don't, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly". All of these characters in this play are men and women who are trying to take wing, who are trying to find themselves in the American landscape, who are looking at redefining the world by reinvesting in their own dreams by embracing a consciousness that is certainly not revolutionary but self-determining.

When you come to this play, come with your heart open. Come ready to experience a journey of not just African American women but of human beings who are trying to make sense out of their lives, who are trying to take order out of chaos. There was a social critic who once said that in the lives of every African American man and woman, they will have to confront the fact that they will be perceived to be a n\_\_\_\_er, and it's at that point that they have to start that long, psychological climb uphill to restore order out of chaos. So I think what this play does extremely well is to show men and women who are trying to restore order out of chaos.

# DETROIT '67: About the Show

## Director Thomas W. Jones II on the Setting of DETROIT '67

There were new manufacturing jobs in Detroit, and with that came people moving out of apartment-like and project-like homes into two-story and one-story homes. With a home came a space called “a basement”, which for Black middle-class life (and for my life growing up) was a repository of dreams. It was a place where you went to imagine something about yourself that you either took to the outside world or that the outside world prevented you from doing or from becoming. I was a rock star—I was Michael Jackson in the Jackson 5 in my basement.

It wasn't the living room, because in a Black family's house, there is no living in the living room. You had plastic seat covers on the couch that never came off and it was only reserved for company. When you ate, you didn't eat in the dining room, you ate in the room that was off the kitchen. The dining room was for special occasions, like anniversaries or Christmas or Thanksgiving. You didn't eat off the good china. If you had an attic, it was always the extra bedroom for some relative that was going to move in with you. Or you then had to move into that room because the relative did move in and all of a sudden you lost your room.

So the basement was the place to dream. A place where you went to recover, where you went to hibernate. I was sharing today that Ralph Ellison's central character in “Invisible Man” starts in a basement. And what he says about it, is that hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt act. That's what I think basements were, a place where we could recover, a place where we dreamt new things about ourselves, a place where we thought and imagined ourselves to be, a place where we invited friends, a place where you had a rent party, a place where you had a New Year's Eve party, a place where you had a blue lights in the basement party. It was a repository for our dreams.

It's not by accident I think that Dominique Morisseau sets the play in a basement. It's why she sets Paradise Blue in a club; what do those things represent? But that is a wonderful, magical part of this piece and what that basement is. When you come to Detroit '67, you watch these characters really exploring their dream selves in that place.

# About the Show

## Director's Note

It was Martin Luther King, Jr who once remarked "Riots are the voice of the unheard"; and perhaps, by extension, all of us—regardless of circumstance—hunger to be heard. Each in our own way experience the quiet riot; the driving need to have our lives heard and witnessed if only for a passing moment. If unfulfilled we rage against the immediacy asking, pleading, demanding justice; insisting the world take notice.

In a basement on 12th and Clairmont in Detroit, 1967, five men and women living quiet lives struggle to find meaning and clarity in a world grown turbulent. Dominique Morisseau constructs a world that intersects personal ambition with deferred dreams. As Ralph Ellison quips in his epic *Invisible Man*, as his protagonist too resides in a basement, "Hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt act" .

So it is Ms. Morisseau who canvasses the basement lives of those preparing/ dreaming/recovering/ demanding/praying for an outside world to consider justice in its inequity; to replace callousness with gentility; to build peace from its incendiary violence. It is a world where ordinary men and women live lives of epic significance. Ms. Morisseau's world is a soulful blue dance in the killing ground.

## About the Director



**THOMAS W. JONES II** (Director) has directed, written, and performed in more than 200 plays worldwide. In 1978, Tom founded Jomandi Productions, where, as Co-Artistic Director and Producing Director, Tom led Jomandi to become the third largest African-American theatre company in the United States. His work as a writer, director, and actor has been acclaimed nationally and internationally. His work has received 48 Washington DC Helen Hayes Award nominations winning 15 awards, including Best Director for Samm Art Williams' *Home* and his own *Bessie's Blues*. He has also received 3 New York Audelco Award nominations, the Dramalogue Award, the San Diego Critics Award, NAACP Phoenix Award, among others. In 2000, Tom and his co-founders left Jomandi to create the entertainment company VIA International Artists, Inc. and subsequently a musical theatre company VIA Theatrical. His most recent works include *Three Sistahs*, *Point of Revue*, *Two Queens One Castle*, *Bricktop*, *Heart 'n' Soul*, *Love Johnny*, *A Cool Drink A Water*, *Holler and Sheddin'*. Tom's musical *Cool Papa's Party* completed a workshop in New York with Wayne Brady. He recently directed Kandi Burress' musical *A Mother's Love*, *Only Just a Minute*, and *Mary Honey B. Morrison's play Single Husbands*. Tom is also working on several exciting projects including *A Musical Evening with Frankie Lymon and Blackberry Daze*.

**Learn more about the Set Design for the show on our blog:**



<http://www.vastage.org/blog/2019/10/11/set-design-blog>

# Cast + Creative Team

DETROIT '67

BY **DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU**

DIRECTED BY  
**THOMAS W. JONES II †**

SET DESIGNED BY  
**MATTHEW ALLAR †**

COSTUMES DESIGNED BY  
**NYROBI MOSS**

LIGHTING DESIGNED BY  
**MARY FRANCES PARKER**

SOUND DESIGNED BY  
**CHRIS LANE**

NY CASTING BY  
**BINDER CASTING, CHAD ERIC MURNANE, CSA**  
STAGE MANAGED BY  
**KAREN CURRIE \***

Chelle

**LISA THARPS \***

Lank

**BRYCE MICHAEL WOOD \***

Bunny

**SHENYSE LEANNA HARRIS \***

Sly

**FREDDIE FULTON \***

Caroline

**SUZANNAH HERSCHKOWITZ \***

For more information about the Creative Team,  
Cast, and for the complete list of show staff, visit

<http://www.vastage.org/blog/2019/10/7/detroit-67-cast-creatives>

*† Member of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, Inc., an independent labor union.*

*\* Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States*

*‡ Member of United Scenic Artists Local 829*

"I think the one thing I can say I've learned to embrace, that I didn't always, is the idea of being a political writer. I did not look at myself as a political writer for a very long time because I'm not trying to push a political agenda, per se, or tell people what politics to embrace, but I am looking at how politics, in a certain light, impact people. I've learned to embrace that I have a very strong social justice call to my work. Even when the work is very personal and not pushing a political agenda, there is some sense of justice I am always seeking for my characters. How are they or are they not getting justice in their lives for the things that they want? How are they or are they not being measured fairly by each other and by the world? And how are they or are they not being considered by those who have status over them?"

Dominique Morisseau in an interview with *The Interval*

<https://www.theintervalny.com/interviews/2017/07/an-interview-with-dominique-morisseau/>



<https://www.macfound.org/videos/584/>

# DETROIT '67: An Essay

## The Family You Choose: Motown as Muse

“Promise me we’re gonna hold this house and this family together, Lank.”

– Chelle to her brother Langston in Dominique Morisseau’s *Detroit '67* (Samuel French ed., 22)

Dominique Morisseau, Obie-winning playwright and MacArthur Genius Fellow, can flat out call down some muses. Calliope, muse of epic poetry, surely guides Morisseau’s unerring ear for the way folks really talk; Clio, muse of history, plops her (and us) directly down into 1967, in the middle of a dangerous and much endangered Detroit ghetto. With passionate expertise, Morisseau conjures up Euterpe, muse of Motor City music, and she sadly summons Melpomene, the ever-present muse of tragedy—forever hungry for young black men. We see her conjure Terpsichore, muse of the slow dance, making everyone sway to the beats of the ‘Temps,’ Marvin Gaye, and other Motown greats.

But, setting Zeus’ artsy daughters aside for a moment, an implacable city *itself* can serve as quite a muse, too.

Consider Damon Runyon’s New York City, with its *ad hoc* street families of soft-hearted thugs, crazy crap-shooters, and earnest soul-savers. Consider August Wilson’s Pittsburgh. Wilson used Pittsburgh’s very lifeblood for ink, dipping in for ten plays to depict each decade of the 20th century. Wilson is also one of Morisseau’s chosen literary fathers, (with Lorraine Hansberry, a chosen mother).

Detroit is especially muse to Morisseau in the trilogy of plays about her birthplace entitled *The Detroit Project* of which our play is a part. *Paradise Blue* depicts the city in 1949; *Detroit '67* conveys us to 1967— the violent year before Dr. King’s assassination and a year in which other black lives didn’t seem to matter much either. The third play in the trilogy is *Skeleton Crew*, set in 2008, ground zero for the Great Recession, which crashed down harder upon Detroit than nearly any other US city.

Within this play in the trilogy, Motown Music is almost a sixth character. Morisseau’s use of famous hit songs in *Detroit '67* is as an oblique but clear commentary on the play’s central action. Morisseau has since written non-Detroit-centric plays such as the ominously entitled *Pipeline*, about a younger black man’s brush with the law. *Pipeline* was good enough to be produced at Lincoln Center and then chosen for broadcast on PBS as part of the Lincoln Center series. But Morisseau evidently still hears Motown’s siren song. She wrote the book for the jukebox musical *Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations* which opened this past February on Broadway.

**This is an excerpt. Read the full essay on our blog:**

<http://www.vastage.org/blog/2019/motown-as-muse-an-essay>

The author is Dr. Page Laws, Professor of English and Dean of the R C Nusbaum Honors College, Norfolk State University (Ret.). Dr. Laws also serves on the VSC Board of Trustees.