

Dominique Morisseau's *Skeleton Crew* in Detroit: A drama about the working class

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3 November 2017

Dominique Morisseau's two-act play, *Skeleton Crew*, recently had a run at the Detroit Public Theatre. The drama, which premiered at the Atlantic Theater Company in New York City in January 2016, takes place in the breakroom of a stamping plant in Detroit "somewhere around year 2008."

Three of the characters are production workers. The central figure, Faye (Ella Joyce), is a black woman in her late 50s. Outspoken, caustic and gay (and alienated from her son as a result), she has lost her house—to foreclosure—and a great deal more.

Audience members realize soon enough that Faye—who also suffers from breast cancer but eternally and defiantly puffs on a cigarette in front of the prominent "No Smoking" sign—is sleeping in the breakroom, because the cold weather has made spending nights in her car impossible. She has worked at the plant for 29 years ("Been on the line longer than you been born") and serves as the UAW union representative.

Dez (Brian Taylor), a black man in his 20s, is angry, individualistic, even explosive, but also quite sensitive. He has plans to open his own repair shop-garage ("Few more months of overtime, I'm in there"). The pregnant Shanita (Shawntay Dalon), a young woman and single-mother-to-be in her 20s, also black, is "hard-working," according to the playwright, and "believes in the work she does."

The fourth and final character is the workers' supervisor, Reggie (Brian Marable), a black man in his 30s. He wears a tie, always has a clipboard under his arm and tries, to his own way of thinking, to keep everyone and everything in the plant in line. His late mother was Faye's closest friend, and he has known her since childhood.

We quickly learn that the plant, "the last small factory standing [in Detroit presumably]," in Dez's words, is scheduled to close. Reggie tells Faye, "HR is sending out the notice as soon as details are final." Faye thinks of her own situation ("I hit thirty years at the end of the year. ... Retirement package be real different for twenty-nine years versus thirty") and that of the others. The supervisor implores her not to tell the workers she is supposed to represent. "Help me figure this out without sounding the alarm," Reggie pleads, using his family connection to Faye as a kind of emotional blackmail. She agrees to say nothing for the time being ("Fine. We'll do it your way").

As *Skeleton Crew* proceeds, the various social and personal pressures mount, with the impending closure of the factory, which eventually becomes common knowledge, looming in the background.

Faye desperately attempts to keep the lid on things at the plant and in her own chaotic existence. The factory is now literally and figuratively her home: "I know everything about this place, Dez. The walls talk to me. The dust on the floor write me messages. I'm in the vents. I'm in the bulletin board. I'm in the chipped paint. Ain't

nobody can slip through the cracks past me up in here."

For Reggie's benefit, she recounts the circumstances that have led her to camp out in the breakroom, circumstances faced by millions in America: "I wasn't keepin' up the payments on the note [mortgage]. Goddamn property taxes killin' me. Roof was near cavin' in and I couldn't afford to fix it up. Cancer treatments kickin' my ass. What you want me to say? I ain't goin' through my whole list of finances with you. Shit got out of my hands. End of the damn story."

Meanwhile, Dez increasingly comes into conflict with Reggie and the rest of (unseen) management over his latenesses and general "insubordination." When company policy, prompted by a spate of robberies of plant materiel, dictates that lockers and workers' belongings be searched, Dez resists the humiliating procedure. He faces off with Reggie, who complains that he keeps breaking the rules. "Always treating me like I'm up to no good," Dez responds. "Like I ain't got a righteous bone in my body. Won't matter why I do what I do or what my intentions are. Won't matter what plans I got or what I'm trying to build. You got your mind made up that I'm shit and you just waiting for proof." A gun found in Dez's bag seems to confirm Reggie's worst suspicions.

Shanita's job and life situation seems precarious, perhaps more so to others than it does to her. Faye, knowing that the plant is shutting down, is appalled that the pregnant young woman had turned down an office job. But Shanita wants to stay in the auto industry. She loves the "sound of machines running. ... Sound like harmony. Like life happening. Production. Good sound." She doesn't want any part of the other job. "Here, I feel like I'm building somethin' important. Love the way the line needs me. ... I'm building something that you can see come to life at the end. Got a motor in it and it's gonna take somebody somewhere. ... Workin' in this industry is what I do. Uncertainty is always there. But it's the work I'm made of. ... Everybody can't do what I do. I belong here. Ride it 'til the wheels fall off."

Reggie is tormented by a divided loyalty between management requirements and demands and his desire to see that the workers get a fair break. Pressured by Faye, he replies defensively, "I don't own this place. I just try to keep it running smoothly." Then later: "I'm also thinking that I need my job just like everybody else. If this company folds, I could fold with it. I don't have a union to protect me, I just have my reputation." He explains that he's thinking about the workers, but he's also thinking about "How I could lose my job and make my family lose everything. ... I'm walking the line, Faye. One foot in front of the other and trying not to fall and crash and break my spine."

As should already be obvious, there are a number of strong elements

in *Skeleton Crew*. First of all, and this is not an insignificant matter, there is the physical and social time and place: the devastating economic slump of 2008, working class Detroit, a stamping plant. The play never wavers from its legitimately urgent concentration on and interest in the lives of this handful of workers, confronting powerful economic and social forces. This in itself is commendable and rare.

Morisseau, originally from Detroit, has an undeniable way with words. At times she tries too hard to be “authentic” and “local,” but generally speaking, the dialogue is relatively rich and evocative. The story itself is coherent and intelligently set out, and it is sometimes moving. The actors have clearly thrown themselves into one of the few opportunities they have to do something about real life. The set resembles an industrial lunchroom, down to the unmatched plastic chairs, the inevitable company notices, the miserable, fading green paint and the decades of grime.

However, there are also serious weaknesses in *Skeleton Crew*. This is a story “about” the working class, not a drama “of” the working class, so to speak. Some of that is inevitable. But some of it is not. There is a lack of an appreciation here of the concrete, historical conditions facing the American working class. For all its “immediacy,” the play is either distant from or wrongheaded about some of the most pressing questions.

The drama in *Skeleton Crew* resolves itself into the struggle to negotiate the best terms under which the workers’ jobs will be eliminated. No one questions the right of the owners to damage or destroy the workers’ lives. The closest thing to rebellion is this speech by Dez in Act Two: “Ya’ll gotta be kiddin’ gettin’ moral on me right now. You think any of this is moral? Keep us workin’ these presses ‘til we pull a fuckin’ shoulder blade, and then replace us in a heartbeat if we can’t keep up the production. You think when this ship sinks the captain’s going down?”

Of course, Morisseau can’t invent a mass upsurge in the auto industry that hasn’t taken place yet, but the artist is also charged with doing more than simply reproducing the empirical surface and the individualist illusions. The workers may not see certain things at this moment, but what does the playwright see? The private ownership of the auto industry and the profit system as a whole have proven catastrophic for Detroit, the poorest major city in the US, where unemployment, poverty, drug abuse and homelessness are rampant.

Bound up with this is the playwright’s portrayal of the United Auto Workers, which has collaborated with the auto companies and various governments in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the transformation of life for wide layers of the population in Detroit, Flint, Pontiac and other communities into a nightmare.

In her director’s notes, included in the program at the Detroit Public Theatre, Morisseau explains that she spoke to many people as part of her preparation to write *Skeleton Crew*, including “UAW activists.” She goes on later to comment, “One of my consultants said, ‘the important thing about the UAW that people need to understand is that at its core it isn’t just about the rights of auto workers, but about civil rights in general.’”

Morisseau was clearly talking to the wrong people, those connected in one way or another to the well-heeled, privileged and widely hated UAW officialdom. The organization is a corrupt, bureaucratic shell that exists to police the factories in the interests of the auto companies, large and small.

Her outlook helps explain why she has the only opposition to the UAW in her drama come from the “right,” so to speak, from those, like Dez, who complain that the union pulls “money outta my

paycheck every month, for what? Only thing the UAW do for me is force me to strike when I don’t even want to. ... I done paid enough dues in my life already, I ain’t tryin’ to pay to nobody else.” Strikes? What strikes? The UAW hasn’t lifted a finger in decades to stop the immiseration of the working class in Detroit, or anywhere else.

Dez later complains that Faye, the nominal union representative, hasn’t done anything: “You supposed to be on our side. Fighting for us. What happened to all that union talk you got every other day? ... Tell me why you ain’t called no meetings down at the Local or demand this company let us know our fate. Tell me why we ain’t talkin’ health coverage or severance deals? Ain’t even gonna prep us for the blow that might be comin’?” But this protest is pretty ineffectual and quickly set aside.

One of the other big questions is Morisseau’s decision to make the entire cast African American. According to an ABC News item in 2009, “the nation’s 60 or so African-American automotive suppliers...have annual sales of about \$4 billion and employ some 8,000 people, about 70 percent of them black.” The company in *Skeleton Crew* appears to be African American-owned, as far as one can tell. But still, 70 percent is not 100 percent.

Morisseau is a strong admirer of the work of playwright August Wilson (*Fences*), the chronicler of African American working class life in Pittsburgh and an ardent black nationalist, who once declared, “Let’s make a rule: blacks don’t direct Italian films, Italians don’t direct Jewish films, Jews don’t direct black-American films.”

There is no evidence that Morisseau subscribes to that reactionary and crippling viewpoint, but there is something limiting about her choice of characters. Whether it is deliberately racist or not, the choice to have only black characters working in a Michigan auto plant is parochial and insular, and, frankly, makes the drama less interesting and complex. At the very least, the playwright has taken the easy way out in this regard.

This is bound up as well with the over-emphasis on vernacular, which doesn’t prove all that much except the playwright has a skilled ear and pen. Pinning down the rhythms of speech, accompanied between scenes by “J Dilla-inspired beats,” is a secondary matter. It can even be an evasion ultimately of the effort to arrive at the truth about the condition of the working class, black, white, Latino, Asian and immigrant, an effort that deserved to be placed at the center of such a serious work.



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