* CHICAGO PREMIERE *



BY DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU DIRECTED BY RON OJ PARSON





Welcome to *Sunset Baby* by Dominique Morisseau, one of the most compelling and provocative writers to break out in the American theatre in recent years. A winner of the prestigious Steinberg Playwright Award and the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History, Dominique's plays speak to the heart of TimeLine's mission by exploring the past and shining a light on critical contemporary issues.

I first encountered Dominique's writing when I saw Ron OJ Parson's production of *Detroit '67* at Northlight Theatre, and I quickly got my hands on four more of her scripts, including Sunset Baby. My TimeLine colleagues and I were immediately enthralled by the depth of her historical scope, her dialogue that combines beautiful poetry with biting prose, and the stirring blend of disenfranchisement and hopefulness in her plays.

Dominique is a writer for our times, boldly looking at the past events that led us here and asking how we move forward.

Sunset Baby explores a trail that stretches from the Black Liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s to the Black Lives Matter movement of today. It's a play about activism, about reconciliation between father and

daughter and about the ache to break out of one's given circumstances.

As we continue to see our city and country wracked by systemic injustice, the issues of Sunset Baby feel all the more resonant, pushing us to ponder how generations of inequality have or have not evolved, as we consider what our role is to change the course of history.

With social media, we're in an age of new forms of activism, new types of reach and perhaps a different definition of "connectedness," prompting the question: What is today's movement? Who are its leaders? And how is it different from previous generations?

That generational progression is at the core of Sunset Baby, and while it poses large, messy, sociological questions, this is a play that is less about the actions of the masses and more about the personal decisions and disconnect between a handful of people-daughter, boyfriend, absent father and deceased mother. It's a deeply personal and intimate look at a family torn apart and examining what was lost in the struggle. Each must confront the mistakes of the past, recognize the choices that led to their division, and determine how or if healing might be possible.

Despite a background of strife, the play's title reveals that this story is a young woman's yearning for peace and beauty. She longs to escape her harsh urban confines and finally experience the tranquility and serenity of something that has always been out of reach-a sunset. To see its splendor with her own eyes, filled with color and warmth and hope for what the new day might bring.

What a beautiful thing for us all to look forward to-what tomorrow might bring.

Best,

What is today's movement? Who are its leaders? And how is it different from previous generations?

"As a writer I am and have always been **PLAYWRIGHT** interested in filling in the void, and addressing the issues of the marginalized; if their stories are unknown, I'm looking to illuminate them." - Dominique Morisseau

Detroit native Dominique Morisseau has guickly made a name for herself as one of the most exciting young playwrights and performers in theatre today.

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DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU

An alumnus of the Public Theater Emerging Writers Group, the Women's Project Playwrights Lab, and the Lark Playwright's Workshop, Morisseau is the 2015 recipient of the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, and the winner of the 2015 Steinberg Playwright Award. Morisseau is also a two-time NAACP Image Award recipient, a Jane Chambers Playwriting Award honoree, and the winner of the Barrie and Bernice Stavis Playwriting Award.

Morisseau's Sunset Baby received its world premiere at London's Gate Theatre in 2012. It had its U.S. premiere at LAByrinth Theatre Company in New York City just a year later in 2013. TimeLine Theatre's production marks the Chicago premiere of the show.

Morisseau is perhaps best known for her work on The Detroit Projects, a three-play cycle about her hometown, inspired by August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle. The first show of the trilogy, Detroit '67, premiered at The Public Theater in 2013. The second, Paradise Blue, was staged

Coco Elysses and Tyla Abercrumbie in Northlight Theatre's 2013 production of Detroit '67. (Photo by Michael Brosilow)



last summer at Williamstown Theatre Festival. The third and final play in the cycle, *Skeleton Crew*, is receiving its premiere at Atlantic Theater Company in January 2016.

Morisseau is also the author of Follow Me to Nellie's and a series of published one-act plays including Third Grade, Black at Michigan, love.lies.liberation, Socks, Roses Are Played Out and Love and Nappiness. Her work has also been published in *The New York* Times bestseller Chicken Soup for the African American Soul as well as "Signifyin' Harlem," a Harlembased literary journal.

As a performer, Morisseau originated the role of Camae in Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* in New York City. She also has appeared in Saturday Night, Sunday Morning at the McCarter Theatre, Shoe Story at New York Stage and Film, and On the Levees at Yale Repertory Theatre.

A graduate of the University of Michigan, Morisseau started her career as a performance poet. To this day, her work revolves around shining a light on communities that are underrepresented and pushed to the fringes of society.

For more information, visit dominiquemorisseau.com.



Nina Simone, the High Priestess of Soul and inspiration for the protagonist of Sunset Baby. (Photo: Billboard Magazine)

Throughout her life and career, Eunice Waymon was known to many different people, by many different labels: "Little Girl Blue," "The High Priestess of Soul," "The Voice of the Civil Rights Movement," and most commonly, by her stage name, **Nina Simone**. But Nina never campaigned for these labels, nor did she much care for them. While Nina's music has since become a grand celebration of a time long ago, the music and art that Nina created was simply her voicing her own experience as a black woman living in America in the mid-20th century.

Growing up in a poor black family in the Jim Crow South, Nina's musical gifts manifested early—by age 4, she was singing in her church choir and learning how to play piano. Nina initially dreamed of becoming a classical pianist, but was rejected by the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, Penn. (she would later claim that this rejection occurred purely because of the color of her skin). Nina moved to "They say I'm crazy but they just don't know the real me. They see me perform and if I'm tired or feeling low they say I don't care ... I'm mad. No one really bothers to look behind the mask. I am a human being too. I hurt and feel as you but the public see me as a 'performer' and not as a person. I have to pretend ... to smile and pretend."

– Nina Simone

Atlantic City, where she began singing in various nightclubs in order to make rent. Afraid that her mother would disapprove, she adopted the stage name "Nina Simone"—Nina from a nickname a boyfriend had given her, and Simone after French actress Simone Signoret.

Nina began recording under her new name in the late 1950s, and by the mid-1960s she had become known as a key voice in the Civil Rights Movement. She used her music to speak out against the harsh realities of a racially segregated country, and to express outrage at the state of the nation. For many, her words gave voice to a community that was, in many ways, forced to be silent.

In 1963, upon learning of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., Nina sat down and wrote "Mississippi Goddam" in just one hour, noting that if she hadn't turned her anger into song, she would have likely gone out and killed someone. The song would go on to become a rallying cry among people in the Civil Rights Movement, and continues to live as a testament to the raw emotion being felt by the country at the time.

"Can't you see it? Can't you feel it? It's all in the air. I can't stand the pressure much longer. Somebody say a prayer. Alabama's gotten me so upset. Tennessee made me lose my rest. And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam." – Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam" Nina's songs demonstrated an anger with the status quo, and she began to call for black liberation by any means necessary. She became a frequent performer and speaker at civil rights marches and protests, continuing to lend her voice to the movement.

Upon learning of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Nina wrote "Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)" in which she sang, *"My people are rising;* they're living in lies. Even if they have to die, even if they have to die at the moment they know what life is, even at that one moment that ya' know what life is. If you have to die, it's all right cause you know what life is. You know what freedom is for one moment of your life."

Despite the role that Nina's music played in the racial awakening of America in the 1950s and '60s, she grew increasingly frustrated by the nation's divisive racial politics. As the '60s drew to a close, she spent much of her time abroad, traveling and living in various countries across Europe, Africa and the Caribbean before eventually deciding to settle down in the South of France.

"I wish I knew how it would feel to be free. I wish I could break all the chains holdin' me. I wish I could say all the things that I should say. Say 'em loud say 'em clear, for the whole 'round world to hear"

– Nina Simone, "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free"

She continued to record music and tour and remained a best-selling artist, selling more than one million records globally during the last decade of her life.

Throughout her career, Nina recorded hundreds of songs and released a wealth of recordings. Despite the multitude of her work, she was known to have said repeatedly that her Civil Rights songs were "the important ones." Indeed, it is these songs, more than any of her others, that define her voice as a musician, as an activist, and as a woman.

THE TIMELINE: NINA'S ART & AMERICA'S ACTIVISM

Art is not created in a vacuum. And societal change does not happen without significant cultural markers. Follow this timeline to learn about how the art of Nina Simone was in direct response to the times in which she lived.

1933 Nina Simone is born Eunice Kathleen Waymon on the morning of February 26 in Tyron, North Carolina. She is the sixth of eight children.

1948 President Harry S. Truman signs Executive Order 9981, which legally desegregates the U.S. military.

1950 After graduating from high school, Eunice is denied a scholarship to The Curtis Institute of Music. Eunice becomes convinced this rejection was due to her race.

1954 The Supreme Court rules in Brown v. Board of Education that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.

1954 Eunice takes a job as a singer/ pianist at the Midtown Bar and Grill in Atlantic City, N.J., and decides to use the stage name Nina Simone.

1955 Emmett Till, visiting family in Mississippi, is brutally lynched after speaking to a white woman. He is 14 years old.

1956 Nina spends time in Philadelphia, recording material that will later be released on her album *Young, Gifted and Black*.

1957 Martin Luther King, Jr. and a group of Civil Rights leaders establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which will become a major organizing force in the Civil Rights movement. King is elected its first president and espouses his ideals of nonviolence.

In October 1966, two young political activists, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Unlike many of the other political and social groups of the time, the BPP took a militant stance, advocating self-defense by whatever means necessarv.

Newton and Seale fought to establish revolutionary socialism and defense of black communities through largescale community organizing and community-based programming. The two asserted that the economic and political roots of racism were effects of a larger oppressive regime. In order to achieve liberation for all black people, the BPP believed it necessary to overthrow the entire capitalist system.

While the BPP gained notoriety for their armed patrols in black communities as a way to monitor the police and cut back on police brutality, they also organized a number of community programs to strengthen black neighborhoods. The BPP created free breakfast programs for young

children, established free medical clinics, worked with the homeless to find housing, gave away free clothing and food, and supported black-owned business and institutions.

Under the leadership of Chairwoman Elaine Brown in the 1970s (the first and only woman to lead the party), the BPP worked to gain more mainstream political power, with varied success. Most notably, Brown and the BPP worked to organize a largescale voter registration drive in 1975, during which they registered more than 90.000 black Democrats, who helped elect Lionel Wilson the first black mayor of Oakland. During this time, the BPP also founded the Panther Liberation School to help educate black youth.

While the BPP was incredibly popular among the black community, quickly growing to 5,000 fulltime party workers, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover described the BPP as "the number one threat to the internal security of the United States."

Due to external attacks and internal party divisions, the influence of the BPP began to seriously decline by the mid 1970s. By 1980, membership in the BPP had decreased significantly, and the party was unable to maintain many of their programs. By the time founder Huev P. Newton was murdered in 1989, the BPP was no more.

Members of the Black Panther Party (Washington State Archives)



"I don't want a > C movement or a cause. SOCIOLO I want a home. I want somewhere I can walk into my space and not have to look over my shoulder or hold my HH breath ... I wanna sit in the horizon somewhere and watch the sun rise BOIS AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS and set."

- Nina, Sunset Baby

So laments Nina, the protagonist of *Sunset Baby*, during a disagreement with Damon, her boyfriend and partner in crime. Nina's feeling of exhaustion and of being torn between two competing worlds is not an entirely imagined phenomenon. More than 100 years before Dominique Morisseau sat down to write the play Sunset Baby, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of a similar concept he called double consciousness.

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W.E.B.

First explored by Du Bois in his seminal work The Souls of Black Folk, double consciousness describes the impression that your personal identity is being divided among several different arenas. This fractured sense of self makes it difficult for the individual to create a single, unified identity.

In light of a national racial history that is fraught with tension and hostility, Du Bois argues that it is impossible to reconcile the racial traumas (slavery, Jim Crow laws, etc.) that define America's national identity, stating that "one ever feels his two-nessan American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."

Du Bois used this theory to describe the experience of black Americans as feeling torn between their racial and national identities (later theorists

1959 Nina moves to New York City and releases her first official album, Little Girl Blue.

1963 On June 12, 37-year-old Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, is murdered outside of his home. On September 15, four young girls attending Sunday school are killed when a bomb explodes at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

1963 Nina performs her first solo concert at Carnegie Hall. Later that year, she composes "Mississippi Goddam" in the wake of the Birmingham Church bombing.

1965 On February 21, Malcolm X is assassinated while giving a speech at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. He is 39 years old.

1965 Nina speaks and performs at the Selma to Montgomery marches highlighting racial injustice in the South. Like Malcolm X, Nina advocates for violence in overcoming Jim Crow laws.

1966 The Black Panther Party is founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale.

1968 On April 4. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated as he stands on a balcony outside his hotel room in Memphis, Tenn. He is 39 years old.

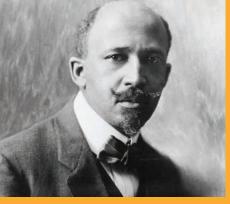
1968 Nina pens the song "Why (The King of Love Is Dead)" after the assassination of Dr. King.

1969 Nina releases the song "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" in memory of her close friend and mentor Lorraine Hansberry. The song quickly becomes a Civil Rights anthem.

1970 Nina leaves the United States. She will spend the rest of her life living in various foreign locations including Liberia, Switzerland and the Netherlands, ultimately settling in France.

2003 Nina Simone passes away at the age of 70.

"One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."



W.E.B. Du Bois in 1917. (*Photo: United States Library of Congress*)

would throw other aspects of identity such as gender and sexuality into the mix). Du Bois argued that as blacks living in America have had to deal with a society that has historically repressed and devalued their identity, it has become difficult for them to unify their black identity with their American identity. According to Du Bois, the result of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others" is that black Americans become more prone to suffering from a damaged sense of self, a self that is shaped by the misperceptions and stigmatization of society.

Even today, American culture is fed by a media that sells us images of black men as athletes, rappers or criminals, resulting in a mainstream America that more easily perceives black men and women as more violent or dangerous.

In the string of high profile deaths of black men and women that have

– W.E.B. Du Bois

plaqued the country over the past two years. frequent is the notion that the black victim was somehow dangerous or threatening, and was, in some way or another, at fault in their death. The New York Times famously described 17-year-old Trayvon Martin as "no angel" in his obituary. Twelve-vear-old Tamir Rice was killed by a police officer because he seemed to be a full-grown man and the toy gun he was playing with was thought to pose a direct threat. Sandra Bland was thrown to the ground and arrested because of the "attitude" she took up after being pulled over by a police officer. For many, double consciousness becomes a side effect of living in a society that often labels you based on the color of your skin first, and sometimes, exclusively.

This concept of double consciousness remains increasingly relevant today, as many black Americans continue to attempt to reconcile their identity as black individuals and American citizens. One has to look no further than the rallying cry of #BlackLivesMatter to recognize the continued awareness that black Americans possess of their blackness and the continued struggle to feel unified in their hyphenated identity.

"The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost ... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American."

- W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk



During rehearsals, Artistic Director PJ Powers (PJP) talked with playwright Dominique Morisseau (DM) about the inspiration of history, the themes of *Sunset Baby*, using her voice as an artist, and more.

This is an edited version. To read the complete interview, visit timelinetheatre.com/sunset_baby/resources.htm.

(PJP) One of the many reasons TimeLine has been so drawn to your writing is because your plays explore history in such provocative and personal ways. What draws you toward historical stories and issues?

PLAYWRIGHT DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU

(DM) I like to understand things that come before me that have a strong impact on my life and upbringing. I like knowing untold histories, things that are a part of my fabric and the fabric of my community, that inform our social structure. My character Damon says "the past is bullshit, only thing that matters is the present." While I find that a valid point from his point of view, that's almost the antithesis of what I truly believe. The past is everything about what the future can become. I want to bring it out and learn from it in the most interesting and human ways possible.

(PJP) What was your inspiration for *Sunset Baby*?

(DM) Several things. First, a picture my father took of me as a baby sitting in the sunset. Second, Tupac Shakur. He is the child of revolutionaries and I always wanted to know how someone raised by such forward-thinking people could be so brilliant and destructive at the same time. And third, the various freedom fighters of the 1960s and '70s and my curiosity about the things they lost to try to gain the world.

(PJP) Much of this play deals with the relationship between father and daughter—something that is surprisingly underexplored in comparison to the number of father/son plays or even mother/daughter plays. What led you to make this relationship so central?

(DM) I have a very close and complex relationship with my father. I'm a daddy's girl and a true reflection of my old man, for better or worse. I recognize the complexities and the love and fight that can exist between a father and a daughter. There is a likeness between the two that is not often acknowledged but I am living this likeness, so I am intrigued to explore it in my work.

(PJP) Among other things, *Sunset Baby* explores generational shifts in activism. Since the play premiered in 2013, we've seen another wave of activism with the emergence of Black Lives Matter. I'm curious if you view the play any differently, in light of the ongoing shifts in activism?

(DM) I do. I realize that things continue forward and we keep repeating history until we settle the wounds. There is a strong connection that I'm only just discovering around the Black Liberation Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement. We are continuing to respond to police violence and disenfranchisement of Black and Brown people as is evidenced in Ferguson and Baltimore and New York and most recently Chicago.

I never wanted this play to be about current issues. I was hoping it could be an examination of the past. But the past is strangely becoming the present again. Repeating history until we settle the wounds "The only way to remind us of our collective humanity is to keep pushing for more stories from the disenfranchised to have equal voice and support socially as those in positions of privilege. Balance of storytelling is all of our responsibility because we all ultimately benefit from it."

(PJP) I read an article in *The New York Times* yesterday about the ways Black Lives Matter is affecting the upcoming election, and I was struck by a quote from Allen Kwabena Frimpong, an organizer with the New York chapter, who said: "There's nothing wrong with being decentralized and dispersed. The problem is being disconnected. If we are going to build political power, we have to build connections." It stuck out to me because your play, to me, beautifully examines the challenges of building (or repairing) connections. What's your take on this quote?

(DM) I think it's brilliant. I might counter that there is great issue with being decentralized and dispersed. That can be damaging to a movement and a people, but mostly because it allows us to become disconnected. So I think Allen is pretty great about highlighting that connection between generations, agendas, socio-economic status, etc. Standing on our common ground is how we make effective and positive change happen collectively.

(PJP) I've read interviews where you've eloquently discussed your role in a movement—as part of a revolution of African American playwrights who are helping to change the face (and topics) of the American theatre. Can you discuss what you think your voice is in this ongoing evolution?

(DM) Right now I'm just aware that my job is to speak the truth of my experience and my corner of the world. I can't be afraid of that truth or mute it in any way, even as it becomes confronting for others or exposing of myself. The only way to remind us of our collective humanity is to keep pushing for more stories from the disenfranchised to have equal voice and support socially as those in positions of privilege. Balance of storytelling is all of our responsibility because we all ultimately benefit from it.

(PJP) Nina Simone's life and music is clearly a source of inspiration in this play. What has her music and legacy meant to you?

(DM) As of late, in light of my recent outspokenness in my industry, Nina has become even more of an inspiration to me. She gives me power and liberation in her music and in her legacy of standing up to the world's injustice and defining her art by her passion for justice. I also worry about things as I learned through her documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone?* that she was tortured by the ostracizing that happened to her as a result of her firm political beliefs. I recognize how much we can damage artists by leaving them on the frontlines to take all of the critical bullets for us, and I try to move into a new model of social unity and healing for myself as an artist as a result of her example.

(PJP) With so many different opportunities—playwriting, acting, writing for Showtime's *Shameless* how do you decide what projects to pursue?

(DM) I typically pursue what moves or stirs my soul. Not always, but mostly. I have to find my way into a show or a story. If I can't find my way in, if some part of it doesn't connect with my passion or curiosity, or if I simply don't connect to the vision or am not moved by the subject, I can't participate in it. And it isn't that I think it is less valuable, I just don't imagine bringing any additional value. When I know I can bring value, dignity, integrity, honor, passion, fight, and humor to a story because I understand its world or its people, I am usually all in.

On Friday, March 18, 2016 you are invited to Step Into Time—TimeLine's biggest and most important party of the year.



YOU ARE INVITED!

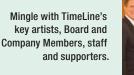
Enjoy an elegant evening on the town at the luxurious Ritz Carlton Chicago, including dinner, drinks and dancing in the ballroom.

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Be among the few who see the musical entertainment created exclusively for the event by Associate Artistic Director Nick Bowling.

And help raise the funds critical to TimeLine's ongoing success.

TimeLine's Step Into Time gala is an essential part of our annual fundraising efforts and a unique and interesting way for you to play an active role in supporting TimeLine's mission and programs, including productions like *Sunset Baby*, TimeLine's Living History Education Program in Chicago Public Schools, and so much more. Tickets start at \$400 and seating is limited. Read more on the back cover of this *Backstory*, and visit *timelinetheatre.com/ step_into_time* for all the details.

Join us on Friday, March 18th for a historic celebration!

Pictured from top: An elegant table set for Step Into Time; TimeLine Board President John Sirek, Managing Director Elizabeth K. Auman, Board Vice President and Step Into Time Chair Eileen LaCario, and Artistic Director PJ Powers at last year's event; silent auction tables; singer Kelly Lamont entertains guests at Step Into Time: American Bandstand 1957 last season.

BACKSTORY: THE CREDITS

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Sunset Baby *production image by* Grip Design, Inc.

Backstory is published four times each season.

Our Mission:

TimeLine Theatre presents stories inspired by history that connect with today's social and political issues.

Our collaborative artistic team produces provocative theatre and educational programs that engage, entertain and enlighten.



FRIDAY, MARCH 18, 2016 6:00 PM - 10:30 PM THE RITZ-CARLTON, CHICAGO 160 EAST PEARSON STREET, CHICAGO

* STEP INTO TIME IS TIMELINE'S * BIGGEST EVENT OF THE YEAR

Celebrate TimeLine's unique mission of exploring history by stepping into another era for an elegant evening that raises funds vital to our work.

This season, we'll take guests back to April 1977 when a crowd gathered outside 254 West 54th Street in Manhattan hoping for a chance to enter what would soon become the most famous nightclub in the world. The global epicenter of the disco craze, Studio 54 was the playground of the flamboyant, the exotic and the famous at the height of the sexual revolution. We'll celebrate a year of amazing music, movies and more with spirits to set the mood, a Silent Auction and Raffle, a seated gourmet dinner, and entertainment created especially for the event. Like that infamous Studio 54 opening night, this party is sure to be a night to remember!

All net proceeds support the mission and programs of TimeLine Theatre.

More information at TIMELINETHEATRE.COM/ STEP_INTO_TIME