

Interview: 'Blood at the Root' Playwright Dominique Morisseau on the Power of Art, Language, and How Music Unites Us

Dominique Morisseau's *Blood at the Root* uses the case of the Jena Six as a template to examine the origin of prejudice and racism. Set in a high school in the American South, the play shows teenagers going about their daily lives seemingly unaware of the pain they cause to others with their irresponsible use of words, cultural references, and lack of social and historical conscience. It's a devastating work made even more urgent by the post-show discussions that occur after each performance. This brand of theatre that's educational and highly sophisticated in its artistic execution is what's made Ms. Morisseau such an important voice in modern theatre.

How do you turn the story of the Jena Six into something theatrical? What was your entry point so to speak?

First of all, I had been bothered by it since 2007 when I worked for an educational theatre company, Creative Arts Team at CUNY. My colleague and I did a modified version of the style we use in *Blood at the Root* in response to the Jena Six. I found that style of responding in theatre to headlines and using them in the poetry of the piece, and started doing something the second the issue came up. By the time I worked on the play in 2013 it was organic, I wanted to revisit that device theatre style.

Why was it important for you to tell this story from the perspective of the kids?

First of all I work with a lot of teenagers and youths in New York City, and their voice is strong to me, and their perspective matters. Second, this happened to teenagers, it's easy to dismiss them and turn things to adults and the administration. I think one of the things that disturbed me the most when I first heard about the case was that it was young people, and their lack of sensitivity around things like nooses and the lack of exposure to the history of racism was disturbing. I felt they had been failed and I wanted to put the power back in their hands.

There's a very prominent turntable in *Detroit 67*, and a very prominent boombox in *Blood at the Root* that sends one of the most powerful messages. However now we live in a society in which we mostly consume music alone, how do you think this has affected the way we perceive the world?

My husband is a hip-hop artist so music is important in our household and our family, and how we connect and relate through music is important to us. I think how people relate to music is important in the world, I was at a live music show last night, seeing a very talented singer, and he had an open prayer at the end of his performance that was so generous and healing for the audience members. I thought in that moment we were all being healed and connected through this man's music. We were all having an intimate exchange together. Music inspires activism because it unites us through common emotions and issues. Music can help evoke the emotional picture, through language and lyrics it creates a vivid portrait of how we're all connected and how an issue affects us all collectively. Music can unite people and inspire them to be upset about the same thing, and seek change.

I saw the play the day after Beyoncé's *Lemonade* came out, and there was a very interesting conversation going on about how important it was that she wasn't trying to be universal, but rather making music about the black female experience, for other black women. I really admired that, as a man I know it would be impossible for me to fully connect to what she's saying, but I respect her message. Are you similarly interested in making theatre for specific audiences, like would *Blood at the Root* be more for younger audiences for instance? I'm asking because after the show, during the Q&A many people pointed out they were embarrassed to admit they hadn't fully "gotten" the show.

Do you mean they didn't know what was going on racially? They didn't know about the history and the cultural references?

The one that stuck with me most, was someone who asked if the white actors were playing black characters. The idea never crossed my mind, but I figured this person who was sitting feet away from me had experienced something completely different. Other people asked if these characters were based on the exact same people or if they were fictional versions of the real teenagers.

I don't write to exclude anyone. To write about a specific experience is not an exclusionary practice, so I want to state that first. I think the more specifically a writer can write, the better the writing. If I'm writing about young people and their world, I better be specific about high school students and what's on their mind. If I'm writing about a region, and the region is the key, then I have to make sure I get all the regionalisms right. It doesn't mean that someone not from that region, age group or generation should not be able to connect. In fact, even when you say you admire Beyoncé, but as man you can't connect, I think you can connect, you might not be able to personally relate to the things black women go through, but you certainly can connect to the struggle. I think a connection to somebody just means finding a way in. People are connected when they find common ground, even though you don't have all the same specific cultural concerns, maybe something similar in your life is happening that will help you connect. I think the greatest work connects people. The power of art is helping you find a way in, a point of connection with someone you know nothing of before you meet them for the first time.

With *Blood at the Root*, even if you didn't know the story of the Jena Six, this was to give you an emotional experience similar to the one I had when I first found out about this story. It's not to fully educate you about the Jena Six, but to inspire you to seek your own education about the Jena Six. It's not a biographical play, but knowing that kind of stuff can help people find their point of connection.

I don't think I used the word "connect" properly, but you answered my question just the same. Thank you.

It's alright, I totally know what you meant.

I think this is the perfect segue to ask about the way in which you use words in the show. I found it so powerful for instance that one of the characters was wearing a hoodie with the word "fearless" which we could read when the garment was zipped up. But when she opened it, it had two words: "fear" and "less" which are so negative. Similarly we hear people talk about "the f word", "the n word". The play made me so conscious about how we use words. Did writing this play make you even more conscious about the things you say and even the words you think?

Absolutely. In all the things I write I feel the weight of words. Language is a very powerful tool to me. I'm very conscious of language and how we use it all the time. Typically I think that miscommunication happens when they don't use language properly. Something about the language they used didn't make space to fit in both experiences. Language can be a tool of empowerment and a tool of oppression. Language is a weapon, we don't carry the same sensitivity around certain words that others do, so we can dismiss them and not care. Our great unifier is not only in our actions, but our language and how we use it with each other.