



# ***Sunset Baby***

**By Dominique Morisseau  
Directed by Lou Bellamy**

**A Penumbra Theatre Company Production  
April 14 – May 8, 2016**

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

**Penumbra's 2015-2016 Season: Revolution Love**  
**A Letter from the Co-Artistic Directors**  
**Lou Bellamy and Sarah Bellamy**



The African American experience reveals unique insight into the triumphs and tribulations of humankind. At the core of black identity we find remarkable resilience and an unwavering commitment to social justice. We stand on the shoulders of giants — a proud legacy of millions who fought to survive and who kept the flame alive for the next generation. Some names we know and celebrate every year, others go unrecognized by the history books but are remembered and honored in the drumming of our hearts. Change does not happen overnight, or even in the life cycle of one generation. Progress is made in fits and starts but only through collective action do we see real advancement.

This season Penumbra offers you the opportunity to get involved. Hear from the very people who founded movements that shaped history, talk with local leaders, and meet others like yourself who love theatre and believe deeply in justice. At Penumbra, transformative art illuminates ways to move humanity forward with compassion — join us as we move from empathy to action, from emotion to solution. Ours is a brave, honest, intelligent, responsible, and hopeful community and there is a place for you here. Welcome.

## EDUCATIONAL TOOLS

### Welcome and How to Use this Tool

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

**Penumbra Theatre Company** occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

## THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

An exploratory essay by Sarah Bellamy

### The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

### Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or "mediums," to communicate meaning. The artist's effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed

by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist's "voice." Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist's perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as "artistic commentary." It conveys the artist's intent, or impetus for creating something.

### **The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist**

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will "read" (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—

it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

### **Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture**

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

### **Summary**

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

## HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

### An overview of the African American contribution to American theatre

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the African roots of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was The African Grove Theater in New York City. It was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.<sup>1</sup>

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel. These racist depictions would be reflected over and again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, William Wells Brown, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. Minstrelsy was very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in blackface would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to

<sup>1</sup> For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, Jim Crow, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors’ racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as The Harlem Renaissance. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by Willis Richardson.<sup>2</sup> Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes’ famous poem “Notes on Commercial Theater”:

You've taken my blues and gone --  
 You sing 'em on Broadway  
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
 And you fixed 'em  
 So they don't sound like me.  
 Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.  
 You also took my spirituals and gone  
 You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones  
 All kinds of Swing Mikados  
 And in everything but what's about me --  
 But someday somebody'll  
 Stand up and talk about me --  
 Black and beautiful --  
 And sing about me,  
 And put on plays about me!  
 I reckon it'll be  
 Me myself!  
 Yes, it'll be me.<sup>3</sup>

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Harold Cruse, Ray Durem, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (Lloyd Richards) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Lou Bellamy, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright August Wilson said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

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<sup>4</sup> August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

# SUNSET BABY

by Dominique Morisseau

Directed by Lou Bellamy

**About the Play:** Ashanti and Kenyatta met in the prime of their youth and at the pinnacle of their political consciousness. Beautiful, brave, and idealistic, they never imagined what would come of their Revolution: how it would be dismantled from the inside with drugs and conspiracy, how young intellectuals and activists would be brutalized in the streets, how the media would reduce them from caring community members to criminals. Three decades later, Kenyatta is searching for connection after being locked away in prison. During that time, the love of his life succumbed to a deadly combination of heartbreak and drugs. In the wake of so much loss and disappointment, one fire still burns – the light inside the child born of their passion – Nina. Will she be overcome by the ghosts of the past? Or, will she blaze a new trail, harnessing today’s revolutionary spirit?

## Characters

**NINA** – Black woman. Late 20s. Hard, quiet power, deeply guarded and nonetheless brilliant. Has a lifetime of walls up and will fight you before letting them down. Were she an animal, she’d be a dangerous panther. A robber and drug dealer, but in another life could lead a righteous revolution.

**KENYATTA** – Black man. 50s. Strong, quiet power, also deeply guarded. Almost a duplicate of Nina, except he has lost the hardness and is now navigating a softer version of himself. Riddled with guilt and desperate to break through Nina’s walls...and his own. A former political prisoner and Black revolutionary. Nina’s estranged father.

**DAMON** – Black or Latino man. 30s. Broad, street-smart, intelligent, and a drug dealer and robber. Has lost his hardness and is on the brink of retiring from the game. Nina’s partner-in-crime and boyfriend. Not a stereotype. A true, genuine, soon-to-be o-g. In another life, could be a helluva scholar...



**About the Playwright: Dominique Morisseau** is an alumnus of the Public Theater Emerging Writer’s Group, the Women’s Project Playwrights Lab, and Lark Playwrights’ Workshop. Among her playwriting credits are: *Detroit ’67* (Public Theater; Classical Theatre of Harlem/NBT; Northlight Theatre), *Sunset Baby* (Labyrinth Theater Co – NYC; Gate Theater- London), and *Follow Me To Nellie’s* (O’Neill; Premiere Stages). Her produced one-acts include: *Third Grade* (Fire This Time Festival); *Black at Michigan* (Cherry Lane); *Socks*; *Roses Are Played Out*; *Love and Nappiness* (Center Stage; ATH); *love.lies.liberation* (The Newgroup); *Bumrush* (Hip Hop Theater Festival); and *The Masterpiece* (Harlem9/HSA). Morisseau is currently developing a 3-play cycle about her hometown of Detroit, entitled “The Detroit Projects.” She is a Jane Chambers Playwriting Award honoree, a two-time NAACP Image Award recipient, a runner-up for the Princess Grace Award, a recipient of the Elizabeth George commission from South Coast Rep, a commendation honoree for the Primus Prize by the American Theatre Critics Association, winner of the Barrie and Bernice Stavis Playwriting Award, the Weissberger Award for Playwriting, the U of M – Detroit Center Emerging Leader Award, a Lark/PoNY (Playwrights of New York) Fellow, and a recent recipient of the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama. She is an artist that believes wholeheartedly in the power and strength of community.

## A Conversation with Playwright Dominique Morisseau on *Sunset Baby*

March 29, 2016

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth:** Let's begin by talking about your relationship with Penumbra! *Sunset Baby* is the second piece of yours that Penumbra has produced, and the company (in conjunction with Oregon Shakespeare Festival) has also commissioned you to write a piece about the Civil War. Lou Bellamy and Sarah Bellamy have been adamant about their commitment to nurturing your writing, and see such beauty, depth, grit, and authenticity in your plays. Your work is being done all across the country right now, which is fabulous. In the midst of all of that, what does your relationship with Penumbra, an African American theater company, mean?

**Dominique Morisseau:** I first got acquainted with Lou Bellamy when I saw his production of *Two Trains Running* at Signature Theatre two years ago, and actually it's one of my favorite productions. I just remember feeling that this is someone that has been in the world, someone who has been around and has helped to cultivate August Wilson's work. They [Bellamy and Penumbra] understand the lineage of this aesthetic.

I was then introduced to Penumbra as an institution by Dominic Taylor, who I met at the Black Women Playwrights Conference in Chicago. He was such a mad genius; he blew me and several other playwrights away. I got really excited about staying in touch with him and Penumbra. I submitted some of my earlier work to the company and have been in conversation with them for a very long time.

My relationship with Penumbra is ever evolving and I'm very excited to have them cultivate my work. I'm excited to have my work in their home because of the legacy of the institution, because of their commitment to celebrating and nurturing black playwrights and voices, and because I, as a playwright, come out of the tradition of the Black Arts Movement. Not because I was alive or practicing art during that time, but because the art of that time has influenced me. It's the first art that I got to know as a young actress, as a young potential playwright. It was the work of the Black Arts Movement that helped me find my voice as an artist. And so, the fact that they're committed to that and that voice is really special to me. There's not a lot of institutions in this country that are doing this work.

**SLW:** How does *Sunset Baby*, set in New York City, work in relationship to your Detroit trilogy, including *Detroit '67*, which we produced last year?

**DM:** It's independent of it. It's in New York. It's not connected to the Detroit trilogy. It's my edgiest play. I think all of my plays go onto the edges in different ways. They walk on the edges of societal norms in different ways. But I think *Sunset Baby* is one of the most unapologetic plays I've ever written. I think *Detroit '67* is also unapologetic. I've been told it's "unapologetically black," whatever that means, because no one should be apologizing for that. I guess it just means that, in a theatre continuum, it feels like it doesn't operate underneath that white gaze. I also think at some point in my life I have written under the black gaze. In *Sunset Baby* I am actually liberating myself of the white gaze *and* black gaze. Having my personal truth as *Detroit '67* also in many ways liberated me from the black gaze. The non-harsh way of using the n-word, for instance, become part of the relaxed colloquialism of their sacred basement. You know? I gave myself permission, during the time of writing *Detroit '67*, to stop policing black language and black dialect and start just let people speak for themselves. This was as opposed to me as a writer trying to control, fix, or edit the way that we speak. And so *Sunset Baby* is in many ways a continuation of that. In the Detroit trilogy, I wrote two out of three of those plays – *Detroit '67* and *Paradise Blue* – and then I took a break from the cycle to work on *Sunset Baby*. It was calling me in the middle of

the Detroit stuff to say, “Hey, this is a really important thing you thought of, and you need to follow this through.” So, I guess that’s one way it sits in the Detroit cycle.

The other way, is that *Detroit ‘67* was about this very revolutionary spirit that was brimming in the city, this spirit of not doing things status quo, not doing things the normal way, not following and accepting the slots we’ve been given socially, and trying to push back against that. *Sunset Baby* is doing very much of the same. *Detroit ‘67* is very much about the people with the dirt under their nails. That’s what I like to write. I like to write the people with the dirt under their nails. I’ve said that like a million times. The characters of *Detroit ‘67* are all hustlers. They’re working to try to find money off the books. They’re trying to keep their heads above water. They’re the hustlers! They don’t have 401K jobs, and neither do the characters in *Sunset Baby*. They’re the people who live in the cracks, and that are trying to hustle and survive. There’s a relationship between the movement or the rebellion that is the backdrop of *Detroit ‘67*, and the political movement that is the backdrop of *Sunset Baby*. I think they’re in conversation with each other even when they’re completely separate.

**SLW:** Why did you choose the term Black Liberation Movement, rather than the Black Power Movement or the Black Panthers? What kind of political or aesthetic freedom does that allow? Or is there something else in that choice?

**DM:** Yes, I’m glad you asked about that. I specifically call it the Black Liberation Movement because I think it’s a movement bigger than an organization. I did not want to make this some statement about the Panthers, or invoke an organization and make the issue small, and make those organizations targets for particular kinds of criticism. That wasn’t my goal at all. I also don’t want to try to speak for members of the organization. I don’t feel equipped to really try to put into words a specific organization, or people that were part of a specific organization. There were many Black Panthers, and even though a lot of famous ones will come to mind, I didn’t want to appropriate their struggle. I use the *many* struggles of the Black Panthers and of the Black Liberation Army as inspiration. People in the past have compared Ashanti X, Nina’s mother, for example, to Assata Shakur. And that would be a fair comparison. But I’m not telling Assata Shakur’s story, or anyone’s story. If her story comes to mind, if Elaine Brown’s comes to mind, then you’re in the right pocket of what kind of woman Ashanti X was. But I’m not telling any of their stories. She would just be a woman from a similar line of activism. So that was my choice. To speak to what a movement was about. My father wasn’t a Panther, but he was definitely inspired by, and took a lot of his politics from that movement. I think the movement is bigger than the organization.

**SLW:** At stake in Ashanti X’s life story is the place of women in the movement – symbolically, politically, and personally. What did they give, willingly and unwillingly? How were they positioned? What were their sacrifices? How will their daughters, this younger generation, accept or reject those same rules and roles? And where, if at all, do you see yourself in this genealogy?

**DM:** I’ve always been inspired by the women of the Black Liberation Movement. Ashanti X wasn’t necessarily a Panther. She probably was more likely a Black Liberation Army member. So even though I use some of the facts based on both – the Black Liberation Army, and the Black Panther Movement – there were smaller organizations that were a part of that movement. I’ve always been inspired by women who were in the movement, the women who were the backbone of many movements; the women of the Civil Rights Movement, and of many movements that didn’t necessarily get their due or their respect during the movement because it was dominated by men. Even as we talk about them with a lot of reverence and romanticism right now, during that moment I don’t know if they felt revered. I think a lot of times they were trying to challenge their roles and

make themselves heard, not only to a white dominated power structure, but also to a black male dominated power structure within the movement.

I've always taken a lot of inspiration from Assata Shakur's novel that I read when I was young and in college and trying to find myself. She really helps me to do that, as does Angela Davis' activism. I've also taken a lot of inspiration from black women poets during this time period. So, for me, my more direct predecessors are the Nicki Giovannis and Sonia Sanchezes. That's who I was reading in my late teen/early college years that helped me to find my voice as a writer. So, I've always had a connection to them. They have helped me position myself in the world in a certain kind of a way.

Within the play, Nina has a sense of protection around her mother and rejection around her father, and that is a continuation of the idea that the women of the movement were not always honored and protected. I think she has carried on the task of providing her mother with the protection she feels her mother did not get earlier on. And the rejection is not just with Nina's [relationship to her father] but there's a rejection on the part of the younger generation towards the older generation's philosophies and ideals about the world. I wanted to put those things at war with each other, and find where they're similar and where they're completely different.

But even for Nina, my character descriptions in the play note that she is *this* today but she could be *that* tomorrow. She's a drug dealer today. Tomorrow she's leading her own revolution. She is a product of these people. I think everyone is on the brink of their own revolution, so I wanted to explore a daughter's grappling. How does the next generation move forward and take the good stuff and not take the baggage? I think that that's what she's trying to negotiate. She has a lot of the political astuteness. She might even be sharper than her father, I don't know. But how does she take that political astuteness and reconcile it with the personal war she's having inside of herself? So that's how I envisioned that relationship. And that's how I envisioned her character is grappling with those things, and needing to find a real place of healing to get to her own revolution.

So, how does that relate to me personally? My husband is a hip hop artist. I listen to a lot of hip hop; I pay attention to women in hip hop, and I pay attention to the journey of women in hip hop, and their over-sexualization. The really tough women that I know in hip hop, the really strong and tough women who are less "market" and who are underground, have a masculinity about them. Not necessarily in their looks or in anything, but just in the force with which they express their ideas and intelligence. I see myself in that continuum. When you hear a woman like Nicki Minaj talk, it's actually really brilliant. And you have Lil' Kim. I come from the era of Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown. Nina is Foxy Brown. She's Brooklyn. She does not speak in her high register, she speaks in her low register. She speaks like a man, because no man is going to listen to a woman speaking in her higher register. They're just not going to listen to that in any kind of authoritative way.

It means a lot to me that some women have abandoned the ideals particular to hip hop. I feel that hip hop has taken on the rebellious spirit of the political movement preceding them, but it has abandoned the socialist philosophy and has adopted a more capitalistic mentality. It has blended the "fuck the authority" ethos with capitalism, and that's a really weird thing, because it has this rebellious spirit of the Black Liberation Movement, but it has also this "gotta get mine" mentality which I think is a complete abandonment of what the Black Liberation Movement's philosophy was.

So for me, as a woman, this play is about finding where our power is and what we can take back. How can we go back into the past and shape our identity based on the things that we want, the things that are healthy. I can go back into my own life and look at my father, because I have a relationship with my dad that wasn't always easy, but I'm very close to my father. So I can go back and say, "Okay, I'm just like my father. Here are the things that I

want to take from him and these are the things I want to leave. These are the admirable traits in him I see in myself that I want to continue to hone. This is the baggage. This is the painful stuff from him that I want to heal. He may not have learned to heal it, but I want to learn to heal it, so that I can just have all of the best stuff.” And that’s what anybody should try to do – just try to take the best stuff from their parents and leave the worst.

**SLW:** This play, perhaps more than any other this season, embodies and illuminates our season theme of “Revolution Love.” How does it resonate for you in this piece? What are the things these characters have done for love? And what love was lost in the process? How do they hold those two things - revolution and love – in tension?

**DM:** I think everything stated in the play is the truth. I find myself saying that a lot about the plays and my characters. I think each of the characters is telling the truth the way they know it. You don’t have to agree with their philosophy, but they are not lying about their philosophy. I don’t really write people that lie. I’m not interested in lying. I mean sure, [in *Detroit* ‘67] Lank didn’t tell Chelle he was going to spend the money on the bar, but he didn’t *lie*. I like people working out their version of the truth. And so everyone in this play that says “I love you,” means it. Which is probably really only Damon, because Kenyatta can’t say it, and neither can Nina really. But I believe the other things they’re saying are true, which is Kenyatta saying to Nina, “We named you these things. I wanted to name you. I wanted to shape your future. I made you and I wanted to see you become great. I wanted to give you the best life had. And to do that means that I had to fight to change the world that you were in, because the world we brought you into is not the world I want you grow up in. I was willing to not be present in your life to make the world the right world for you.” And yet that idealism - it didn’t really pan out. Because, it turns out, being present *is* part of making the best world. That motivation I think is true for him. That is what drove him: that he’s always had a penchant for justice. When you have a child, it doesn’t take away your penchant for justice. It might make it stronger. It’s just about how he defines it.

Other people have other ideas about how he’s [Kenyatta’s] going about his world. Somebody in London really casually said, “Speak more about how he’s a homegrown terrorist. Do you have anything else you want to say about the terrorism?” I said, “Whoa, whoa, hold up. That’s *your* phrase. Don’t put that in my mouth. I’ve never called them terrorists and don’t quote me like that. Don’t try to make me say that, because that’s not anything I’ve ever said. That might be your point of view on their style of activism, but that’s *your* point of view and not mine.”

I realized that that to me, the tactics by which somebody goes about changing the world can be very drastic if they’re under drastic conditions. I feel that love can drive that, but there’s also fear and danger and destruction that also drives that. One of the other things I wanted to explore is trauma. Because trauma gets in the way of saying “I love you.” Trauma gets in the way of being able to be emotionally available for someone. Trauma is a part of the sacrifice that activists and people in the movement go through, and this untreated trauma spills into the next generation.

**SLW:** While reading this play, I thought of Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor’s term *survivance*. He distinguishes it from mere survival by saying that “Survival is a response; survivance is a standpoint, a worldview, and a presence...survivance is resistance and hermeneutics.” What I think he articulates is a kind of self-reflexive Native presence that takes a stand, challenges dominant expectations, and is in itself a process of interpretation. Is this a tale of survivance, do you think? And if so, why is that important?

**DM:** Absolutely. I am moved in my writing by survival. I’m just moved by that. And I think that what makes someone a survivor, what they go through and how they maintain is what I find inspiration in. But I’m also

intrigued by the kind of things people have to do to survive. We often criticize the *choices* people make in their survival, but we don't often criticize the *conditions* that put them in those desperate surviving modes. I'm super interested in things people have to break their backs for, and how they can figure out their way. And I'm interested in when it gets desperate: survival at all costs. That's a theme I'm interested in. I'm interested in those kinds of people. I'm attracted to what makes us resilient.

Damon and Nina are some *survivors*. That's Nina's attraction to Damon. He's someone who knows how to find his way through life, and won't be broken by tough circumstances. He will find a way to take what would normally break someone and find a way to make it work for him instead. For all of his dysfunction, and probably not being a healthy partner for her, that is one gift that he gives that is of value to her and to their relationship.

I'm very attracted to the spirit of survivance, and again, surviving the trauma of certain social conditions. Surviving the trauma of a social movement that is government infiltrated and attacked. It's like [the movement's survivors are] war veterans. It seriously is *war*. It's a homegrown war. We look at third world countries and we call things they're going through civil war. It's nothing different than what was going on in these people's movements and it's nothing different than what's still going on in the Black Lives Matter movement.

I never really thought that *Sunset Baby* or *Detroit '67* would be in conversation with what was happening now. Because neither was a contemporary play. I didn't realize how much *Sunset Baby* was speaking to the current activism we're seeing in the country, particularly with the Black Lives Matter movement and the ways in which the leaders of that movement are targeted. Also how the leaders of that movement are women, and the ways in which those leaders, the movement, the protestors and the activists all get tainted. If we haven't learned something from the past, all those things could create a new trauma for the current activists, because it's a lot to put yourself out there on the line. That costs a lot. Ultimately, I'm interested in what that costs the survivors of that trauma, to have given themselves so openly, and so desperately to a greater cause.



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**Stephanie Lein Walseth** is the Director of Inquiry for Penumbra Theatre Company. Her tenure with Penumbra began in 2007, and since then she has served the organization in various capacities, from August Wilson Fellow, to Summer Institute Coordinator and Instructor, to Education Programs Manager. She recently completed her PhD in Theatre Historiography at the University of Minnesota, and her research focuses on the cultural poetics and politics of contemporary African American, Native American, and Asian American theatre. In addition to her work with Penumbra, Dr. Lein Walseth has worked professionally as a theatre educator, administrator, actor, director, dramaturg, and stage manager throughout the Twin Cities.

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## A Conversation with Director Lou Bellamy on *Sunset Baby*

March 28, 2016

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth:** Dominique Morisseau is one of the hottest playwrights in the country right now. Can you talk about Penumbra's commitment to nurturing her work? How did you meet her, and what do you see in her and her writing that has prompted this kind of relationship and support?

**Lou Bellamy:** At one time in the recent past we had funds to sponsor a playwright development program. The head of that program was Dominic Taylor, and Dominic would choose plays to be worked on so that a playwright could hear them read by professional actors and get dramaturgical criticism and so forth. Well, Dominique was one of the playwrights who was chosen, with a play called *Follow Me to Nellie's*. That's been some years ago – it was before she turned out to be the phenomenon she's turned out to be. And I think that speaks to two things: one, we have to be able to take chances on writers, because you never know what they're going to end up being or what they might grow into, and two, that Penumbra's intellectual acumen seems to allow us to identify a kind of potential heft and truth inside of black writing, and she had that from the very beginning in that rough piece. I read something – I think it was Ben Brantley who said there were echoes of August Wilson [in her writing]. Well, [laughter] there's echoes of August Wilson in everybody.

To me, she reminds me more of an Ed Bullins. It might seem odd to say that, but Ed put characters on stage unadorned. They were as I know black culture to be, rather than inside of a classical structure like August would write them. I mean, when you call someone "Troy," you're calling in a kind of nomenclature and identification that's intentional. Although Wilson doesn't sacrifice the conversation and the way in which the people interact, but his plays have that sort of structure. Ed Bullins' structure was just completely, as I said, unadorned. He would, for instance, at the beginning of his plays he'd write, "This play is about *some* black people." You know what I mean? It was just...there was a kind of a raggedy truth that was in many of his characters, and Dominique, for me, echoes that ragged truth. She is sophisticated, but the form hasn't superseded the content. She's a woman, and she sees the world from a woman's perspective. She also has an ax to grind about Detroit. That's her home, and she feels strongly about it.

**SLW:** How does *Sunset Baby*, set in New York City, work in relationship to Morisseau's Detroit trilogy?

**LB:** What I think is that the specifics, or let's say the *geography*, of the African American experience may change. But, the antecedents, the things that are deepest about us, that define us, are very similar whether we live in Detroit, in Louisiana, or New York. These are primarily people that come from the soil, they've been farmers. My daddy used to say, "Everybody's got a relative who's stepped in mule shit." So that means they've been behind the plow. Those things still inform who we are. The liberation struggle for instance, which is part of this play that we're talking about, takes a particular form in New York and a different form in Oakland than it did in Louisiana. But it has the same costs for families no matter where it is. I recognize black folks wherever they are and I suspect that Dominique does as well.

We've commissioned her to write a play on the Civil War. You know, and this is a complicated existence, this African American existence. For example, do you know about those black folks that are up in Nova Scotia? There's a whole community of folks up there – these are people who fought for King George in the Revolution and when they lost, they had to get out of here [laughter]. Black folks are everywhere, yet they are always recognizable. I think that August called it the "blood memory." It seems to me there is a bit of a common

experience that at least gives us an understanding of African Americans and Africans in different contexts, and I think she's tapped into that.

**SLW:** This play, perhaps more than any other this season, embodies and illuminates our season theme of "Revolution Love." How does it resonate here?

**LB:** This revolution that we're talking about has been a long one – it began when the first slaves were placed on a plantation and began to break up tools, or do work slow-downs, or poison their master, or whatever it was they were doing – so the revolution has been going on for quite some time. The incarnation of it that we're talking about since the Black Arts Movement, which was a sister of the Black Power Movement, brought in a number of different factions of American black society. There were, in this revolutionary movement, people off the street whom the revolution saved. It gave them a place to be, a cause, it cleaned them up off of dope, and heroin and all that sort of stuff. On the other side of the spectrum, there was another group of individuals who embraced the revolution who were intellectuals and very, very learned people high in government and education. We tend to think of it from the bottom up when we think of revolution, but this one as I know it had both of those elements operating. It had an intellectual wing and a grassroots wing that sort of met, and I haven't seen that coalescing of those socioeconomic or intellectual classes since then. We've got a case now where you see African Americans moving to the suburbs and losing some of that cohesiveness that made community. Although the community that existed may have been defined by racism, it still held them together in a kind of a way, and they're now atomized. It's a little different.

But this play, for me, gives theatrical and emotional representation of the cost of being a revolutionary. The lead character's father, Kenyatta, was imprisoned for holding up an armored truck to get some money to support the revolution in some sort of way, and he did prison time and would not divulge the names of the other people. And what then happened is that he couldn't raise his daughter because he was in prison. His wife turned to drugs and so forth. All of this happened because of his role in the revolution. There are far reaching ramifications, and the destruction of families. As J. Edgar Hoover and his ilk began to infiltrate these revolutionary organizations, they sowed distrust. There were informers and it was just a horrible time.

And you know it is still going on. Obama being in Cuba for instance, I find really interesting, because Assata Shakur was down there. She's the woman who was accused of killing a cop execution-style in New York, and she escaped from the police, broke out of jail and went down to Cuba. People are still being effected by the acts that they did in the name of revolution a long time ago. I heard a Ted Cruz say that "The first thing I will do when I am president is find Assata Shakur," (they used her slave name, which I can't remember) "and bring her to justice." You see again that relationship of the power structure and its views of revolutionary acts: they are crimes and people must be punished for them.

**SLW:** Why do you think Morisseau names it the Black Liberation Movement, rather than the Black Power Movement or the Black Panthers? What kind of political or aesthetic freedom does that allow?

**LB:** I think it's clear that the *model* is the Black Panthers, but there were revolutionaries and people doing revolutionary things that didn't identify as Panthers, so that [her choice to name the movement the Black Liberation Movement] I think lets in more of that broad-based effort. I remember reading Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* and saying, "Why didn't she say this was South Africa? I know that's what this is, it's obvious. She should have said it!" Well, she was a little smarter than that, she wanted to include more people in the revolution and I think that's what Dominique is doing. This idea of revolution is in one's heart. The Panthers, for instance, that's one strategy, but there are lots of different strategies and the revolution is being waged in lots

of different ways. I think that's why she made that choice. I think it would delimit it to make it a specific or singular Panther thing.

**SLW:** I was struck by the fact that Ashanti X's letters, the objects that the play pivots on and around, serve a similar purpose that the parent's inheritance does in *Detroit '67*, and a similar purpose of the piano in August Wilson's *Piano Lesson*. They represent different ideologies – legacy vs. capitalism, past vs. future? Can you talk about this struggle?

**LB:** Well, I don't know. I think I hadn't made those connections until you mentioned them just now. I think there's an argument to be made for them. In *Piano Lesson* it was clear that Boy Willie wanted the piano, wanted it for a specific purpose, and that was to buy land. And land is the basis of all wealth, we all know that. And I would argue—and did with August—that he should have sold the damn piano and bought the land. In this case, these letters have an emotional worth that heals the family and reaches across prison walls and so forth. After that is fulfilled, they do have a monetary value. And personally I see no reason why one couldn't take advantage of that for the betterment of the family. But first I think they have to satisfy that worth to the family, and Nina's careful about that.

**SLW:** There is a real resistance to and dislike of the academics and activists that want to get a hold of the letters, which brings to light the question of public and private lives of revolutionary figures. They come to be symbolic of a cause, yet they are real people, with real lives, families, and loved ones. What gets to remain private? What must be public? And what are the stakes and consequences of living a life for a movement?

**LB:** I think Dominique captures it pretty cleanly in this play. Those people who dedicated, and *still* dedicate, their lives to the movement realized that they are putting at risk members of their family. There is a sort of "danger list" that occurs in this prison industrial complex. It wouldn't surprise me if my name were on one—I run a black theatre and have for forty years. I suspect that I've said something that triggered one of their thresholds along the way. We don't have a way of dealing with and protecting people who were part of the black revolution that has been going on since slavery and Reconstruction.

The African American community isn't a unit where everyone agrees philosophically on what the best tactics are, yet we all benefit from these people doing all of these things. For instance, Fred Hampton was riddled by bullets in Chicago. One could stand here in Minnesota and say, you know, I didn't have anything to do with that. But still, the needle was moved ever so slightly by Hampton's life and death. His individual contribution is monumental, but we often don't recognize the cost to families of the people who dedicated themselves to those kinds of struggles.

We see it in minor ways in middle class America – someone works for a nonprofit rather than a corporation, and that choice has an economic effect upon the family. So, as you well know, one weighs out whether or not it's worth it. But you can't say that it doesn't have ramifications for the rest of the people in the family. We see that coming home to roost in this play. Making and being in a family unit made you particularly vulnerable to the war that was being waged at that time. If you cared for your family, you'd distance yourself from them because your connection to them made them vulnerable. And we see the effects of that in this piece. We also see the effects of black males being conscripted into that prison industrial complex, and what that does to a family. Kenyatta comes back, trying to connect to just a portion of his family. Meanwhile, the revolution and the ephemera that surrounds it begins to get commodified and begins to have a kind of a worth that it never had inside of the community. Or at least the worth was not monetary. And so, Ashanti's letters have personal value to Nina and Kenyatta as individuals, but outside of the culture they represent a potential gold mine. So, even though we're

in this post—or not so overt—revolutionary status, the outside culture is still commodifying and defining all of the things around the revolution. Kenyatta just wants to read some letters from his wife while he was in prison, but now they’ve become so valuable he can’t get to them. It’s good stuff – Dominique can write!

**SLW:** Speaking of Ashanti, her story raises the question of the place of women in the movement – symbolically, politically, and personally. What did they give, willingly and unwillingly? How were they positioned? What were their sacrifices?

**LB:** It’s really complicated. Some political figure said, “mistakes were made.” [*Laughter*] And they were. I think that these people are a product of their time, and no one can deny the misogyny that was part of many of these movements – black playwriting as well as the Black Arts Movement. There is this strange commodification of the black female body that has survived since slavery in the US – black females have had a worth and have occupied a position in this society that black males have not. This perceived worth comes from outside the culture, it has to do with reproductive capability – they can have children, they’re seen as sexual objects, where a black male is perceived as a threat or a brute to be worked and so forth. So, understanding that, there were –and I’m not defending what happened back then – but there were women who intentionally stepped back, black females, my mother was one, who intentionally stepped back to allow a black male to be a man, to move forward. It was an intentional thing. These women were aware of what they were doing, knowing how black males are destroyed in white society, and they intentionally allowed men to play this kind of dominant role in the only place available to them. Rose, in *Fences* [by August Wilson], I think of her speech, “Up there in that room I gave everything I could to make you believe that you were the greatest man in the world.”

[In *Sunset Baby*,] Nina ain’t having it. This may be this new generation. She’s not having it. She is so inured. She’s smart and well-read but inured by this urban existence that I think it’s hard for her to love, or to make any kind of emotional commitment. When you deal in emotions, you’ve got to learn to protect them somehow, and she has done that really well. She says, even about Damon, the man that she lives with, that when she says that she loves him, nothing changes inside her. Nothing flutters. She’s become hardened by her existence as her father had to become hardened in order to exist inside the milieu that he was in. Both are war zones.

**SLW:** Nina is hardened, but her dreams are sweet: to live a life of simplicity, comfort, secure, family, and simple pleasures. We often take revolutionary movements as the goal, but is the true goal of liberation the ability to experience life, liberty, and the pursuit of one’s own personal happiness? Is it to attain the comforts of what the dominant racial and class group have? Is it just to be able to BE?

**LB:** Yes, and her boyfriend doesn’t get it. He’s saying he wants to give her the “lavish life,” but for Nina that ain’t it. I think war – which is what this revolution is – it warps you. It changes you. And often the warrior is caught up in the war. But it’s clear that Kenyatta chose to go to war, and he gave up something for doing it. Now, the question remains whether or not he is the one who then shapes the results of that war into something. The only person I know who really played both of those roles is Nelson Mandela. He was a warrior, went to prison, and then came out and became a statesman and began to shape the future.

**SLW:** When Kenyatta speaks of the dissolution of the movement, it is in part from internal division, but it seems to result from a divide and conquer strategy on the part of governmental agencies that intervened. What did happen at the end of these movements? What did and didn’t they achieve? How did the tactics change? What is their legacy today?

**LB:** I think that we're still finding that out. Because African American society was confined, it was easy to spot who was in it and who was out of it. When that society began to be compromised by informants and so forth, you couldn't trust the badge of color to identify someone. I think that that is still being contested. I haven't figured it out. You've read Ed Bullins, *Goin' a Buffalo*, right? It's about a prostitute and all of these people that are in this house, and they get infiltrated in the same kind of way. When I was young, everyone was real suspicious of anyone who went to jail or was arrested, and got out too quickly, because that was the only way that black society could be penetrated. A white person couldn't penetrate that society, so they had to work at it a different sort of way. And in so doing, they intentionally destroyed families. Look at Martin Luther King Jr. and the sort of misinformation campaign that J. Edgar Hoover waged against him, to besmirch him, trying to publicize his sexual exploits and so forth. This is why one of the key tenets of the Black Arts Movement is that the black artist eschews any attempt to separate himself or herself from their community. And that's what these efforts tended to do, they separated people, they moved them apart from the community. And it's still working.

**SLW:** Yes, and yet they survived. While reading the play, I was reminded of Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor's term *survivance*, which he distinguishes from mere survival by saying that "Survival is a response; survivance is a standpoint, a worldview, and a presence...survivance is resistance and hermeneutics." Do you think Morisseau might be crafting a tale of survivance here?

**LB:** It all begins with culture. Without culture, black people or any people are simply the reaction to the dominant culture. And we're way more than a reaction to the dominant culture. Even though it helps as we put ourselves together, it's part of the mortar, you can't get away from it. As I was listening to you describe that, I was thinking again about the way Nina describes what she wants out of her life, her boyfriend Damon says, "I want to give you the lavish life," and she says, "That isn't what I want. I want simple. I want to do those basic human things." And those things, by the way, are culturally bound for black people – I want a garden, I want to read bell hooks, or Camille Yarrowborough, children's stories and so forth. She's talking about taking the time to pass on culture, to have children and pass that stuff forward, but she's so busy in survival that she hasn't had that luxury of passing that stuff on.

I think we made some mistakes in the revolution. I didn't have my butt on the line in same way, but we all thought that it was a war that was fought and won. And then everyone relaxed and went back to having a life and went on and tried to get our stories to our children. Meanwhile, the forces that were being fought didn't stop, they just rested for a second. And then you look up and civil rights are being rolled back, voting rights are being rolled back, all of the supposed advances during the movement are now being dismantled and taken away. You have to be ever vigilant, every second, there is no relaxing because evil doesn't rest. It's unfortunate, but it seems to be the way life is. And there is a cost for that on both sides. It's got to poison your soul to be that evil, that you're always thinking about a way to get over or to keep someone from getting something. It's got to be karmically and psychologically and psychically killing.

**SLW:** We'd be remiss if we didn't discuss Nina Simone's music and its relevance to these characters' lives. They speak of her as a rebel, and of madness, rage, and power, and of all of that soul coming at a price. What does her music mean for you, and what do you think its impact will be in production?

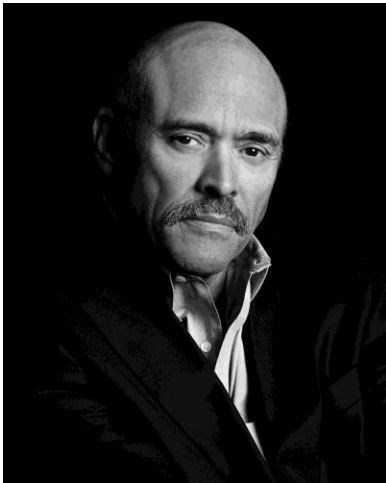
**LB:** Well, I think that Nina Simone, because of the music and the approach to the music that she used, really challenged people. The topics she took on, and even her treatment of standard things, have a sort of rebellious quality about them. She was an uncontrollable sort of force. Certainly that is mirrored in the play. Some of the stuff is achingly beautiful. It's very challenging music, aggressive music, and we don't typically think about that. Things like "Mississippi Goddam" it just comes at you. And then she occupies a rather interesting place in black

neo-popular culture. She didn't go out of her way to doll up, or gussy up. Her beauty seemed to rest in her power, and I think that Dominique has used her in this piece as a reference point or a touchpoint for the main character, Nina. Music is really important to African Americans and to the culture. Baraka says in *Blues People* that it's our primary language, not secondary. It's fairly important. Anyone who comes to a play at Penumbra will feel that music as being almost a part of the text, a continuation of the text, and a contextualization of the text.

**SLW:** So the show opens April 14<sup>th</sup>, and then on April 18<sup>th</sup> we're having a panel with two of the founders of the Black Panthers. Can you speak to the way that Penumbra always works to connect the art that we do with the community, and with critical conversations with the public? What does it mean to be having this conversation now?

**LB:** We view ourselves as reflections of the community, as cultural stabilizers. As all of these outside forces buffet the community and the culture, as they blow the culture all out of shape, stretch it, oversexualize it, make it hyper-violent, make it all these things, we tend to stabilize that culture. We come back and say, "No, no, no, it's not all *that*. *This* is what it is." And you have to have institutions inside of a community that help stabilize that culture or else people have nothing to hold onto. So, part of the stabilization of the culture is to recognize how we got to where we are, and who we owe for being in the situation we're in – who we owe, who we have to pay, and who we have to repay – you have to remember that. I'm struck by that old saying, "When I glorify you, I glorify myself." When I recognize the contribution that those people made, whether they knew about a Penumbra, a Minnesota, it doesn't make any difference. But we recognize the contribution that they made, we recognize that spark of revolution and culture in ourselves. And *that's* where power comes from. And without these intuitions inside the community, we'll be out in left field somewhere wandering. We'll be a tempest in a teacup, thinking that that's the world.

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**Lou Bellamy** is the Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre, an Obie Award-winning stage director, and taught for 35 years as an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota. Select Penumbra credits: *Two Trains Running*, *I Wish You Love* (The Kennedy Center), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking* (National Black Theatre Festival), *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Gem of the Ocean*. Other: *Radio Golf* (Indiana Repertory Theatre and Cleveland Play House); *Two Trains Running* (Signature Theatre Company and Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Jitney* (Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company); *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (The Kennedy Center).



## A Conversation with Jasmine Hughes

### On her role as Nina in *Sunset Baby*

March 31, 2016

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth:** Let's begin by having you share a little bit about yourself. What has been your involvement in theater, and what brought you here to Penumbra?

**Jasmine Hughes:** I am from Mississippi, I grew up there. I had an early attraction to the arts: music, literature, and poetry. It became my escape early on. I just never had much opportunity, being from the Mississippi Delta. It's like: school, blues, home, food, fishing. The art there is like folk art, you know?

I went to a historically black boarding school in Mississippi, it's 100 years old. It's called Piney Woods. There are actually a lot of people here [in the Twin Cities] that went to boarding school down there [in the South]. The school instilled in me this amazing moral, ethical compass and a lot of responsibility. You know that philosophy, "To whom much is given, much is required." I've always been a liberal artist. I am into literature and philosophy and humanitarianism.

I started doing some theater in high school, not really taking it seriously. Did some in college, and said, "Well, I've got a little something in there. I mean, people are telling me I am pretty good and I've never done this before, so maybe there's something there." I was raised by my grandparents, kind of as an only child, and I had to entertain myself, so my imagination and my pretend land was always really vivid. You know, I talked to myself a whole lot, did impersonations, created many concerts for my cats. So, when I got into theater in college it wasn't anything new. It wasn't like my eyes were being opened to this whole different thing. It was like it was always there.

I attended an HBCU, graduated, and went to grad school in California at CalArts. I had a mentor there, Nataki Garrett, who was a director and theater administrator. I went through the program there – very different, experimental, edgy, out of this world, revolutionary work that was very instrumental in helping me develop my aesthetic and my identity as an *artist*, not just as an actor. So that's when I knew, "If I'm going to invest the time and I'm going to invest the money, and this is where I want to be and I feel like I can make it, then this is what I'm going to do." Not very many people understood it. Not at all. It was expensive and it was three years and it was at an institution where minorities were not represented at all, and many times I felt like an anomaly.

I finished there, and Nataki hired me for my first gig out of CalArts. I went to New York after I graduated, did a couple of shows there. But the environment did not really serve my willingness to work, and my passion to work in theater. I wasn't served in an environment as populated and as racy and competitive as New York City.

So I went home [to Mississippi] and I had a daughter and taught school for two years. I taught 4<sup>th</sup> grade science and high school English. Although it was very fulfilling, I wasn't happy because that's not what I was supposed to be doing. That's not what I had invested my time doing. I know that I love to teach, I love to educate, and I think it's very noble. But I also think that there's something for me to teach under the footlights too. So then Nataki called me, and I was in the middle of the semester, and she said "I might be directing this Katori Hall world premiere, and it's going to be in Minneapolis. I don't know if you could work it out, but I'd like you to send a

tape in.” So I sent an audition tape in, I got the job, and I had to leave teaching. It was very sad, I miss the students more than anything, but I knew that that one job, doing the Katori Hall world premiere, playing a character like Mercedes in that show, and..

**SLW:** Which show was that?

**JH:** *Pussy Valley*. It was at Mixed Blood Theatre. Being in an environment like Minneapolis that was conducive to me being an artist *and* having a family, and not just getting a day job to pay the bills was something that I had never really *fathomed*. So when I got here I was like, “Oh my God, all the actors that I know are working! There’s all these theaters, and they *pay*!” I was sold! It was worth the cold. It was worth knowing I was a minority. And it was worth being so far from my family because I think this city has just allowed me to mold a professional, authentic craftsmanship in my work that I would not have been able to do anywhere else at this stage in my career. I have friends in LA, I have friends in New York, and they ain’t working like me. You know? This is my fourth show in a year. And God has been so good, and this whole city has been a blessing to me because I knew nothing about the city when I got here, I had never been to the city. When I first got here I was calling it “Minneapolis.” [*They both laugh.*] It literally has changed my life and my trajectory and I appreciate it so much.

I was able to work with James Craven in *Pussy Valley*, and he was like, “Do you know Penumbra?” And I was like “Of course I know Penumbra! It is listed in the front of the credits of every August Wilson play. It’s the most prolific and historic and relevant African American theater in the country right now. Of *course* I know about Penumbra. What about it?” You know, not even thinking that I would have an opportunity to go from that job to another job to another one to another one. So, he [James Craven] said, “I really want you to meet Lou Bellamy. Now, he’s a tough cookie, but I think you got it and I have your back.” And he brought me in, he brought Tatiana Williams who was also in the play, and he brought Megan Rippey, and we all came and we auditioned and Lou kind of sat back like the cool guy he is. The only thing he was missing was a fedora and a cigar! And he was like “Mmm. Molly Cunningham. Joe Turner.” Looks at my resume, “Ah, Fran Dorn.” And I’m like “I really hope he likes me.” I heard that they were doing *Sunset Baby*. James T. Alfred who was working on *Detroit ’67* at the time sent me the play and I read it, and I asked James was it already cast, and he thought it was, but come to find out it wasn’t. I really think James Craven and James T. Alfred huddled up with Lou Bellamy in a corner like, “You gotta get this girl, she’d be good.”

I reached out to Lou and I said, “I read the play. I understand that this character has to be portrayed with some edge and some rawness and some rage and just urban renaissance-ship that you can trust me to bring to the table.” I sold myself, you know! And he hired me. And I’m still grateful for the trust and I don’t take it for granted because it’s not an easy role. People might assume that just because I’m from Mississippi, and I’m a black woman, and that my voice might have a little edge to it, that I *am* her. But I know that that’s not me. Now don’t get me wrong, a couple of twists of fate and a lack of God’s mercy and grace could have made me, or anybody else for that matter, Nina. I don’t take for granted that I know her, or that she’s coming to me every day. Before the process each day I ask for her to come to me. I conjure her spirit, because I know that if I don’t, *Jasmine* would be way too terrified to do that, way too compassionate to the human condition and humanity itself to be so, so hard.

**SLW:** So, what is the dialectic that you are finding with this character? What are you bringing to her, and what is she bringing out in you? As you’ve said, you’re not the same person. But I always think that when you play a character you find elements in yourself that speak to that character that you might not have known were there. And then vice versa, what are the things that *you* bring to playing her that nobody else would?

**JH:** I think that I definitely bring an easier access to my more melancholic emotions than she does. I think when emotions come to Nina, they come to her because she's been hit with them. They come unexpectedly to her. That happens to me sometimes too, but I also can just open myself up and let them come. So that's why I know that I definitely differ from her. She definitely brings up this heaviness and this hardness that I've always been afraid of, because I've never wanted to be looked at the way I know Nina has been looked at from the outside in. But like I said, a couple twists of fate and she could have been me and that would have been unfortunate, you know, because I would not have had nearly as many friends, or nearly as much professional success. But I do have friends like her and I have had to tap into them for this role, and just watch them and listen to them, especially the ones who've had really difficult, rough, traumatic lives. I have friends that were born in prison. That could have been Nina. So I've really had to go deeper, go harder, go darker, even further than I think. Even further then, when Jasmine might be prideful and a little tipsy, and glints of anger might come in and somebody might say the wrong thing, and Jasmine might get a little aggressive or defensive or tell somebody like it is. But it is still, very tame, you know? Like, "I'm going to tell you how it is" and be nasty and ugly, but still talk to you just like this [*speaking very calmly*]. But Nina is like, "No, motherfucker. I'm gonna talk to you like *this*." You know?

**SLW:** So, what has the process been like so far? I know it's only been a couple of weeks, but what is it like being at Penumbra, in the room, working within an ensemble approach?

**JH:** It's really like family. When I came here I was friends with James T. [Alfred]. I came to *Detriot '67* and I met Austene [Van]. And then I date a fellow actor here in the Twin Cities, Nathan Barlow, who was just in *Dutchman*. While I was doing *Bright Half Life* at Pillsbury House, he was doing *Dutchman* over here. I came over to rehearsal with him and would just sit in and already try to get a feel of what the process might be like. It's been very like family. Very no-pressure. It's like "We've been doing this long enough. We done seen a lot of actors come up and through here, we've seen a lot of craziness, we're veterans in this business, nothing much is going to surprise us. Do the work. You know? Bring what you have to the table."

I love the way Lou directs, I love his approach. It's.... I don't even know how to describe it because I've never been in an environment as.... It feels familiar. It feels like I have been here before. It's like my soul has called for this experience and it is happening, and I'm not super apprehensive, I'm not super nervous, I'm just really *here*, and charmed to remain present. The only pressure that I am getting is pressure from myself, and doing it justice, and making it worth the fight to get me here. Always making the people who got me here look good. You know?

**SLW:** Yes, absolutely. Speaking of making the fight worth it, how you all are bringing knowledge about what Morisseau calls the Black Liberation Movement into the rehearsal process? Considering the different generations in the room, how have you been conjuring all of this history?

**JH:** It's been difficult. It's been confusing a little bit, and the reason is one of the first movies my mom introduced me to as a child was *Panther*, which was the movie about the Black Panther Movement. So you see Huey P. Newton in this big straw chair, and then you see him being killed in the movie and it was a traumatic experience. And then I was going to this black high school that was all about "the head, the heart, and the hands." It was all about making us proud and fortified, not just for being an educated person in the world, but for being a knowledgeable African American, knowing how to survive in America. So I was reading Assata Shakur's biography in high school, I was reading the autobiography of Angela Davis, I was wearing my "Angela, You Are Welcome Here" t-shirt or her mugshot on my shirt. So I was all about the movement. I have Assata Shakur's book in my book bag that's in the rehearsal room right now, and I haven't cracked it open because I cannot be blinded by what was *her* truth about the movement. Because I know some of what were the movement's truths.

But, Nina, the character, has been so hardened by the result of the movement. Nina's truth is that "I know the story. It's in the books." She knows it. But that does not excuse Kenyatta for neglecting the family. That does not excuse Kenyatta and Ashanti for being irresponsible parents and having a child that they knew that they couldn't protect, that they knew that they couldn't nurture, couldn't comfort, couldn't take care of, couldn't fortify for the world that they already knew existed. So, I think in Nina's head, she would have almost rather have been aborted, because she's the sacrificial lamb. They had her to be *their* revolution, but did not give her the *tools* to help her fight the revolution. That's why she's like "Fuck your progress. What did you achieve? This your progress [*points to herself*], nigga? Me, in the hood, selling dope, robbin' niggas with this guy that I really don't love? Not knowing love, not having no family, not giving a fuck, 'cause of you. Not because of me. Not because of me. You knew my mom was a crackhead, apparently. You knew what kind of trauma the movement was facing."

Before I had [my daughter] Brooklyn, there was this moment when I was so happy when I found out she was a girl, because I was pregnant right around the time that Trayvon Martin happened. And I said "Thank God I don't have to be a single black mom in America raising a black man right now, because it's war out here for them." I know women today that're like "I ain't having no baby. Having a baby for what? Do you see the world that we're living in?" And that's the counter-response to Nina. It's the counter-response to Ashanti and Kenyatta. It's the difference between saying [as Kenyatta might have] "No, I'm gonna have a baby because she's gonna be the revolution. I'm gonna plant my seed in a warrior woman, and I'm gonna show her what liberation is." And Nina was like, "No. Sorry. That's not what you did. You might have had good intentions, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions. So, no I'm not letting you off the hook for being in a movement, which was really *your* movement. I'm holding you accountable. You, *the man*, not the *activist*, responsible and accountable for what you did. So no, the movement is not gonna be your excuse. No, jail is not gonna be your excuse, because you could've *not* gone to jail. You know? You could've said 'No, the most important thing is my child.'"

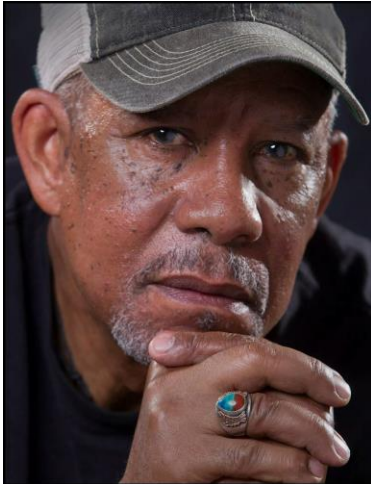
So, as a result, you have a generation, not in the play but in real life, of young adults who are really, really hurting. And those who said, "Fuck it, I'm *gonna* have children, those kids are *really* disconnected, because they're raised by parents who never were able to reconcile that hurt. Who were affected by that real dark side of it, that mess, that stuff that came as a result of the movement – the drugs, the organization being infiltrated, the murder, the COINTELPRO and Hoover planting people and turning families against each other. Nobody was able to trust each other, and even the women were broke down and families were separated. And then to be still alive today and to see what's happening, I can imagine it's even more depressing and disappointing and I'm sure it breaks their hearts even more now. Because not only are they seeing that what they did in the movement didn't really change a whole lot, but they're also seeing that what they did in the movement, the personal sacrifices they made in the movement, also contributed to what's going on. You know? So it's some heavy stuff.

**SLW:** You've already answered my next question, which is how you see the play resonating today, outside these walls. You just hit on that beautifully. So, my last question for today is, what do you hope that folks that see this production of *Sunset Baby* come away with?

**JH:** I want people that don't understand the anger, people who are taken aback by how hard or angry characters like Nina are, to get a glimpse into her and begin to learn to empathize with the hurt she feels. And I want the people [in the audience] who are hurting to begin to reconcile themselves to the fact that it's not their fault that they are who they are, it's the fault of a whole lot of factors that had nothing to do with them, and to move on. It's like [there is] a lost generation of people who are stuck, not just in *financial* poverty, but *poverty of mind* because they are so disconnected from what the movement was and what it was supposed to be, because they

saw what it did to their parents. Or they see that nothing has changed. So they're like, "Fuck it. Do drugs. Listen to hip hop. Wear my pants down to my ankles and blow heads off and not give a fuck." I want them to reconcile the hurt too, and say, "I can forgive you. Not because I'm not hurt, but because I recognize that there were a lot of things that were out of your power. And hurting people hurt people. You hurt me because that's all you knew. You didn't know. People were being shot. You couldn't trust anybody. How can you raise a child when you're living every day in fear?" So, that's what I want. I want us to be able to move beyond the pain. And also, [I want people to] show a little homage to the people who were in the fight, because they're hurting on a deep level too. We have to respect that they had the balls enough to say, in the 60s and 70s, "We're going to fight white supremacy."

So, it's a little bit of like, "I know we fucked up." That's what Nina wants to hear him say, "I know I fucked up. I know I wasn't there. But if I could tell you what I was going through, if I knew how to love, I probably could love you the way you wanted to be loved. But I don't." But he can't even say that. That's all she wants to hear him say. Is "I loved you, I loved your mom, but I fucked up and shit didn't work out. Can we use what time we have left? I know it's not going to be overnight, but can I try to get to know you and see what I missed?"



## A Conversation with James Craven

### On his role as Kenyatta in *Sunset Baby*

March 31, 2016

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth:** Since each of the cast members is coming to this piece from a different place, I wondered if we could begin by talking about your relationship with Penumbra?

**James Craven:** My relationship with Penumbra goes back to about 1981. I think it was *The Resurrection of Lady Lester*. Lou [Bellamy] and Claude [Purdy] and Marion [McClinton] liked my work style and the kind of artistry I brought to the work, and felt that I would be a very good fit. So, I've been here ever since.

**SLW:** And you're a company member...

**JC:** Yeah. I've been a company member since '83.

**SLW:** Can you tell us a bit about the character you're playing in *Sunset Baby*? What is he about, and how do you relate to his journey?

**JC:** Well, the character of Kenyatta Shakur is a former Black Nationalist, and he has been sentenced to jail for an excess of twenty years for his activities as a Black Nationalist. His wife Ashanti X went into a major depression. She had depression before he went into jail, but her depression accelerated once he was in jail. Eventually she succumbed to drugs and alcohol, and died a terrible death. One that kind of lifestyle tends to bring. They had communication – he would write to her and she would write to him. However, because he was a Black Nationalist, which was considered by the American government and the FBI as an enemy of the state, their letters were intercepted and were not passed on. So, even though they had this very intense love in their hearts and deep within their souls, they could not get confirmation of it, because of government interference.

Kenyatta Shakur is coming out of jail after, let's say twenty-five years. He knows that his wife has passed on, and he knows that he has his child out there in the world who he loves dearly. But he has not been around her for all of this time. He's heard things about her through the prison grapevine; that she has not done well in terms of lifestyle and life choices, and there's nothing he can do about it. She has found a way to survive on her own. So, he's coming in just wanting to reconcile with his daughter. Over the course of the play, that doesn't happen, but they reconcile enough that he's able to put the missing link in his life back together with his wife. So that's who he is, and that's his relationship with his wife and daughter.

When I look at the larger aspects of the play, the character in this world, I was thinking, "Who are these people?" The most obvious [answer is that Morisseau] drew on somebody from the Black Panther Movement that went to jail and came back out, or suffered great losses because of the FBI. You can take different pieces of people and put them together as a character study, which is maybe what Dominique did.

But I was struck by the idea that what we have here is the collision of two worlds – the old and the new way of approaching Black Liberation. The old style was a rebellion against Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent movement. It was not a *violent* movement, but a movement of self-defense against police brutality. These folks were considered enemy combatants of the United States and everybody was jailed because of that. They were

just trying to defend their communities and themselves and they went to jail for it. They were fighting against the capitalist system because they realized that the capitalist system was at the root of how the entire structure was unfair. So that's what they were fighting against.

But after going to jail for 25 years and coming out, he finds that the world has changed. His child, and everybody else in the world, is more or less embracing the capitalist system. The old ideals of socialism and communism are dead – they fell when the Berlin Wall came down and Perestroika began. So, his whole political philosophy is archaic now. But what has replaced it within the context of the black community has been this bling, this drugs, this prostitution and everything. The world has moved into that realm, which he doesn't understand. But his daughter understands it very well. And that's the world that she is in. That's the world that he is trying to reconcile with, but he cannot. He realizes that he is past it. And she also knows that that's not a good place for her to be, and she's trying to get out of it, and she's trying to go to a more enlightened place. Within the context of the play, that more enlightened place is London, where you don't have guns, for instance. They've got their problems over there, but they don't have what Chicago has, you know? They don't have a major drug problem like we do in this country. And they're a capitalist society, they're the original capitalist society. So, perhaps in her [Nina's] mind, I can't speak for her character, but maybe in her mind capitalism works. In my [Kenyatta's] mind it doesn't work. All it does is destroy. But that's all he knows, and that's where he is.

My relationship with the play and with the character is that I understand that stuff pretty well because of my age. I grew up being influenced by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X and the Black Panther Movement. That's the foundation of my inner core of how I think politically. But having said that, I also haven't gone to prison, and I have had to evolve to a certain extent to keep up with the world. I never got into drug dealing, I never got into prostitution or pimping or anything like that, you know. I'm not a person that's really involved in materialism. I don't really care about that kind of thing. But I understand that money can give you security, and to have a government agency always provide you with that security is not necessarily a good thing. But it should provide you with some things. So when the first black president was elected, what he said he wanted to provide was health care and social security and so on and so forth, a base lifestyle, because this is the richest country in the world. Everybody should have a base lifestyle. So, for another term, you could call me an "Obamacrat;" realizing, embracing what I know in my heart to be the right thing to do, which is a more socialist form, but also at the same time embracing the ideal that capitalism is perhaps a way to flesh it out.

**SLW:** I wonder about the father/daughter relationship in the play as it relates to those old world/new world ideologies that you named? And I wonder how it relates to your life outside the play. For instance, your granddaughter is here with you during rehearsals. What do you see as the different philosophies and perspectives at work in terms of different generations?

**JC:** Well, now you're bringing up something entirely different. This is totally different. And this is something that you are going to have to face in a different way than I am because of our age difference. My granddaughter is going into a world that I *really* won't understand. The only way I can characterize that is to tell you that around 1983, my grandmother, who was born in 1890, got on a plane in Minneapolis and flew to Memphis and then got on a bus to go see her brother who was in his 80s and was dying. When I took my grandmother to the airport – now I had been used to flying and traveling all over the place. I had been to Europe a couple of times, I had been to Mexico many times, and Canada. I've flown all over. I've been on boats and all that. My grandmother literally came to Minneapolis because my grandfather, in 1906 went and got her and brought her to Minneapolis and she never left. She never got on a plane, didn't even know what it was. So when the plane was developed, and she kept seeing this thing in the air, it was not something that she ever imagined would ever happen. In 1969,

the United States landed on the moon. That was completely and totally mind-blowing for her. Now, 14 years later, she's going to get on a plane for the first time in her life. And I'm looking at her like "What's the big deal?"

So, as I move forward in life, and as my granddaughter, who has only ever known one president – that's Barack Obama – she's only know that, she's just now, at 10 years old, becoming politically aware. She is starting to build her philosophy and so forth, and whatever it is that she is building is not something that I am going to understand. You know? And I stay pretty sharp. I'm an old guy, but I keep up with things that are going on all over the world. But I know that I can't even *imagine* what kind of a world she's going to build. And it *scares* me. It scares me, because I think, okay, there's fracking – the whole country could be in constant earthquakes. There's global climate change – there could be huge tornados and hurricanes happening every day in the future. And this generation is going to have to deal with it. They're not just going to perish, they're going to have to deal with it. That's not a world that I know anything about.

In terms of politics, just look at what happened yesterday with the Jamar Clark decision [not to indict the police officers who shot and killed him]. You have Black Lives Matter really angry and really upset because they see things as not being changed at all. But I saw something that was *way* different than that. What I saw was the Minneapolis Police Department, the jackboot thugs that I had known all my life, all of a sudden they had opened up the entire war chest of what had happened. Now you can believe the evidence or not, or say that they manipulated it, but they *never* did that before. [In the past] it was like, "We did what we did. Shut up. You have nothing to say about it." Well, it's not like that anymore. And that is a *huge, huge* change over the course of my lifetime.

## Memories of Revolution and the Power of Love

A dramaturgical essay by Eunha Na

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**Eunha Na** is completing her doctoral dissertation on the role of empathy in negotiating racial politics in contemporary U.S. women's theatre at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include 20<sup>th</sup> century drama, theories of affect and race, and feminism. She has worked with theatre companies in the U.S. and South Korea including the Seoul Performing Arts Company.

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In *Sunset Baby*, playwright Dominique Morisseau explores the aftermath of the black liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, examining the legacy of the revolutionary spirit and illuminating its fraught impact. The play opens with the singular and supplicating image of Kenyatta, an old man who failed in everything – in love, in fatherhood, and in political revolution. As he attempts to re-ignite his relationship with his daughter, Nina, we witness their struggle to reclaim love. While this powerful human emotion sent revolutionaries to fight for the cause, it was often sacrificed to protect those closest to its warriors, and in the process it was bruised, broken, and lost. In *Sunset Baby*, Morisseau recognizes and recuperates love's potential as a source of power.

From the outset, Morisseau investigates the meaning of love and its relationship to revolution from a contemporary feminist perspective, reviving the voices of women who contributed to the movement in their own complicated ways. Ashanti X, Nina's mother and Kenyatta's wife, and the figure of Nina Simone, whose songs pervade the entire play, represent such unacknowledged and invisible efforts by women during the movement. The play rediscovers their legacies in the twenty-first century, as embodied in Simone's music and Ashanti X's "love" letters. Throughout the play, the "love letters" serve as a conduit for the seemingly fossilized feelings and conflicting ideals that Nina and Kenyatta wrestle with. Morisseau sets a contrast between the characters, each of whom has a different attachment to the letters. For Damon, they can become capital for he

and Nina to change their lives; for Nina and Kenyatta, their primary value lies in their shared memories, charged with familial intimacy. More importantly, they carry the legacies of a collective history that gave birth to Nina as Ashanti X's note to her daughter reveals:

*"Dear Nina. I am leaving these letters to you. Leaving them in your possession. Your birthright. This is a love song for you. To know you were made from blood, sweat, tears and passion. So you may know how deep the soul can go. That love unrequited is never our tragedy. It is our contribution."*

Her birthright is as much in her name as the letters themselves. Kenyatta and Ashanti X name Nina after Nina Simone with a profound belief in the revolutionary spirit it carries: *"We named you after Nina Simone because she was our rebel music. You were going to be our revolution. That's what we said."* Accordingly, the music of Nina Simone, which pervades the physical space of Nina's apartment, captures her intense passion; it also encapsulates the rage against racism and sexism within and beyond the Black Power Movement, in which Simone was deeply involved. While Simone's work for the movement often went unacknowledged and uncredited despite her evident commitment, many critics suggest that even early in her career - in the late 1950s and early 1960s - her songs evinced activism grounded in racial consciousness, and resonated with the voices of such artists as Amiri Baraka, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin. Her subversive lyricism, along with her performance strategies, delivered the political messages of the movement. Simone's contemporaries, especially the media, often saw her as "the definitive 'combustible artist' who 'never hid her intense rage'." Simone herself explained her black experience in terms of anger: "I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn't the intellectual connection of the type Lorraine [Hansberry] had been repeating to me over and over - it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination." It is worth noticing how she differentiates her visceral and affective reaction to the racist world from the more philosophical and rational activism that Hansberry would have represented to her. Music was a means for her to politicize her "fury, hatred and determination" as an artistic expression of her black consciousness.

Like her namesake, Nina in *Sunset Baby* embodies the warrior who digs deep into her feelings and turns them into a true source of power. Audre Lorde also emphasized the political potential of black women's feelings in their antiracist struggle, referring to them as "hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting actions comes." ("Poetry is not a luxury") In particular, Lorde suggests how anger can serve as a collective call for racial justice and social change:

... anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. ("The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism")

Lorde's point of view transforms the stereotype of the 'angry black woman' into a warrior who fights against systems of oppression around her as we see in the character of Nina in Morrisseau's play. When one considers the predominantly masculine images of Black Power Movement, as illustrated by prominent figures like Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton, and Amiri Baraka, the strong woman warrior subverts the prevalent notions of revolution and radicalism constructed around manhood. According to Barbara Smith, a black feminist critic who actively participated in the Black Liberation Movement, women were expected to step three or four steps back, and "have babies for the nations" as queens to the kings. This sexism within the movement was very frustrating to women activists like Smith and eventually led them to the philosophies of feminism. In *Sunset Baby*, Ashanti X's role during the revolution replicates the image of the women who step back to assist men. Nina remembers Ashanti as a "brilliant" woman, a "hopeless romantic," who "died with a broken heart waitin' on your progress." (61) At the same time, she critiques the ways in which the male-centered efforts "can free the whole world and fuck over the woman who was the backbone to your movement." (62) The gender politics within the Black Arts Movement followed suit. The political nature of black women artists was underappreciated and overshadowed by male artists; Lorraine Hansberry used to be accused for catering to white mainstream

audiences and adhering to white, Eurocentric aesthetics, and Adrienne Kennedy's experimental, avant-garde styles were similarly regarded as not political enough from the activist point of view.

Morisseau takes up this prevalent criticism and flips the gendered image of the revolution through the character of Nina. She endows a fierce female character with power and determination for the future. One sees what transformations the vision of a black female revolutionary has undergone in Nina, whose relationship to Damon initially recalls the image of a black woman who condones her power/will to her man. Claiming to be a protector and lover, Damon demands that Nina follow his lead in the name of love, trust, and their common goal, and Nina seems to succumb to such coercion. Here, Damon's rhetoric of "togetherness" resonates with the rhetoric of Black Nationalism:

*"You believe in me, right Nina? Cuz if you don't, then fuck the whole thing right now. Fuck the hustlin' and the stackin' and the Bonnie and Clyde deal between us. If you ain't on this with me, say whassup and we can dead this. Cuz the only thing I'm pushin' for is you and me. That's the fuel. And if I ain't runnin' on this, I ain't runnin'. So...you believe?"*

The scene that ends this conversation visually delivers the power dynamic between the two: *"Damon mounts Nina and kisses her passionately"* (emphasis added). Such a mis-en-scene captures the skewed power dynamics, despite their shared struggle and vision for a better future.

As the play progresses, however, the dynamic between Nina and Damon gradually changes. At the end of Scene 5, as Damon kisses Nina on the neck, and Nina "grabs him from behind and pulls him to her mouth." The parallel position of the two characters visually represents the agency and power that Nina assumes in their intimate acts. The position of power is completely reversed between the two towards the end of the play, when we learn that Nina made a deal with her father and that she does not lay her full trust in Damon. Unaware of Nina's intentions and her own future plan, Damon still senses that his dominance over her is over:

*"I got this feelin' Nina. Gnawing feeling in my gut...I'm about to be an island. No London Eye. No Trafalgar Square. Just an island on my own. Vacant and empty. Irrelevant to my son. Irrelevant*

*to you. Just baking in the sun with nobody to occupy me. Worthless and ain't shit."*

Damon's vulnerability is contrasted with Nina's toughness in this last scene. Nina responds to his entreaty, "You always gonna be a survivor." The stage direction reads, "She kisses him passionately. *He surrenders to her*" (Emphasis added). Damon's "surrender" is symbolic as it suggests a reversal of the power dynamics between the two.

And yet, Morriseau asks us if human vulnerability can be transformed into power through the characters of Nina and Kenyatta. Kenyatta, for instance, suffers from a sense of guilt about abandoning his own family in pursuit of a "higher purpose." His monologues, inserted throughout the play, allow the audience into his innermost secrets, affections, fears, and yearnings. The act of sharing these intimate feelings is so powerful that audiences cannot easily dismiss his requests – like Nina does – as mere baits to get hold of the letters. The play describes each scene where Kenyatta faces the camera and confesses his feelings as "intimate." The relation between he and the camera transfers to the relationship between he and the audience, and Nina, who is his future audience. Each scene creates intimacy that was once lost or forgotten and hopes to recuperate their broken emotional ties. It is this human, vulnerable side of the revolutionary that appeals to Nina and gradually affects her decisions. Most of all, it is the *viewers* who are affected by Kenyatta's emotional honesty, when his wrongdoings and past failures are brutally exposed and criticized by his own daughter. Kenyatta's attempt to retrieve the emotional memories of the movement through his lover's letters is his way of confessing that love is an underappreciated and crucial part of human life:

*"I gave up some things, I know. Some important things in this fight. ... You lose intimacy. It makes targets out of the people you love. Do you understand that? It makes family a liability.*

*These are the things you lay on the line if you're willing to die for progress."*

Ben Brantley, New York Times critic, wrote that Morriseau's play is marked by "a culture of survival": "It's not consciousness that's going to save anyone here. It's toughness. ..., as is often the case, it's the woman who's the toughest of them all." If the play has begun by its call for toughness, it ends with murmurings of "the possibility

of love” that has been trumped by such a brutal way of living. *Sunset Baby* resurrects the fragility and power of love, which profoundly moves people in a way that a political movement can never do alone.