

Why Dominique Morisseau's **BLOOD AT THE ROOT?**

by David Ceccarini

I have come to the realization that being a parent is a humbling experience. No doubt, there are millions of people who already know this – it's just taken me my typically-longer time to stumble onto this unremarkable, mundane, yet, personally-shattering understanding.

Why have I just figured it out? Maybe I'm paying more attention? Maybe it's a side-effect of having one teenager and her sister the pre-teen in the house? Is it because I am repeatedly in awe of how brilliantly my magnificent wife juggles the activities calendar, monitors school work, supports, helps and nurtures these two emerging human beings with ultimate grace and bottomless love? Do they surprise me every day? Yes. Humbling.

TO DO? OR NOT...

As time toward adulthood grows shorter and the stakes for my children grow higher, I wonder how I can best serve them from the father position which I so uneasily occupy. Help with homework? Sometimes I have the right information, or right amount, to offer – but it's tricky. [With my



Stori Ayers, Christian Thompson, and Kenzie Ross
in "Blood at the Root" Penn State production.

Photo: Susan Shaffer

dad, I was always hoping for the "edited" version, and it's highly likely that I've inherited his tendencies.) Help with projects; art, science, music? Sure, but again, how much and what? It's not what I learned yesterday, as much as it's what they're learning today. Technology? Hanging on by a thread. In the workshop? Still good at fixing things in the material world. Taxi service, home improvements, bad jokes, pumpkin pies, driving lessons (soon!), laundry, political discussions, attend concerts, make lunches, etc, etc.

ALTERNATIVE COURSE

Wait a minute. This is all about taking action, delivering solutions – a somewhat typical male response [although mothers seem to constantly be on the go and doing]. Happy to say that a female playwright, Dominique Morisseau, has offered a different and most valuable perspective. In her play *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*, coming up in February, we see six high school kids wrestling

with some tricky events and issues, including their emerging identities of themselves and of those around them. Each of the teens is a product of their own family's values and the society which surrounds them. Within their school culture is where they interact – clashing, collaborating, but always making an earnest effort to communicate.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Here is where Morisseau works her magic. These kids engage each other in frank and courageous conversation, not hesitating to explore and share their truths, and listening to those of their peers. They don't always agree, but they do give each other the respect which comes with good listening. And some of what these young people have to say definitely commands respect.

In *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*, the character Raylynn says, "Every time somebody {gets} hurt, all they wanna do is hurt back. It don't make nothin' better."

Continued, page 2

Inside This Issue

| | |
|--|---|
| Branching Out | 2 |
| You are the Reason for the Season | 3 |
| Blood at the Root in Jena, Louisiana | 4 |
| Impressions of Blood at the Root | 5 |
| Our New Year's Resolution is Complete! | 6 |
| The Art of Xavier Lightfoot | 7 |

Why *BLOOD AT THE ROOT* continued

Another young lady, Toria, says, “[I] come from people that believe freedom don’t happen by itself. Ain’t just for one group. Can’t be free if everybody else around you is chained.”

Morisseau’s young people form an impressive group, and ultimately, offer up hope.

CLOSER TO HOME

Perhaps after reading Morisseau’s play a half-dozen times or so, it has dawned on me that the young people I’m closest to, my two daughters, might be having conversations as frank, and as deep, as the characters in *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*. Conversations which would demand my respect. Admittedly, we’re not in Jena, Louisiana, and my family does not struggle with poverty, or prejudice – at least firsthand. But struggling to find your identity is a common human trait; so is achieving self-confidence, self-respect, self-knowledge, and the courage to own who you think you are, deep down inside. It may be, too, that if I as Dad relaxed on the “doing” and zoomed in on the listening, I’d find out a lot more about the two people in my house who will one day



Stori Ayers & Kenzie Ross as Raylynn & Asha in Penn State production
Photo: Susan Shaffer

leave, hoping to build impressive, productive lives all their own. With the advent of Morisseau’s play coming up at Next Act, this seems like a good time to start.

See you at the theatre.

Branching Out

by Grace DeWolff



Greetings!

My name is Grace DeWolff, and I’m excited to tell you that I’ve been hired as the Education Manager, a totally new position for the Next Act team. You might have seen me on stage before, and you’ll see me again in Next Act’s *BLOOD AT THE ROOT* in February. If you know me, you know that theatre education has been an equal

passion of mine, and I’m happy to be at the helm of both careers at the same company! I am joyously eager for the opportunity to give back to the community that taught me to be the artist I am today. Next Act has an incredible staff, and I already love everything on my to-do list!

by Dominique Morisseau gives high school-aged characters a voice to explore the causes and consequences of deeply-entrenched injustice. We will be touring *BLOOD AT THE ROOT* to neighboring MPS high schools, culminating in a community performance on Milwaukee’s near-north-side. At each school we’ll be delivering a post-show talkback and workshops that leverage the message in the play and support classroom teachers with projects that further the play’s impact. Curriculum is designed by our inspiring director and teaching artist, Marti Gobel, and I’m making sure that curriculum enriches the local classrooms on our tour agenda as well as our student matinee audiences.

These Community Youth Projects [and my new education position!] wouldn’t be possible without the support of our funders: Bader Philanthropies, Inc., Einhorn Family Charitable Foundation, The Richard & Ethel Herzfeld Foundation, the City of Milwaukee Arts Board, The Dental Offices of Dr. David Paris, the United Performing Arts Fund, and the Wisconsin Arts Board. I personally thank each and every one of you for contributing to my goals and passions, and I promise to keep Next Act’s relationship with Milwaukee’s youth strong.

The first item on my agenda is our Community Youth Project. Our production *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*

That’s right. You reading this publication, you are the reason that David painstakingly selects plays to fill the stage for another season of enjoyment, discovery, thrill, challenge, and dialogue. If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to...If a play is performed in the theatre but there’s no one in the audience, does it make a sound? The point is, we appreciate you! Thank you for being an integral part of the big picture of Next Act – without you we would have no reason to exist.

Whatever their reaction may be, every patron that witnesses a performance is affected, and that is why we do what we do. You, trusting that David’s artistic choices will stir something in your heart or your mind, come back to Next Act time and again. We are grateful – for your patronage, for your contributions and for your advocacy and support. If you donate to Next Act and you ever wonder what difference does it make, wonder no more. You do make a difference, and here’s the proof, straight from patrons themselves:

“How rewarding to leave the theatre with the reinforcement that life is worthwhile, that we have the free choice to strive, hope, and persevere against seemingly unconquerable barriers. Thanks so much for enriching our lives. [I wish you were our leaders in government.]”

“THANK YOU, Next Act Theatre, for always presenting interesting, thoughtful plays. What I love best about Next Act is how I leave the theater enjoying a play I was not very familiar with. It is always surprising me – in a good way. I find the unexpected and I like that.”

“Can’t say when I’ve last enjoyed a performance this much! Even more so in that one actress performed so nearly flawlessly for more than ninety continuous minutes. Amazing – I completely forgot I was in a theatre.”

“...happy to see Jim Pickering and Deborah Staples again, two of our favorite actors... So it would appear you are our new dealer to feed our theater addiction.”

“Loved the show, and really appreciated the after talk. We brought friends who had never been to Next Act, and they were VERY impressed.”

“We will remember this one for a long time.”

“Thanks for all you do to make our lives richer.”

Thank you to everyone who made a contribution to Next Act during 2018. We are blessed to have all of you in the Next Act Theatre family, and look forward to seeing you on your next visit.



Cast & Crew of *OUTSIDE MULINGAR*, with NAT Staff plus Board Member David Hertel. Photo: Timothy Moder

“Southern trees bear strange fruit,” Billie Holiday famously sang in her harrowing song about lynching. “Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.”

That lyric gave Dominique Morisseau the title for a play. Events unfolding in Jena, Louisiana in 2006-07 gave her the story that unfolds through that play. And as with Holiday’s great song, Morisseau’s story involves a tree – and the nooses dangling from it.

In 2006, the tree in question – known as the “white tree” – dominated the small yard outside the high school in Jena, a small and poor central Louisiana town of 3,000, located 220 miles northwest of New Orleans. Per capita income in Jena in 2006 was less than \$14,000.



Jena High School Grounds

Just under 500 students attended Jena High in 2006; nearly 90 percent of them were white. They’d long appropriated the “white tree” – and its welcoming shade – as their own. The school’s black students generally sat elsewhere, on bleachers near the school auditorium.

The day after some of those black students had congregated under the “white tree,” they arrived at school to find three nooses hanging from its branches.

“I’m thinking the KKK were hanging nooses” black student Robert Bailey said, as he recalled first seeing the nooses. “They want to hang somebody.”

Three white students were almost immediately tagged as the perpetrators. The principal recommended their expulsion; the superintendent overrode him, calling the incident a “prank.” The students instead served mild in-school suspensions.

Three months later, after a hot and tense autumn, six black students – including Robert Bailey – beat up white classmate Justin Barker; he briefly lost consciousness. Upon his release following a three-hour hospitalization, Barker attended a school function that same evening.

Barker hadn’t been among the three white students who’d hung nooses. But he had allegedly taunted Bailey for getting “whipped” a few days earlier by a white man outside a party.

District Attorney Reed Walters, who is white – and who attended the same church as one of the three white students involved in hanging nooses – charged the six black students with attempted murder. Five of the students, who’d subsequently become known as the Jena Six, were juveniles. One of the three noose-hanging white students gave a key witness statement against the Jena Six.

The stark unfairness in Jena justice – mild suspensions for white students threatening murder through lynching, and actual attempted murder charges for black students following a schoolyard fight – underscored a larger problem, in Louisiana and the nation.

According to Department of Justice statistics, a black man in 2007 was three times more likely than a white man to be sent to prison for the same crime. One half of this country’s prison population in 2007 was black. One in three black men in 2007 had a prison record. In Louisiana, black men are five times more likely to go to prison than to college.



In Jena itself, the high school wasn’t even integrated until 1969 – fifteen years after the U.S. Supreme Court had ordered an end to school segregation. The town remained segregated; each of the Jena Six lived in unincorporated and poorer areas outside of town, meaning they couldn’t vote for mayor or police chief and didn’t receive basic services like garbage collection.

In Louisiana’s 1990 Senate race, nearly two thirds of the voters in the parish [a Louisiana county] where Jena is located had cast ballots for onetime KKK member David Duke. In 2006, Jena’s mayor, judge, district attorney and sheriff were all white.

Continued, next page

As a woman of color, a mother and a theater artist, I find that I am constantly looking for projects that offer a means to take an immediate look at our society and the issues that we have not yet managed to fully rectify. It is no surprise that racism, segregation and sexism continue to return time after time, and we still have not found a way to fully turn back in a direction opposite of our former course. We have found ourselves stuck in a rhythm. Plays that show us that we can alter the rhythms of ourselves are a rarity. Plays that allow us to look at the ugliness of our society’s history but packaged in the fresh beauty of our youth are rarer still.



BLOOD AT THE ROOT
Director, Marti Gobel

BLOOD AT THE ROOT boldly reminds us that movement with our bodies, our voices and our intentions are the only way we can alter the rhythms long ago established in our society. Further, it is the young that often find ways to recognize the patterns of ignorance we have set and alter them in a way that can shake us out of our complacency.

Stylistically, Morisseau’s use of Neo-Soul and Rap intertwined with Jazz serves as a stark reminder that the old often gives rise to an unexpected new. Her use of the characters’ direct address to the audience reminds us that it is often individuals, with their own backstories, that will serve as instruments of change. Her use of dance and movement reminds us that when we move together, under the same rhythm, we can find a deeper, more complex harmony.

Lastly, it is not often that a play can show our young adults an accurate reflection of themselves. I have spent many hours engaging in conversation with young adults on a variety of topics from dress codes to the environment and from sexuality to gun control. When allowed to speak freely, their thoughts and observations on all things, great and small, are fueled with great intelligence and passion in a way that is refreshingly non-calculatory. So, why does anger so often present itself as the primary emotion of our youth? It seems to me that their biggest frustration comes from not feeling that they are heard. And, I wonder how it is that we can expect them to someday hold the world in their hands and yet we are so often unwilling to listen to what they think of the world we have created for them.

I recall speaking with my husband on the lack of leadership for minority communities. I grumbled, “Where is our Martin? Our Malcolm? Our Gloria? We need a few of those.” His response has stayed with me. He simply said, “They are probably already born. They’re here. We just don’t know it yet.”

Jena, Louisiana, continued

“Somebody’s been plantin’ these awful feelings in the soil somewhere,” comments one of the students in *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*, about the racism that surrounds him. Morisseau’s play doesn’t just explore what happened a decade ago in Jena. It also joins this student in wondering whether “we ever gonna plant somethin’ new” – instead of continually reaping the whirlwind we’ve sown.



Protestors march in support of the Jena 6



The New Year always brings the desire for a “new you.” Well, we have been working over the last year and a half on a new look for Next Act. Just this past week, we launched a new website, as well as a new ticketing system.

When I first arrived at Next Act over six years ago, I helped us switch our ticketing platform. While this was an improvement, we found there were many features we were not able to offer you. With our new system, Spektrix, we are now able to enhance your ticketing experience with features such as online subscription renewals, online Access Pass redemption, and discount offers automatically applied to your cart at checkout.

If you've purchased online with us in the past, you should have received an email about the new system and how to set up your account. If you didn't see that email and would like to set up your online account, give us a call at 414-278-0765.

Now I know many of you still enjoy talking to a live person, and that service will not change. Our Ticket Office is staffed daily, noon to 5 pm, and we're always happy to help you.

As for the website, the look is new, the navigation is streamlined, but all the same great content is there. So, please check it out at nextact.org, and let us know what you think. We're always happy to hear from you, and your user experience is our top concern!

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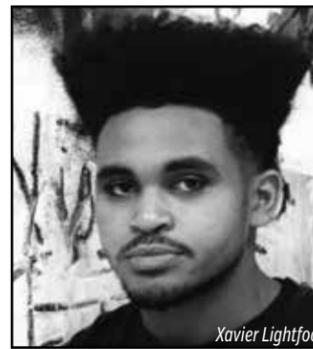
WHAT'S NEXT
 is a quarterly publication of Next Act Theatre
 255 S. Water Street • PO Box 394
 Milwaukee, WI 53201 • 414-278-7780
 www.nextact.org • email info@nextact.org
 Editors Rebecca Moder & David Ceasarini Layout Rose Delaney

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Do you need to make a mandatory withdrawal (required minimum distribution) from your IRA account? Good news: Tax laws allow you to donate your withdrawal, tax-free, when it goes directly to a charitable 501(c)3 organization. Make your support of Next Act go further and keep your tax bill low. Consult your tax advisor and learn more at www.nextact.org/support/ira-distributions

I am a Boomer and as such I have reached an age where I hear more and more of my contemporaries decry the state of the young ... they are too into their technology ... they avoid real, face-to-face contact ... they expect everything to be given to them ... they are disinterested in politics ... they [fill in the blank]. I don't buy it and as a counterpoint I am proud to present Xavier Lightfoot, our featured artist for the production of *BLOOD AT THE ROOT*.

Xavier was one of the students featured in the Pius XI High School art show mounted last spring in conjunction with *I AND YOU* by Lauren Gundersen. His piece “Just Another Excuse” was a powerful indictment of the increase in shootings of unarmed black men at



the hands of law enforcement. Since graduating as valedictorian from Pius XI he has enrolled at the prestigious Maryland Institute College of Art where he continues his pursuit of increased self and social awareness through his art.

“I have decided to make the basis of my artwork about social injustices against my people and things surrounding my own identity as a gay, black and Native American male. Things such as police brutality, mass incarceration, gun violence, gender roles, my sexual orientation, racism and sexism are all issues I tackle, or want to involve in my artwork.”

Xavier wants to confront us; challenge us; make us think about things that may be uncomfortable and unsettling; to compel us to action. But he also



wants “to be a voice for the voiceless because I am not afraid to make a bold statement.”

While he is certainly an exceptional young man, I do not think Xavier is an anomaly. I believe he is representative of his generation and their desire for a more just and inclusive world. Sound familiar fellow Boomers? Maybe this time we can help them realize what have been our dreams too.

I invite you to take time with Xavier's work that will be on display in the lobby gallery. You can also learn more about him and view his art at xavierlightfoot.com.

Jim Toth is a retired art educator in his fifth season as Next Act's volunteer gallery curator.

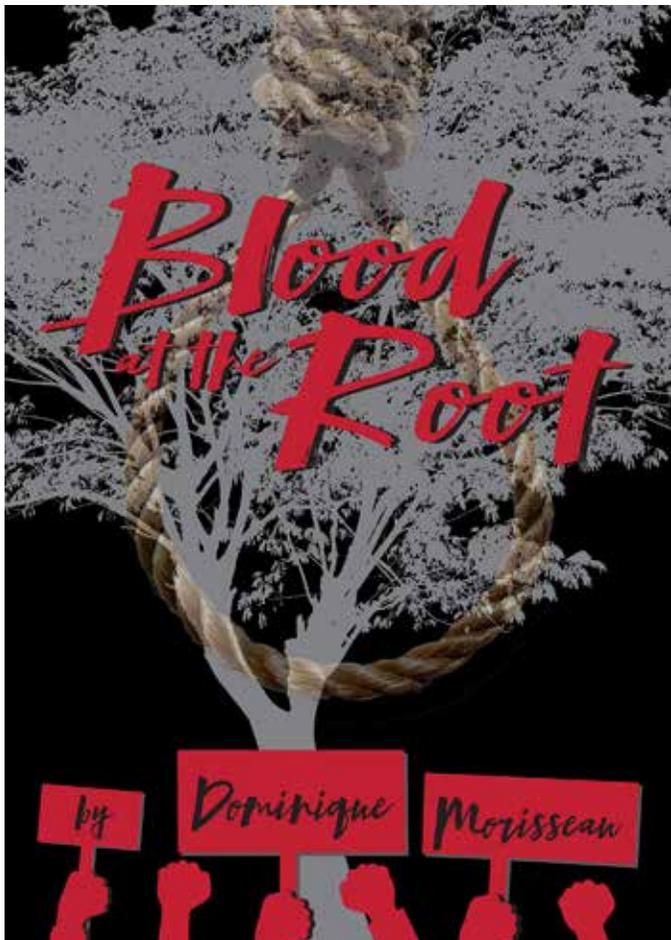




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Louisiana: September, 2006 An African American student sits under the school's large oak tree, challenging its "whites only" status. The next morning, three nooses are discovered hanging from the tree; school administrators dismiss the incident as a prank. As racial tensions grow, six students wrestle with the causes and consequences of deeply-entrenched injustice. These young people speak openly about the prejudices and fears that stand in the way of their dreams, and find the courage to seek solutions for a better life for all.

"... an exquisite play ... a powerful collaborative piece."
- Edinburg Spotlight

| JANUARY 31 - FEBRUARY 24, 2019 | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---------|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| SUNDAY | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY |
| | | | | 31 Preview 7:30 | 1 Opening 7:30 | 2 4:30 8:00 P |
| 3 T 2:00 | | | 6 1:30 7:30 P T | 7 7:30 T | 8 7:30 | 9 4:30 8:00 |
| 10 2:00 P T | | | 13 1:30 7:30 T | 14 7:30 P T | 15 7:30 | 16 4:30 8:00 |
| 17 2:00 P T | 18 7:30 S | | 20 7:30 T | 21 7:30 T | 22 7:30 P | 23 4:30 8:00 |
| 24 2:00 P T | P Personal Preview (Begins 30 minutes prior to curtain) | | T Talkback | | | |
| | | | S Pay What You Can | | | |

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