



**Lights Up! Library
Classroom Activities**

Skeleton Crew
By Dominique Morisseau
Directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson



INTRODUCTION

Thank you for bringing Manhattan Theatre Club's Lights Up! Library initiative into your high school classroom! We're thrilled to provide to you and your students these classroom activities and the performing recording of *Skeleton Crew* by Dominique Morisseau.

Our goals for this initiative are:

- To help students better understand themselves and the world through the medium of theatre
- To help develop a knowledgeable, perceptive new audience for the theatre and for the arts in general
- To stimulate participants' imaginations, creativity, and critical thinking skills through engagement with challenging theatre works

The activities are divided into three sections:

- **Preparing Students to View the Play** — activities may include classroom discussion prompts, writing prompts, and theatre games or improvisations
- **Viewing the Play** — including questions for classroom discussion after students watch the performance
- **Follow-Up Activities** — further activities intended to deepen students' personal and intellectual interactions with the play

Additionally, [click here](#) to access supplemental resources which may include links to articles and videos meant to bring further context to this experience.

Our hope is that you will have the time to activate all of the activities in this document; however, we understand that time is among the scarcest resources in a high school classroom. One could maintain a rich experience by engaging in the framing questions, one preparatory activity, post-show questions, and one follow-up exercise. And, of course, please modify these activities — or devise your own — in any way necessary to meet the needs of each student in your classroom.

Some of the activities you'll find on these pages align to the [National Core Arts Standards for Theatre](#), and most will align to your local benchmarks and standards.

We hope that this experience will be enriching and educationally beneficial to your students!



ABOUT MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

Over the past five decades, Manhattan Theatre Club has been a preeminent producer of the highest quality, award-winning theatrical productions of new works by American and international playwrights. Our over 600 premieres have been produced throughout the country and across the globe and have contributed a proud legacy to the American theatrical canon.

Our artistic mission, which Artistic Director Lynne Meadow created and has implemented since 1972, is to develop and present new work in a dynamic, supportive, environment; to identify and collaborate with the most promising new as well as seasoned, accomplished artists; and to produce a diverse repertoire of innovative, entertaining, and thought-provoking plays and musicals by American and international playwrights in our theatres each season. Our commitment to excellence extends to every aspect of the company: from the gifted permanent staff; to a supportive Board of Directors; to a first-rate Education program, which has served more than 100,000 students of all ages in New York City, across the country, and around the world; to a quality, paid career training program, which prepares the next generation of theatre professionals for jobs at MTC and beyond; to a robust behind-the-scenes developmental program for new work. MTC performs in multiple venues: our Broadway home at the 650-seat Samuel J. Friedman Theatre—formerly Biltmore Theatre—which we restored and reopened in 2003, and at New York City Center off-Broadway, where we created a 300-seat Stage I and a 150-seat Stage II.

MTC productions have earned 7 Pulitzer Prizes, 30 Tony Awards, 51 Drama Desk Awards, and 49 Obie Awards, amongst many other honors, but our success is not measured by awards. Instead, the merit of our work is represented by the output and talent of the myriad of writers and artists who have debuted at MTC and who continue to return for multiple productions. We are proud of the artists whom we have discovered and nurtured, as well as their impact on our industry.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Manhattan Theatre Club's Broadway premiere production of Dominique Morisseau's *Skeleton Crew* opened on January 26, 2022, at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre. It was directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson; the cast included Chanté Adams, Joshua Boone, Brandon J. Dirden, Adesola Osakalumi, and Phylicia Rashad. The set was designed by Michael Carnahan; costumes were by Emilio Sosa; lighting by Rui Rita; original music and sound design by Rob Kaplowitz, with additional original music and lyrics by Jimmy Keys, aka "J. Keys." Choreography was by Adesola Osakalumi and hair and wig design was by Cookie Jordan.

ABOUT DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU AND *SKELETON CREW*



Dominique Morisseau is one of the most important playwrights in America today; her plays are among the most frequently produced. She is perhaps best known for her “Detroit Project,” a dramatic trilogy focusing on characters and issues connected to the city where she was born and raised. The trilogy was inspired in part by August Wilson’s 10-play “Pittsburgh Cycle”—Morisseau acknowledges Wilson as one of her models and mentors. Unlike Wilson’s work, Morisseau’s plays tend to focus explicitly on political and social questions and concerns. *Pipeline*, for example, deals with racial inequities in the American educational system; *Confederates*, spanning more than a century, is about enduring institutional racism in this country.

Skeleton Crew, the third play in the Detroit trilogy, is set during the financial crisis of 2008 and dramatizes the plight of four Black workers in the automobile industry facing the imminent closing of their factory and the specter of unemployment. While the central conflict in the play is between the workers and their bosses, it also explores the idea of “crossing a line” and the roots and causes of personal and professional crises. Finally, *Skeleton Crew* is about seeking and finding human connection and support during times of uncertainty and potentially devastating disruption.

For more information about Dominique Morisseau and her work, you can read https://www.seenthemagazine.com/culture/arts_entertainment/playwright-dominique-morisseau-from-6-mile-to-broadway/article_91e7bd5d-3e79-5cef-bf08-1f28f747130c.html in SEEN Magazine.

CHARACTERS, SETTING, AND TIME

- FAYE: Black woman, mid-late 50's, Working class woman. Tough and a lifetime of dirt beneath her nails. Somewhere, deep compassion.
- DEZ: Black man, mid-late 20's, Working class man. Young hustler, playful, street-savy, and flirtatious.. Somewhere, deeply sensitive.
- SHANITA: Black woman, mid-late 20's, Working class young woman. Pretty but not ruled by it. Hard-working. By-the-books. Believes in the work she does. Also, pregnant. Somewhere, a beautiful dreamer.
- REGGIE: Black man, late 30's. White collar man. Studious. Dedicated. Compassionate. The Foreman. Somewhere, a fire brims.

SETTING/TIME:

Detroit, Michigan. Stamping Plant. Winter. Somewhere around year 2008



PREPARING STUDENTS TO VIEW THE PLAY

FRAMING QUESTIONS

Either through classroom discussion or individual journaling, ask students to reflect upon these questions:

- What is your chief goal or ambition? What external obstacles might keep you from realizing it?
- What does it mean to step over a line? Have you ever done so? Or thought about it? What happened or might happen as a result?
- What are the differences between “blue collar” and “white collar” jobs?
- What issues can create conflicts between workers and their employers?

ACTIVITY: DEFINITIONS

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cn11.2-1.b.

Ask students to research definitions for the following glossary terms:

- Assembly line
- Blue collar/white collar
- Break room
- Financial crisis of 2008
- Labor union
- Middle manager
- Severance package (aka severance deal)
- Automobile stamping plant
- UAW
- Union representative

WRITING ACTIVITY: WORK-RELATED FREEWRITES

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Pr4.1-1.b., TH:Re8.1-11.b., TH:Cn10.1-1.a.

Working individually, ask students to write poems or monologues on one of the two topics below, half the class assigned to each.

The pieces should reflect the point of view of a worker and at least suggest what the job in question is.

"I Love the Way the Job Needs Me"
"Upstairs Don't Give a Damn"

WRITING ACTIVITY: THE LINE

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cr1.1-III.c., TH:Cr2-II.b., TH:Pr4.1-I.a., TH:Pr4.1-I.b., TH:Pr4.1-II.a., TH:Cn11.1-III.a., TH:Re8.1-II.c.

Line Lists

Divide the class into small groups; each group must have a scribe. With a two-minute time limit, each group is to write down as many short sentences or phrases as it can, each including the word "line." Encourage inventiveness and variety.

After two minutes, share the results. Call attention to the examples that use the word literally and those that use it metaphorically.

Note that the word "line" is uttered 38 times in the play, sometimes literally (the characters work on an automobile assembly line), sometimes metaphorically, especially toward the end of the play.

Crossing the Line

Give each working group a small stack of index cards. On each card they are to write down an action that crosses a line, i.e., that breaks a rule. Encourage them to include both minor breaches of decorum and major transgressions. Once each group has come up with at least five such actions, ask them to arrange their cards in order of seriousness. Share and compare the results. Does everyone agree with every group's ranking? Were there duplications? What's been missed or omitted?

Next ask students, working individually or in their small groups, to write a monologue for a character who has stepped over a line, in which the character explains their action to themselves or someone else. Consider: Is crossing the line always a "bad thing." Can it be admirable?

Share and compare the monologues.



VIEWING THE PLAY

You'll receive a link and password to the performance recording of the play on the first weekday of the month for which you registered to view the play. The recording may be viewed only during regularly scheduled class time in classrooms or assembly spaces on your campus. Viewing credentials may not be shared with students for individual viewing at home or on social media.

You may wish to assign each student to "track" a character during the performance using a [Character Profile Form](#).

CLASS DISCUSSION

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1-1.a., TH:Re8.1-1.c., TH:Re9.1-1.b., TH:Re9.1-1.c.

After viewing the play, use these questions to facilitate a class discussion about the theatergoing experience:

- What moments in the production were particularly vivid and powerful?
- What was surprising?
- What was confusing to you?
- What were the pivotal moments?
- Who of the characters seemed most sympathetic? Why?
- Which characters were less admirable? Did they have redeeming qualities that helped you understand their behavior?
- Why do you think the playwright wrote this play?
- What were the different characters' personal and professional crises?
- What were the moments of crossing a line or walking a line?
- What exactly happened to resolve the main crisis? What did Faye do? What did she accomplish?



FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

MONOLOGUE WRITING: RUNNING ON SOUL

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cr1.1-III.c., TH:Cr2-II.a., TH:Pr4.1-I.b., TH:Pr4.1-II.a.

Working individually, students each create a character who is in a difficult, stressful situation, personal or professional. Be as specific as possible about age, occupation, and the nature of the character's difficult circumstances.

Students then write a monologue, a diary entry, or maybe a poem for the character, entitled "I'm Running on Soul... [All That's Left]" OR "One Thing I Know is How to Rise the Hell Up!" They should consider including the words "down" and/or "dream."

Share and discuss as many as time allows.

How many students included "down" or "dream" in what they wrote? Mention that "down" is uttered 50 times in the play; "dream" occurs seven times. Does that mean it's seven times as likely to be down as to dream?

DRAWING CONNECTIONS

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1-III.a., TH:Re8.1-I.b., TH:Re8.1-II.b., TH:Re8.1-III.b., TH:Re9.1-III.c., TH:Cn10.1-I.a., TH:Cn11.1-I.a.; TH:Cn11.2-I.b.

How does this play connect to the world around us?

Individually or in small groups, ask students to find an article, news feature, interview, or other recent artifact from current events that reflects one of the play's themes or ideas. Then, have students share and discuss:

- Why is this theme or idea relevant today?
- Have they encountered the theme or idea in other artistic mediums or media?
- Does this new information alter your personal response to the production? If so, how?

What did we discover?



Ask each student to identify a topic in the play with which they were previously unfamiliar. The student should gather as much information as they can on this subject and share with the class. Sources could include articles, news features, videos, interviews, or other relevant artifacts. Guide students through the compilation of research and the structure of the sharing as best appropriate for your subject area and curricular goals.

FEEDBACK FOR MTC

We appreciate that you chose to bring Manhattan Theatre Club's production of *Skeleton Crew* into your classroom, and we hope that your students had a great experience with these activities and the play.

You'll receive an email at the end of the month in which your class had access to the performance recording. Please complete the Lights Up! Library Feedback Form linked in that email so that we can continue to improve this initiative.