

A Review of Skeleton Crew

Dominique Morriseau, Playwright

Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Director

Manhattan Theatre Club, Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

January 26, 2002 – February 20, 2022

After a series of COVID-driven setbacks and cancellations, Dominique Morriseau's *Skeleton Crew* triumphantly opened on Broadway. Artistic Director Lynne Meadow's pre-show speech served both as a reflection of Broadway's current climate, and as proof of the enduring subject matter of the play: each of us is only a crisis away from losing our livelihood. Meadow thanked the audience for patiently seeing the show through a postponed opening night "because, well - everything." However, where Meadow's speech spoke to the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020; Morriseau's script speaks to the impact of the global financial crisis of 2008.

After Meadow celebrated "the only new play on Broadway" and all those who made it a reality, the lights dimmed, projections returned, choreography commenced, and the onstage "MASKS ON / PHONES OFF" caution signs were struck as the action began.

As the lights rose, our sense of place (a common theme in Morriseau's work) was made real by Scenic Designer Michael Carnahan's wholly realistic break room, where all the character-driven action takes place. Floor tiles have been chipped away in places, mismatched chairs around the table suggested they've been saved from nearby dumpsters, and what felt like a nod to Phylicia Rashad's role as Mama in the film remake of *A Raisin In the Sun*, released the same year that *Skeleton Crew* takes place, a few plants survive on what little light makes it through the grimy, soot-stained windows. The working-class world is made complete with official safety regulation posters interspersed with homemade announcements printed on computer paper and taped to the windows, sharing space with "support unions" signs and an Obama/Biden bumper sticker affixed to the break room fridge. The space, where we meet the workers who seemingly live there, is instantly recognizable.

Omnipresent Faye, the incomparable Phylicia Rashad, shuffles around the break room in her work boots, her body heavy under the weight of her hoodie as she organizes her belongings and prepares for the day. Faye is as much a part of the plant as the machinery that drones on in the background. In fact, her co-workers have come to expect that Faye is the first one at the plant to make coffee each morning, and that she is always the last one left in the building at night. She looks at one of the computer-paper signs, which reads "NO SMOKING" — with "FAYE" added in magic marker for emphasis — then reaches for a cigarette, lights it, and settles in. Fellow line workers Dez (Joshua Boone) and Shanita (Chanté Adams) enter, filling their work home with

banter about how the cold, who ate Shanita's food from the fridge, and how cutbacks have led to near-impossible production expectations. While all welcome the overtime, they are on the edge of overworked. Talk turns to rumors of the plant's shutdown. Enter Reggie (Brandon J. Dirden), the plant's foreman, wheeling in a space heater he brought from home. Reggie asks Faye to talk with him for a moment, and we learn the rumors are true: the plant will indeed close. The conflicts become clear. Management is looking for any easy way to let go of their workers in advance of closing. Faye's worked at the plant for 29 years — one shy of the 30 years that would guarantee her the pension she deserves. Reggie needs to get Dez to stop passing time with gambling, to arrive on time, and to avoid other minor transgressions without revealing the truth he knows. When Reggie learns Shanita has been offered another job at a local copy center but that she'd rather stay at the plant, we physically see his body bend under the full weight of what he carries. Yet amidst the plot's twists and turns, Morriseau never truly reveals the answer to what *should* happen next, and each member of the ensemble offers a balanced and nuanced performance that keeps the audience engaged in every revelation of what *does* happen next.

Rashad truly gives a standout performance as Faye, with a balance of humor and hardship defining her matronly demeanor. From her first line, it seemed as if Rashad crafted Faye's speech with the same punctuation and intonation as Morriseau herself. It's clear that Faye has a huge heart behind her hardened facade. As the grand dame of the break room; however, there is nothing grand about her character. But while Rashad is billed as the star, the entire ensemble delivered stellar performances, each layered with honest subtlety.

Dirden's Reggie contains multitudes, balanced with heartbreaking conviction: the foreman balanced caution and measured frustration as he struggled with the conflicting responsibilities to his employers and his community in an impressively nuanced performance. Adams' Broadway debut as Shanita was a study in how to expertly weave long, character-focused monologues into the whole of a story's narrative. Shanita's pride in her work and her love of the line are made clear without doubt and added personal investment in the plant beyond the professional work. When she stood center stage and urged Dez to hush and listen to the music of the machinery, the full audience obeyed. Boone brought an intelligent, fiery intensity to the determined Dez, who effortlessly fluctuated between flirting with Shanita in the break room and dealing with the harsh realities of being an ambitious young man in a working-class city.

While not billed as characters, choreographer and dancer Adesola Osakalumi and projection designer Nicholas Hussong filled the plant with character-driven narratives. Osakalumi opened the show with the distinct physicality of popping and locking, mimicking the unseen physical machinery of the plant. As the story progressed, it seemed Osakalumi's dance continued to punctuate the narrative, and his dance became more fluid, less precise, as the dependability of the plant's permanence waned. Likewise, Hussong's projections, filled with the faces of Detroit's people and the visual demarcations of place at the top of the show, turned to

boldly colored, fast-moving machinery and the people of the stamping line. As a mirror to the movement, the projections lost their color and their people in a striking reminder of the world just outside the break room.

Likewise, Director Reuben Santiago-Hudson tied the world of the play together with an almost invisible hand on the staging and an obvious mastery of the driving pace the story demands. He also makes the most of Morriseau's smart, rapid, heightened language. The quick-witted repartee at the top of the show, as Faye defiantly smokes in front of her "No Smoking" sign and verbally spars with Dez when he dares breach the subject of her being a woman of a certain age, going through her "over 50-pause," makes one think the show might be a comedy. In fact, in the two hours the story spans, it's sometimes hard to decipher the drama from the humor. Dez's incessant wooing of co-worker Shanita, and her playful rejections add to the sense of familiarity and fun that the characters depend on from their break room family.

Then, the understated costumes designed by Emilio Sosa were perfect extensions of character and place. Faye's baggy jeans, hoodies, and work boots enabled the physical transformation of the character for which Rashad is rightfully celebrated. Dez's layered wardrobe reminded us we were in a cold Detroit winter. Shanita sported a "Juicy" sweatshirt over her pregnant belly, and Reggie's button-down shirts and fleece vests depicted an instantly recognizable white-collar worker, in spite of his blue-collar origins.

With this last play in her Detroit Trilogy (after *Detroit '67* and *Paradise Blue*), Morriseau again reinforces her legacy as one of our leading American writers. The impact of this story, in an era of real-life shutdowns impacting the theatre industry at large, which saw Morriseau's Broadway musical, *Ain't Too Proud*, close early while *Skeleton Crew* was in rehearsals, was clearly felt throughout the audience on opening night. Even without the "Rules for Audience Engagement" Morriseau includes in many of her show's programs, Faye's smart mouth and fiery attitude elicited a healthy amount of vocal response and agreement from the crowd.¹ Likewise, audible gasps and agreements punctuated some of Reggie and Shanita's more provocative moments. In fact, before the show even began audience members were nodding their heads in sync to J.Keys' original music, with a few dancing in their seats. Like the production line itself, each moment of this production of *Skeleton Crew* falls into place to create the whole — a thoroughly satisfying, thought provoking, and inspiring ride.

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¹ Morriseau's "Rules for Audience Engagement" were included as a program insert in later playbills.