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*Pipeline* by Dominique Morisseau (review)

Lisa B. Thompson

Theatre Journal, Volume 70, Number 1, March 2018, pp. 105-107 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2018.0015>



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the bride”—but all the carrying on by the bridesmaids and groomsmen grew tiresome long before one of them stepped forward to take over for the rabbi and get the derailed ceremony back on track.

While *I Now Pronounce* is animated by the anxiety of marital commitment, Molly Smith Metzler's *Cry It Out* examines the identity crisis of being a new mother. Jessie (Jessica Dickey) and Lina (Andrea Sygłowski) are backyard neighbors on maternity leave in suburban Long Island. There are class differences between them—Jessie is an acquisitions attorney at a big Manhattan firm; Lina has an entry-level job in hospital administration—but that does not stop them from forming a meaningful bond based on their common experience. Things get complicated when the much wealthier Mitchell (Jeff Biehl) appears to ask if they would welcome his wife, Adrienne (Liv Rooth), also a new mother, into their coffee klatch. The scenes that follow provide a touching and variegated depiction of what it means, for better or worse, suddenly to be living a life defined by sore nipples, baby monitors, stretch pants, and a nagging anxiety about whether to go back to work or not. In the scene when Lina does just that, the loss of friendship with Jessie was compelling and sad, thanks to the honest, unforced acting of Sygłowski and Dickey. Their performances, framed by the effective staging of director Davis McCallum, helped Metzler's play stir compassion for the predicament of career women who want to be mothers.

Basil Kreimendahl's *We're Gonna Be Okay* is also about neighbors with class differences, but the kids in its two typical American households are troubled adolescents and the moms and dads are preoccupied with the threat of nuclear war. They live in cartoonish side-by-side shotgun houses that suggest the “Little Boxes” made of ticky-tacky that Malvina Reynolds sang about in 1962. That is the year when the play takes place, right at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Efran (Sam Breslin Wright), a middle-class, white-collar salesman type, spends the first act convincing his working-class neighbor Sul (Scott Drummond) that they should go in together on constructing a bomb shelter to protect their wives and children from the coming apocalypse. The wives and children—Efran's wife Leena (Kelly McAndrew), his gay son Jake (Andrew Cutler), Sul's wife Mag (Annie McNamara), and their angst-ridden daughter Deanna (Anne-Marie Trabolsi)—are each alienated in their individual ways. In the second act the two families merge and take refuge in the unfinished shelter to wait for the world to end. And as cabin fever sets in, the play suggests that in effect it already has—not from a cold war nuclear showdown, but in the cataclysmic change in social and cultural values that will define the 1960s, '70s, and beyond.

Kreimendahl's comedy offered a tender satire on the naiveté of American family values during the age of *Ozzie and Harriet*. The writing is clever and honest all at once, but the second act struggled to satisfy the narrative expectations generated by the first. Efran's increasingly agitated behavior suggests that he—the embodiment of both patriarchy and paranoia—is the bomb that is about to explode, but that threat is too easily defused when his wife simply insists that she has had enough and then burns her bra in a gesture of comic defiance. That leads to a sexual encounter between the teenagers that suggests a breakdown of the gender binary, but before any of these storylines could play out, a big bang and blast of blinding white light ended the play on an inconclusive note and the hollow reassurance that “we're all gonna be okay.”

Are we? As a hopeful though uncertain assertion, Kreimendahl's title resonated with other plays in the 2017 Humana Festival. The wedding vows in *I Now Pronounce* were never actually spoken; *Cry It Out* ended with a mother's profound ambivalence about going back to work. There was great anxiety about how life will turn out for the characters in these plays, just as there was a mounting anxiety about an eruption of violence for the audience of *Recent Alien Abductions*. It is tempting if a bit facile to associate this apprehension with liberal dread during the early months of the Trump presidency. Still, part of what made a play about air-guitar enthusiasts a crowd pleaser at the 41st Humana Festival was the sheer escape it offered from the hard and complicated realities of the present moment.

**SCOTT T. CUMMINGS**  
Boston College

**PIPELINE.** By Dominique Morisseau. Directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz. Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi E. Newhouse, New York City. June 15, 2017.

The world premiere of *Pipeline* at Lincoln Center Theater cemented Dominique Morisseau's reputation as a playwright who explores issues of social justice in the United States through complex narratives of race, class, and power. Much like her earlier work, which includes *Sunset Baby* and the Detroit Project: *Detroit '67*, *Paradise Blue*, and *Skeleton Crew*, *Pipeline* reflected Morisseau's deep investments in telling intimate stories about African Americans confronting monumental challenges. The production's program included a “Playwright's Rules of Engagement,” which encouraged a sense of com-



Namir Smallwood (Omari) and Karen Pittman (Nya) in *Pipeline*. (Photo: Jeremy Daniel.)

munity and respectful audience participation, such that, if inspired, spectators could engage in call-and-response or talkback to the performance. The show I attended also included a post-performance talkback with the playwright and performers, giving the audience yet another chance to respond to the play's themes and further aiding in Morisseau's efforts to build community.

Directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, *Pipeline* served as a theatrical rebuttal to conventional ideas about the black family, the role of education in black liberation, the strength of black women, and the value of integration. The production rejected stereotypes, clichés, and easy answers to many of the persistent issues and debates that African American cultural producers and intellectuals have wrestled with for decades. While telling the story of inner-city public-school teacher Nya (Karen Pittman), her ex-husband Xavier (Morocco Omari), and their son Omari (Namir Smallwood), Morisseau complicates rather than contradicts what audiences think they know about black single mothers, absentee black fathers, failing public schools, school safety officers, black youth violence, and the anxieties of the black middle class.

*Pipeline's* title evokes the social phenomenon identified as the school-to-prison pipeline that funnels black children, especially poor public-school

students, into juvenile institutions and eventually prisons. The narrative contends with the aggressive use of policing and guards in schools, zero-tolerance policies, and the disproportionate punishments handed out to black girls and boys that criminalize black children. There are resonances in *Pipeline* with the work of black playwright-performers Nilaja Sun and Anna Deavere Smith. While Sun's *No Child . . .* and Smith's *Notes from the Field* focus mostly on the fate of working-class black and Latino students in the public-school system, Morisseau concentrates *Pipeline* on one black middle-class family in order to address similar issues in both private and public schools. In performance *Pipeline's* distinct approach raised questions about whether class privilege provides a prophylactic that can protect black children against systemic racial injustice. The play also called attention to another pipeline in the US educational system: the one that delivers those born into privilege into positions of power. Although the school that Omari attends is exactly the kind of institution that feeds directly into the elite echelon of society, the lack of diversity in terms of student body and staff as well as academic subjects raised questions about whether a black boy could also benefit from such a space.

The production made another important intervention in its challenge to perceptions of black fami-

lies as dysfunctional. While the black family, black parenthood in particular, remains under constant critique, Morisseau refused to respond to the criticism by creating a morally upstanding and intact family. Instead, *Pipeline* asked its viewers whether a black boy can succeed in America with his soul unscathed? The production presented a divorced mother and father struggling to assist their son as he attempts to navigate a hostile world that they themselves can barely manage, despite their middle-class trappings. Pittman performed Nya as a loving and devoted, yet flawed mother who pursues every avenue to help her son succeed. Substance abuse, infidelity, and foul language all appear in the play as coping mechanisms that she adopts as a way to manage not only the stresses of single parenting, but also of teaching at an under-resourced school. Through the character, Morisseau destabilizes what black feminist scholar Michele Wallace once called the myth of the superwoman, rejecting the notion that survival requires perfection from black mothers.

Morisseau's weaving of canonical literature by Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks throughout the play allowed the production to talk back to the US educational system, while also demonstrating the power of black literature to craft tender, yet brutal depictions of black boyhood in the country. Her dizzying reimagining of Brooks's poem "We Real Cool" haunted the production. Nya's explication of the four verses for her students revealed how evocative the poem's depiction of young black boys in 1959 remains. This scene also demonstrated the power of black literature to capture the fates of those too often relegated to the pipeline that leads them nowhere and the ability of art and education to confirm that black lives matter.

Notably, it was a question posed by Omari's teacher about Wright's classic novel *Native Son* that served as the lightning rod that threatened his future. In this moment Omari worried about being perceived as a "monster" like the boys in the pool hall in Brooks's poem or like Wright's protagonist Bigger Thomas. The threat of the black boy as monster appeared repeatedly in *Pipeline*. The vibrant film projections by Hannah Wasileski presented during scene transitions provided glimpses of young black students at an urban public school. It was difficult to discern whether the students in the footage were simply being teenagers or if they were on the verge of being dangerously out of control. The projections served to remind audiences of how often fear of black male violence emerges in the American imagination, even in the minds of black boys themselves.

Powerfully, *Pipeline* invited audiences to question assumptions about what constitutes a "good school" and the idea of school choice, especially



Heather Velazquez (Jasmine) and Namir Smallwood (Omari) in *Pipeline*.  
(Photo: Jeremy Daniel.)

if both elite and low-performing schools fail their black students both culturally and pedagogically. New York, with its labyrinth of highly segregated schools, ranging from elusive private academies to under-resourced public schools, provided the ideal setting for the world premiere of the play. Overshadowing the show was the specter of the eventual prize of acceptance to a prestigious college or university; it loomed large in the background of the story, as does its alleged guarantee for a successful adulthood. *Pipeline* not only encouraged its audiences to consider the cost of educational achievement to the souls of many, but also to interrogate what constitutes a successful society.

**LISA B. THOMPSON**  
*University of Texas at Austin*

**THE TOP OF BRAVERY.** By Jeremy V. Morris. Directed by Tawnya Pettiford-Wates. Quill Theatre, Richmond Triangle Players, Richmond, Virginia. February 3, 2017.

Blackface minstrelsy haunts American vernacular performance, from children's cartoons to sorority selfies, but in *The Top of Bravery* it took center stage. Running for three weeks at the Richmond Triangle Players, Jeremy V. Morris's new play was a collaboration between Quill Theatre and the African American Theatre of Virginia, with support from the Conciliation Project. Even if it had not debuted in the former Confederate capital and less than a month after Trump's inauguration emboldened racism across the country, Morris's choice to perform a blackface repertoire would have been provocative. But *The Top of Bravery* was, like the figure that inspired it, brave and virtuosic. The play