

Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York, Albany, NY
Skeleton Crew by Dominique Morisseau. Directed by Hettie Barnhill.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

"I own something that ain't nobody can take from me."

Keeping a factory open that is losing money, business, workers is the back story in Dominique Morisseau's play "Skeleton Crew," third play in her Detroit Play Trilogy. Set in 2008, during the Great Recession, it takes place in a break room in the auto stamping factory where all four characters are employed. Reggie, the supervisor takes on the challenges imposed by three workers, Shanita - unmarried and pregnant, Dez - unhappy and armed, and Faye - grandmother, evicted and homeless, addicted to cigarettes and gambling. The three of them have bonded and their common enemy, Reggie, is a former protegee of Faye's. Over a period of weeks they deal with their individual problems and their one unifier, Faye, almost too old to continue working according to their union's standards.



Artines Smith, Regina Robinson, Hasson Harris W., Frank Wilson;
Photo by Robert Gertler

Morisseau blends these four people within the unity of language and ambition. Reggie, perfectly played by Hasson Harris W., is the best educated and settled among them. He is very grateful to Faye, a pitch-perfect Regina Robinson, who expects no gratitude and accepts no help from the younger man who has been a family friend for decades. Shanita, played softly by Artines Smith, wants very little from her compatriots but is happy to accept the attentions of the volatile Dez, portrayed with an excitement by Frank Wilson. For the Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York this is an ideal play to present. Albany, New York is an unproven political and economic parallel to 2008's Detroit, Michigan. Industry has broken down and the economic structure of the region has taken a plunge into the nearby Hudson River.

W.'s Reggie is a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Compelled by his unseen white bosses he is continually posting new, intrusive and constricting rules for behavior and work



Regina Robinson; Photo: Robert Gertler

efforts. He is caught between relying on his job for a continued present and a failing friendship that brought him the job in the first place. W. plays the confusion naturally and with a talent for interpretation. As his principal opposing cohort, Regina Robinson playing the role, Faye continues to quietly goad the man on. In the author's simple script Faye is the one who emerges as a heroine, with all her mistakes and errors conspiring against her. She still manages to make the greatest sacrifice for her fellows in a way that is unbelievably generous considering her own practical position. Robinson's calm performance plays against the emotions Faye is feeling and allows her to interpret her role in a way that we all can understand.

Wilson's Dez is an exciting character, failing his fellows, falling in love, faking his honesty. Wilson handles this disparity very nicely making his character as real as possible. He brings the audience a comprehension of the times in which the play is set. We easily accept his social mistakes and quietly cheer him on as he pursues the dreams of family and home that could be his if the times and the circumstances were better and more conceivably acceptable. His arguments for honesty from all sides are extremely well played.



Hasson Harris W, Frank Wilson; Photo: Robert Gertler

It falls to Artinces Smith, as Shanita, to hold all of this together. Shanita is content with her lot in life. She enjoys her drive to work. She embraces her unborn child constantly with an understated reality that is beautiful. She is able to discuss coffee with the same ease and directness with which she talks about her future as a single mother and, later, about her possible relationship with Dez,

What director Hettie Barnhill has done within the confines of her one set show is illuminate the many varied worlds these four people inhabit. Reggie has a comfortable existence with wife and family, a very typical middle class world. Dez's outside world is rarely addressed but we feel it through his choices in life. Shanita's commonplace existence is highlighted only

through her current situation. Faye, who sleeps in the break room whenever she can has a personal world that we hear about eventually and can sympathize with out of our own experiences. As stated earlier, the play becomes hers slowly and gradually and it belongs there. It



Atencia Smith, Frank Wilson; Photo: Robert Gertler

is the joy of being the catalyst that makes her the quiet principal character in the play and Barnhill exercises both caution and a deliberate intent in bringing Faye's story to the fore.

There is a fifth character, known only as The Performer, who gives us a mimed Charlie Chaplinesque sense of the factory itself. He does it

extremely well.

Sheilah London-Miller's costumes are perfect, and her set expresses the place so very well. Nicholas Nealon has done a fine job designing the lighting for this and the sound design by Chad Reid works very nicely. Barnhill and her team have given us, not so much a play, a piece of life as these folks lived it. This is a triumph for Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York.

+ 10/22/2023 +

Skeleton Crew plays at Capital Repertory's Lauren & Harold Iselin Studio Theatre, 251 N. Pearl Street, Albany, NY through October 29. For information and tickets go to <https://www.blacktheatretroupeupstateny.org/> or call 518-382-3884 ext. 139.

