



PARADISE BLUE

by

**Dominique
Morisseau**

directed by

**Ruben
Santiago-Hudson**

SignatureTheatre STUDY GUIDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Synopsis and Character Biographies	3
A CLOSER LOOK:	
Interview with Playwright Dominique Morisseau	4
UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY:	
A History of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley	5
Music in the Motor City	6
Poetry in <i>Paradise Blue</i>	7
BEHIND THE SCENES:	
Interview with Actor Kristolyn Lloyd	8
Interview with Costume Designer Clint Ramos	9
About Signature Theatre	10



Kristolyn Lloyd and J. Alphonse Nicholson. Photo by Joan Marcus.

INTRODUCTION

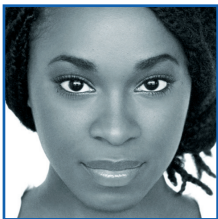
SYNOPSIS

In 1949, Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood is gentrifying. Blue, a troubled trumpeter and the owner of Paradise Club, is torn between remaining in Black Bottom with his loyal lover Pumpkin and leaving behind a traumatic past. But when the arrival of a mysterious woman stirs up tensions, the fate of Paradise Club hangs in the balance.



J. Alphonse Nicholson. Photo by Joan Marcus.

CHARACTERS



Pumpkin

(Kristolyn Lloyd)

Pumpkin works as the waitress, cook, and caretaker of the Paradise Club. She enjoys reciting poetry and listening to the music at the Paradise Club.



Blue

(J. Alphonse Nicholson)

Blue is a gifted jazz trumpeter and owner of the Paradise Club. Blue is hoping to take the next step in his career as a musician, which may mean leaving the Paradise Club and his band members behind.



Corn

(a.k.a Cornelius)

(Keith Randolph Smith)

Corn plays the piano in Blue's band. He's older than the rest and has settled into life and its disruptions with more ease.



P-Sam

(a.k.a Percussion Sam)

(Francois Battiste)

P-Sam plays the drums in Blue's band. He's fast-paced and always eager to play his next gig.



Silver

(Simone Missick)

Silver has just arrived in Detroit after leaving New Orleans under mysterious circumstances. She's secretive yet charming and takes a special interest in helping Pumpkin find her voice.

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU

Photo by Gregory Costanzo



How did you get your start in theatre? What drew you towards playwriting?

I started acting in plays in 2nd grade. The bug bit me very early. And I've been writing since 2nd grade also, very much into mysteries and short novellas (yep, I tried to write a few myself. Mine were called, "The Cabbage Patch Kid Mysteries". They were a type of doll that I grew up with. I was obsessed with

them). But playwriting didn't happen until I was in college as a theatre acting student, and I started getting frustrated with the lack of roles for African-American women in our department productions. I wrote my first play for myself and the two other African-American girls in my department as a way to make space for our stories. And then, with the success of that show, the playwriting bug had bitten me forever.

Paradise Blue is part of your Detroit Trilogy, alongside Detroit '67 and Skeleton Crew. What inspired you to write a trilogy of pieces?

I wanted to write a three-play cycle mostly because of August Wilson's ten play cycle of Pittsburgh. I thought, after reading his cycle, that the people of Pittsburgh must feel so valued after reading this man's work, and I wanted the people of Detroit to have an author doing the same thing for them. We deserve love and full exploration of our humanity and the media wasn't doing that, so I decided that it had to come from those of us writers who are from the city and know its humanity well. I love my city, so this trilogy is also my way of spreading that love.

Where did you get the initial idea for this play? Did you start with the time, the place, the people?

I started with the time. I knew I wanted to tell a story about Paradise Valley in the 40s, so that's where I began my research. And the demands of the world at the time (jazz, liquor, urban renewal) all naturally made their way into the story because that's what was happening. And I knew I wanted to tell a story about how we lost Paradise Valley, because I'd heard so much about it growing up and wanted to experience it for myself. Theatre allows you to resurrect people, places, and communities.

In the play, Pumpkin is reading the poetry of Georgia Douglas Johnson. Can you talk us through your decision to use Johnson's work in this play?

I wanted to use a Black woman poet. I knew that. And I was looking for under-known writers during the Harlem Renaissance. We might have all heard of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen etc. But there had to be more Black women poets that I was unfamiliar with. And so I went searching and found and fell in love with Georgia Douglas Johnson.

Writing a play is very different from rehearsing a play. How does your process change once you're in the rehearsal room? How do your conversations with the director, actors, and designers help inform your rewrites throughout the process?

I use my creative team (actors, director, designers) to help me fill in the gaps or find where things aren't working. They're very smart artists and usually if something isn't working naturally for their character, that's a clue to me that something in the writing is missing. They are a huge part of my re-writing process.

You also identify as an actor, activist, and poet. How do these other facets of your identity help inform your work as a playwright?

They're all interconnected. My work as a playwright is informed by my poetry and my acting. My characters speak poetically and also naturally. It's a blend. And my characters are strong and developed well because the actor in me knows how to make every character have a purpose, objective and point of view. And the activist in me is where all of my stories live. Everyone in every play is searching for some sense of justice.

Jazz, blues, and bebop play a significant role in Paradise Blue. What's been the influence of music in your life?

Music is my everything. I'm married to a Hip-Hop artist and musician. I used to be a dancer, so music was instrumental to my art. I used to play piano. I used to choreograph. As a poet, I've recorded my poems with live musicians and other music artists. Music is everything and everything is music to me. It has become a huge inspiration to all of my writing.

My work as a playwright is informed by my poetry and my acting. My characters speak poetically and also naturally. It's a blend.

Do you have any advice for aspiring theatre makers?

My advice is to think about what stories you are interested in telling in this world. What kind of stories excite you that you'd like to usher forward? Because we are ALL storytellers, whether designing the set or the lights, directing, acting, writing, stage managing.... we have signed up to tell stories together. And so before you can accomplish any great theatrical feat, get very connected to who you are as an artist and what you find purpose in, and follow THAT. Find a way to not just be served, but to also be in SERVICE to others. Those are the makings for the greatest kind of artists... those who are here for reasons beyond their own self-preservation. Join the movement of bringing unheard stories to the mainstage, and be brave in your art. If it scares you, that's a good sign to say yes!

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley

WITH THE DETROIT RIVER TO THE SOUTH AND GRAND BOULEVARD TO THE NORTH, BLACK BOTTOM WAS A THRIVING AFRICAN-AMERICAN DETROIT NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

As African-Americans migrated north, many to take jobs in Detroit's booming automobile industry, Black Bottom became an epicenter of life and culture. Black Bottom's central entertainment district, Paradise Valley, was home to numerous clubs and theatres, as well as the renowned Gotham Hotel, where celebrities such as Jackie Robinson, Sam Cooke, Billie Holiday, Langston Hughes, and Ella Fitzgerald stayed as guests while visiting Detroit.

Up through the 1920s Black Bottom was a diverse community of newcomers to Detroit, including African-American migrants from the South as well as immigrants for Europe and the Middle East. As more African-Americans began moving north to escape the Jim Crow South, racial tensions hardened in Detroit and Black Bottom became one of the only neighborhoods open to African-Americans. By 1945, 90% of Black Bottom's population was black.

Recognizing that many people had nowhere else to go, landlords began charging some of the highest rents in the city. Additionally, properties were neglected, and many households were left with unsanitary and broken facilities, fire hazards, and unreliable maintenance. To pay rent, many people took in boarders, which led to overcrowding. Meanwhile, the growing community encouraged artistic and business collaboration. Black Bottom became a hub for black-owned businesses, while Paradise Valley was recognized as a leading entertainment district with a who's-who of performers cycling through. Nonetheless, politicians began to take notice of the overcrowding and property neglect in Black Bottom and sought opportunities to gentrify the area.

In the early 1950s, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were demolished. Using the **Housing Act of 1949**, the all-white government of Detroit cleared the neighborhoods. They were later replaced with the Chrysler Freeway and Lafayette Park, an urban renewal district with upper-middle class residential buildings designed by Mies van der Rohe. Lafayette Park became a designated National Historic Landmark in 2015.

HOUSING ACT OF 1949

As part of President Truman's Fair Deal legislation, the Housing Act of 1949 set aside federal financing for so-called "slum clearance" under the justification that outdated housing was a safety risk. Although the Act was supposed to ensure affordable housing, in reality the "urban renewal" projects often demolished fractured neighborhoods, disproportionately affecting African-American and immigrant communities. In Detroit, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley fell victim to the Housing Act of 1949, due in part to the zealous interest of Mayor Albert F. Cobo, who campaigned on the promise to limit housing to African-Americans. Within a few short years, Paradise Valley was almost entirely razed and the Chrysler Freeway was built in its place.

GENTRIFICATION

The process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents.



top left and background: Detroit Historical Society
bottom left: "Customers in a Paradise Valley Nightclub" - Detroit Historical Society

Music in the Motor City



JAZZ CLUBS HAD SPRUNG UP IN PARADISE VALLEY IN THE 1920S, AS THE STYLE SWEEPED THE NATION'S DANCE HALLS AND CABARETS.

As Detroit started its recovery from the Great Depression, the city's ballrooms became the go-to venues to hear Big Band music, while the African-American-owned nightclubs of Paradise Valley emerged as the leaders in jazz. Between 1920 and 1940, the number of jazz clubs in Paradise Valley had more than doubled. Post-World War II, Detroit (and more specifically, Paradise Valley) played an integral role in the birth of bebop—a new form of jazz characterized by increasing complex rhythms, melodies, and harmonies.

BLUES

First emerging as a genre at the end of the 19th century, the blues came out of African-American work songs and spirituals of the South, combined with folk music from white European settlers. Trademarks of blues music include call-and-response patterns as well as signature “blue notes,” or notes that are sung or played at a slightly different pitch than standard. Blues songs often speak of heartbreak and injustice, as well as overcoming adversity. Blues is the foundation of many genres including jazz, country, and rock music.

JAZZ

Jazz grew out of blues and ragtime, taking notes from European harmonic structure as well as African rhythms. Jazz contains many subgenres, making it difficult to define. A hallmark of jazz, however, is the importance of the ensemble or performer's personal expression and improvisation within a composition. Much early jazz emphasized larger bands and standard compositions, which artists would improvise on. Later jazz became more experimental, challenging standard musicianship of the 20th century.

BEBOP (“BOP”)

Bebop emerged in the latter half of the 1940s as a controversial interpretation of jazz music that emphasized complex chord progressions, chromatic harmonies, fast tempos, and smaller ensembles that expanded the range of improvisational jazz. The style is credited to Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker.

background: The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, 1944. Photo courtesy of Ernest H. Borden.
top: Maxine Sullivan, 1947. Photo by William Gottlieb.



clockwise from above right:
Dizzy Gillespie, 1947. Photo by William Gottlieb.
Paradise Valley 88. Photo courtesy of Ernest H. Borden
Charlie Parker and Miles Davis.
Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress



Poetry in *Paradise Blue*

GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON (1880-1966) WAS AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POET, PLAYWRIGHT, AND COLUMNIST DURING THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, AND A PROMINENT FIGURE IN WASHINGTON D.C. DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE.

After graduating from Atlanta University Normal College in 1896, Johnson studied music at Oberlin Conservatory and the Cleveland College of Music. In 1910, she and her husband, Henry Lincoln Johnson, moved to Washington D.C. Johnson's home at 1461 S Street NW became a popular meeting spot and shelter for artists, dubbed the "S Street Salon." Attendees including Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. Johnson published four collections of poetry: *The Heart of a Woman* (1918), *Bronze* (1922), *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928) and *Share My World* (1962). Johnson also wrote numerous plays, including *Blue Bloods* (1926) and *Plumes* (1927). Unfortunately, few of her plays were produced and many have been lost.



HEART OF A WOMAN

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

- GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON

COMMON DUST

And who shall separate the dust
What later we shall be:
Whose keen discerning eye will scan
And solve the mystery?

The high, the low, the rich, the poor,
The black, the white, the red,
And all the chromatique between,
Of whom shall it be said:

Here lies the dust of Africa;
Here are the sons of Rome;
Here lies the one unlabelled,
The world at large his home!

Can one then separate the dust?
Will mankind lie apart,
When life has settled back again
The same as from the start?

- GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR KRISTOLYN LLOYD

How did you get your start in theatre?

I started with a community theatre in Spring Texas where I grew up, just one show, but then in high school I tried it again and I was in heaven! I got to dress up and play with swords. Those were my kind of people.

What initially drew you towards the role of Pumpkin? How have you gone about preparing for the part?

Pumpkin is this central female character who plays a typical role in her community but still has layers and layers in my mind. What you see with her isn't really all you are gonna get. She surprises you. A lot of conversations with Dominique and Ruben have helped me find the nuances in her nature. The text alone is filled with so much life. I couldn't put it down when I first read it.

You were part of the Williamstown Theatre Company production of *Paradise Blue* in 2015 as well. What's it like revisiting a play and a character three years later?

Has your understanding of Pumpkin shifted?

I am thrilled to get this opportunity! Life experience really does grow, deepen, and expand you as an artist. I've been exposed to other layers of my own character and abilities so naturally I'm finding that Pumpkin isn't the same as she was three years ago. Every rehearsal has been satisfying and exhausting.

How do you think Pumpkin sees Silver when she arrives at the Paradise Club, and how does their relationship change over the course of the play?

Pumpkin is around musicians constantly and the women that come with them. Silver is unsettling though, because she doesn't seem to need anybody. She isn't an accessory or an addition to anyone or anything. She is unashamedly her mysterious, sexy, confident self – without a man or label. Pumpkin is needing a little of that but ends up getting way more than she anticipates.

Is there a specific theme you keep finding yourself drawn to in *Paradise Blue*?

Community. Over time, your community affects you and is what influences a person's logic, love, and language. I think that the mark of a good playwright is someone who can infuse a stage with a full experience of a community simply with words. It's what keeps driving the characters in this play. Community is the thread that's weaving the actions and intentions of each person. Black communities historically have had the ability to thrive, expand, and progress better when left alone. We truly are Wakanda! I know it's

not quite so black and white, but it actually is. We are talking about 1940s black communities, so they are third and fourth generation since slavery. They are doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, artists, etc. and they are still being lynched because of their skin color by people poisoned with their own bastardized perceptions of humanity. They are unloved outside of their homes. They are victims and assailants when they leave their doorsteps. What if you could expand your square footage of safety? For you and your family? Every black-owned storefront, bar, hotel, rooming house, and club is another square foot of not only surviving, but also thriving. They have an entire section of the city where they are free and now it's being taken away.

What advice do you have for young theatre artists interested in acting?

Be brave. Be ambitious. Be good to others and yourself.



above: Francois Battiste and Kristolyn Lloyd. Photo by Joan Marcus.
below: Kristolyn Lloyd and Simone Messick. Photo by Gregory Costanzo.



INTERVIEW WITH COSTUME DESIGNER CLINT RAMOS

Photo by Lauren Mueller.



How did you first become interested in costume design?

My interest in costume design really came with my interest in theatre. I also design sets, and I think there's something about creating and curating what the world of the play looks like and how its inhabitants appear that speaks most to me. Costuming is really more about sociology and psychology - about what we choose and

are able to put on our body any particular morning to face the world, and what we want the world to know about us (and to what extent). The layers are endlessly fascinating to me.

How do you approach a script as a designer? What are the first steps you take in creating your designs?

I always start from an emotional place. How does the play feel and how does it make me feel? These are my primary questions. Then I dive into a rabbit hole of research.

Costumes can be very telling of a character's personality and motivations. Can you talk us through your design for one character in the play? How did the character's personality inform your design choices?

I think one of the costume tracks that excites me is Pumpkin's journey. Through the play, she pretty much stays in her style lane - projecting the image of a dutiful partner, both understanding her place and also a product of her time style-wise and socially. We present her in a series of shirt-dresses that all are within a particular silhouette: full skirt and very benignly feminine (in contrast to Silver's femme fatale), and then we surprise the audience with her final look, which projects her character's change and her acquisition of agency.

In addition to your work as a costume and scenic designer, you also teach design to college students. How do you approach teaching, and do you have any advice to share with students coming to see *Paradise Blue* who may be interested in design?

My biggest advice to my student is to know that you are designing for the theatre. Be part of the theatre ecosystem. Consume it. Tap into the community. But more than anything, be interested in telling a story first. We are storytellers before we are arbiters of style and form. Understand that construct.



left: Keith Randolph Smith and Kristolyn Lloyd.
top: Francois Battiste and Kristolyn Lloyd.
Photos by Joan Marcus.

ABOUT SIGNATURE

Signature Theatre celebrates playwrights and gives them an artistic home.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto.

Signature makes an extended commitment to a playwright's body of work, and during this journey the writer is engaged in every aspect of the creative process. By producing a series of plays by each resident writer, Signature delivers an intimate and immersive journey into the playwright's singular vision. In 2014 Signature became the first New York City company to receive the Regional Theater Tony Award®.

Signature serves its mission at The Pershing Square Signature Center, a three-theatre facility on West 42nd Street designed by Frank Gehry Architects to host

Signature's three distinct playwrights' residencies and foster a cultural community. At the Center, Signature continues its original Playwright-in-Residence model as Residency 1, a year-long intensive exploration of a single writer's body of work. Residency 5, the only program of its kind, was launched at the Center to support multiple playwrights as they build bodies of work by guaranteeing each writer three productions over a five-year period. The Legacy Program, launched during Signature's 10th Anniversary, invites writers from both residencies back for productions of premiere or earlier plays.



Free Student Matinees are made possible by lead sponsor Delta Air Lines. Delta Air Lines is the Official Airline of Signature Theatre.

Additional support is provided by The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, Nina Matis, and The Sequoia Foundation.

A very special thank you to the New York City Department of Education.

**CONNECT
WITH US**

signaturetheatre.org



[@signaturetheatre](https://www.instagram.com/signaturetheatre)



[/signaturetheatrecompany](https://www.facebook.com/signaturetheatrecompany)