



SUNSET BABY

written by

DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU

directed by

STEVE H. BROADNAX III

STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Synopsis

East New York, Brooklyn. Nina's estranged father Kenyatta, a former Black revolutionary and political prisoner, reappears to obtain a coveted piece of her late Mother's legacy. While Kenyatta had visions of changing the world, his daughter became everything he feared. Now he's at her mercy for his own redemption. This is a story about love, political action, and one woman's journey from a brutal existence to her own liberation.

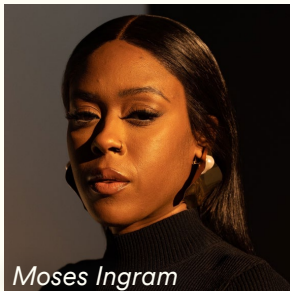
Time

Early 2000s

Place

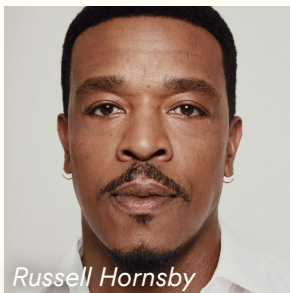
East New York, Brooklyn

Characters



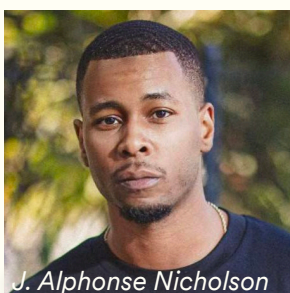
NINA

Hard, quiet power, deeply guarded, and nonetheless brilliant. Has a lifetime of walls up and will fight you before letting them down. Were she an animal, she'd be a dangerous panther.



KENYATTA

Strong, quiet power, also deeply guarded. Almost a duplicate of Nina, except he has lost the hardness and is now navigating a softer version of himself. Riddled with guilt and desperate to break through Nina's walls...and his own. A former political prisoner and Black revolutionary. Nina's estranged father.



DAMON

Broad, street smart, intelligent, and a drug dealer. Has lost his hardness and is on the brink of retiring from the game. Nina's partner-in-crime and boyfriend. Not a stereotype. A true, genuine soon-to-be o-g.

A CLOSER LOOK



Playwright's Note

The first time I worked on this production at the beloved LAByrinth Theater Company in 2013, many things were different. The times. The business of art. The political climate. Trayvon Martin had been killed, but to many it seemed like an anomaly. Mike Brown was still alive. Ferguson had yet to happen. Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were so far away that it almost feels like their deaths could be preventable, in a time traveling sort of way. The wave of police shootings (recorded) that shook this country into a new age of activism was waiting in the wings, having yet to debut.

But some other things were different. These being key to me:

1. It was only my second professionally produced play in NYC.
2. I was not yet a mother. Only a daughter.
3. My father was still alive.

This time around, as a mother and now a fatherless daughter, revisiting this play has shown me something about myself. About the activist shoulders that I stand on. About movements. That they are complex and most people can only understand the trauma from the side they are on, never from the assumed opposition. And that the wars waged on social justice advocates never comes with PTSD treatment and mental health restoration. They are fundamentally on their own.

My father believed in revolution so much that he espoused it on a daily. Our answering machine message would end with “long live the revolution.” It took many years for me to understand what that meant to him. And then what it meant to me.

I borrow from my statement for my play *Confederates*, that played at Signature in 2022. This is what revolution means to me: “Freedom. Everyone’s freedom. Not the kind that comes on the back of other people’s oppression. Real freedom is contagious. In liberating yourself, you liberate others. Freedom is not comfort. Freedom is healthy disruption, positive growth, and peaceful existence.”

It is my desire as a playwright to keep building a pathway to my own freedom. And if others find their own freedom in the process, that’s an even sweeter dream.

In the words of my father, “Long live the revolution.”

peaceandlovedominique:)

→ Playwright's Permissions for Engagement

Consider this an invitation to be your full and un-restricted selves. But I also want you to know that the theater normative will be disrupted in this space for the duration of this show. And that means some things....

It means you are allowed to laugh or gasp audibly and give all the “um hmms” and “uhn uhnnns” you feel inspired to give.

You are allowed to be fully entertained or disturbed in this space, and emote accordingly.

As always, the theater can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.

Please be an audience member that joins with the village, either silently or vocally, in support of the journey we will take collectively. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “oh hell no” or “amen” should you need to.

This is community. Let's dismantle and let's go.

Moses Ingram and Russell Hornsby. Photo by Marc J. Franklin.



A CLOSER LOOK

↪ An Interview with Playwright Dominique Morisseau

How did you get your start in theater? 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 theater 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.

What was the initial spark or inspiration for *Sunset Baby* when you wrote the play over ten years ago?

Many things. Tupac Shakur and his mother Afeni Shakur. I wanted to know how a child of revolutionaries can be both so brilliant but also self-destructive. Nina is my Tupac.

Are there moments of the play that resonate differently with you personally, or that you feel resonate in new ways on a larger societal scale, in 2024?



Dominique Morisseau, photo by Damu Malik

The idea of wars, both abroad and homegrown, and how they are often waged against social justice advocates and activists.

Can you give us a window into your collaboration with the director, Steve? Were there certain questions or ideas you were interested in exploring together in this production?

Steve and I have been working together for the last ten years. He's the director that has directed the majority of my productions around the country/world. However, this is our first NYC premiere together (the first was my play *Blood at*

the Root at National Black Theatre, but I wasn't present to be involved). So in this production, we were very focused on making NYC a huge character in the play, as well as making the revolutionary videos from Kenyatta larger and more invasive in the world of the play.

You have an incredible cast in Russell Hornsby, Moses Ingram, and J. Alphonse Nicholson. What excited you about what this ensemble of actors brings to your characters?

This cast all has a bottomless well of vulnerability and emotionality. With most actors I work with, we have to build to a place of trust before they are able (if ever) to get to the bottom of my character's emotional wells. These actors all bring that to the table freely and openly. So, it gives us a great canvas to work with because the hardest part is the part they do most easily.

All of your plays encourage activism, and each character in *Sunset Baby* has a different relationship to their own personal activism. How did you develop your voice as an activist? Were there elders in your community that supported and/or inspired your journey? Were there moments where you challenged their ideologies, the way we see Nina and Damon challenge Kenyatta?

My father is my biggest activist influence. He was a revolutionary. He took care of many of the young boys in our neighborhood, along with taking care of my younger brother. We had the kind of relationship that was very push and pull. I have challenged him and his ideas since

my young childhood. He challenged me and mine, all the way through adulthood, with my plays. He was the voice I could seek for contextualizing my work. He had a wealth of knowledge and was never shy about sharing it with me. And from him, and my mother who was an educator, I became most attracted to music artists that were socially conscious. Whether Stevie Wonder, Lauryn Hill, or Nina Simone, or many contemporary artists. When they have something to say beyond their own self-aggrandizement, I'm all ears.

Nina's mother, Ashanti X, leaves Nina her letters to Kenyatta stating, "so that you will understand what we do for love." Later in the play, we see that love is something both Nina and Kenyatta struggle to express with words. What interested you most about exploring Nina and Kenyatta's relationship to and understanding of love?

I believe love is the key to any true social justice action. Love for people. All people. You cannot call yourself a true activist if you are not also a humanitarian. And humanity begins with love. If Nina and Kenyatta are both on the brink of revolution, they will not get there without the ability to break through their own prisons and open themselves up to forgiveness and love.

Throughout the play, we see Kenyatta recording video messages to Nina. What interested you in having Kenyatta share his feelings and thoughts with Nina via video recording, as opposed to through a conversation or a letter?

My father used to record himself all of

the time. When I would sometimes stumble across those videos on my own, it's as if I could see him and understand him deeper on video than I ever could in person. I could pause him. Study his gestures. And learn something deep about him and his fragility. I am borrowing from that for Nina and Kenyatta, so that she can see her father in his full truth, and finally find a way to let love in.

Nina Simone and her music are woven throughout *Sunset Baby*. Kenyatta has a beautiful line where he tells his daughter Nina that he and Ashanti X, “named you after Nina Simone because she was our rebel music. You were going to be our revolution.” Can you tell us more about how music informs your process as a writer and the intersections you see between music (or art more generally) and revolution?

I wrote this play to Nina Simone's music. Her quiet power and her beautiful rage in her music is what I feel embodies the complexities of revolution. So, Nina Simone and her belief that an artist's job is to “reflect the times” is also a mantra I live by.

Are there resources you recommend to young folks developing their own voices in social activism?

I believe it's important to read about movements that come before yours. We need to learn from other organizing efforts, both their successes and their failures. There are a lot of authors I would recommend, like Michelle Alexander and Ibram X. Kendi, and I would also recommend reading the work of

Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and the autobiography of Assata Shakur. It's nice to read essays and other writing to understand philosophies, but reading autobiographies is how you can learn from a human level the true impact of activism on an individual.

Do you have any advice for aspiring theater 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



“WHAT WE DO WITH OUR POWER IS OUR REVOLUTION”

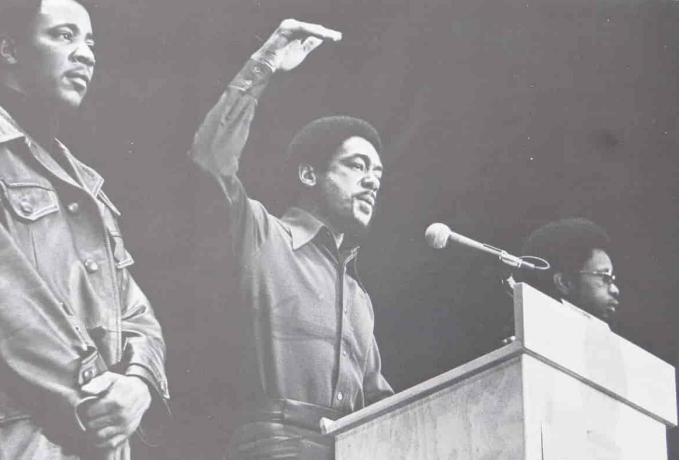
- Ashanti X, *Sunset Baby*

BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

The Black Power and Black Liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized approaches to liberation that centered Black empowerment and racial pride over integration. Proponents of Black Liberation pushed for human rights through Black-centered services, businesses, and leadership. The movement gave rise to Black political and cultural organizations through sub-movements like the Black Panthers, the Republic of New Afrika, and the Black Arts Movement. The Black Power Movement faced widespread resistance in the U.S., with J. Edgar Hoover condemning leadership within the movement as the “greatest threat” of internal security domestically. As a result, many Black liberation groups needed to redistribute funds allocated for social and community programs towards legal defense.

“[There are] 19 black radicals... who are still imprisoned 40 or more years after they were arrested for violent acts related to the black liberation struggle. ... [They] were all part of the 1970s black revolutionary movement. They fought for black power, they were convicted of killing for it – though many profess their innocence – and today they are still imprisoned for it.”

- [The Guardian](#) (as of 2018)



BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense developed out of the assassination of Malcolm X and the influence of early Black Power Movement ideology. The movement grew from its home base in Oakland, California to include multiple national chapters throughout the U.S., and even a

few international chapters. The Black Panther Party is often associated with ideologies of Black nationalism and armed self-defense of Black communities. Many armed efforts were an attempt to patrol Black neighborhoods and protect against acts of police brutality. The party also focused on community “survival” programs that provided free food, clothing, education, and transportation.

Women were particularly influential in the Black Panther Party, making up two thirds of party membership across 40 chapters. The editorial boards of many Black Panther newspapers were made up of women, and women also expanded the community initiatives of the movement to include domestic labor support, such as childcare. Nonetheless, many chapters of the party still suffered from sexism.

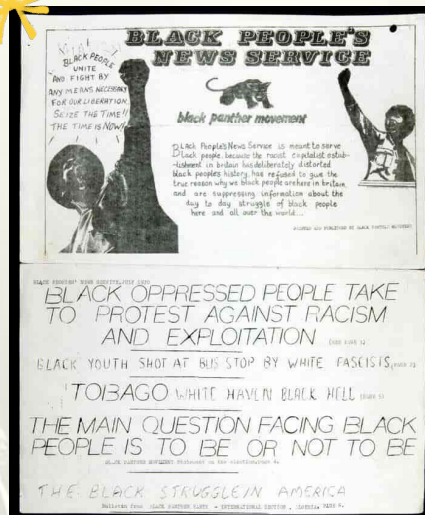
COINTELPRO

In 1969, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, labeled the Black Panther Party “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” and began a multi-pronged counterintelligence program known as COINTELPRO designed to sabotage, infiltrate, criminalize, and ultimately undermine the efforts of the Black Panther Party. Alongside the repeated arrests and imprisonment of activists, COINTELPRO operations led to the death of party members like Fred Hampton and the subsequent decline of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s.



“You can jail a revolutionary, but you can’t jail the revolution. You can run a freedom fighter around the country, but you can’t run freedom fighting around the country. You can murder a liberator, but you can’t murder liberation.”

– ***Fred Hampton***



REPUBLIC OF NEW AFRIKA

In March of 1968, over 500 Black nationalists gathered in Detroit to discuss a path for Black liberation in the United States. What resulted was the creation of a “New Afrikan Declaration of Independence” containing numerous proposals for Black reparations including the creation of a sovereign nation-state, the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), which encompassed a large portion of the South. They were known for their slogan “free the land.”

BLACK LIBERATION ARMY

The Black Liberation Army was an underground Black nationalist group made up of members from the declining Black Panther Party and Republic of New Afrika. The group believed in open resistance, participating in illegal and sometimes violent activity to “take up arms for the liberation and self-determination of Black people in the United States.” Their open resistance was a response to widespread policing, imprisonment, and violence directed at Black Americans.

BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT → (1965-1975)

Founded by Amiri Baraka in 1965, the Black Arts Movement expanded the activism of the Black Liberation Movement into artistic practice. The Black Arts Movement inspired a wave of new Black arts organizations, including the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School, and encouraged dedicated space for nurturing Black creatives and Black stories. Many Black Arts Movement artists came to be known as cultural naturalists, or artists who used their creative work to affirm community, Black consciousness, and liberation.



MAYA ANGELOU
Writer and poet



NTOZAKE SHANGE
Playwright and poet



SONIA SANCHEZ
Writer and poet



AUDRE LORDE
Writer, philosopher, and theorist



NIKKI GIOVANNI
Writer and poet

WHO MAKES A MOVEMENT?

The Faces of Black Power

KWAME TURE (BORN STOKLEY CARMICHAEL)



Kwame Ture was a Trinidadian American civil rights activist and leader of the black nationalism movement, often credited with originating the slogan, “Black Power.” Ture began his activism while in high school at the Bronx High School of Science, participating in a protest against a White Castle that refused to hire Black workers. He continued his studies at Howard University, becoming enmeshed in the civil rights movement and actively participating in multiple protests across the U.S. He chaired the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was targeted by J. Edgar Hoover’s COINTELPRO project. He later went on to work in Africa,

where he denounced the Black Panthers (for whom he’d been the “Honorary Prime Minister”) as too collaborative with white allies.

“My name is Assata (“she who struggles”) Olugbala (“for the people”) Shakur (“the thankful one”), and I am a 20th century escaped slave.”

– Assata Shakur In Her Own Words

ASSATA SHAKUR

Assata Shakur is an activist and well-known Black revolutionary who was a member of both the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. Like many Black revolutionaries in 1970s, she was a frequent target of the police. After a 1973 shootout between the Black Liberation Army and police officers, Shakur was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. In 1979, she escaped from prison and fled to Cuba, where she was granted political asylum and has been living since. She is the first woman to ever be on the FBI’s “Most Wanted Terrorist” list.

AFENI SHAKUR



Afeni Shakur was an activist, member of the Black Panther Party, and the mother of Tupac Shakur. Before becoming known as Tupac's "mama," Afeni was known in resistance circles as a writer, a fierce public speaker, and a part of the infamous "Panther 21"—a group of twenty-one Black Panther members arrested and accused of planned coordinated attacks across New York City. They were later acquitted, and their trial became another example of local and federal efforts to dismantle the Black Panther Party. Four days after the acquittal, Afeni gave birth to Tupac.

MUTULU SHAKUR

Dr. Mutulu Shakur was a Black liberation activist, holistic health advocate, and stepfather of Tupac Shakur. After 60 years in prison for his participation in the 1981 Brinks armored car robbery coordinated by members of the Black Liberation Army and Weather Underground, Shakur was released from prison in 2023 and died six months later from cancer.

TUPAC SHAKUR



Tupac Shakur a.k.a. 2pac, is considered one of the most influential rappers of all time. Born in 1971 to parents who were both Black Panther Party members, Shakur became known for his poetry, music, and art that amplified and criticized social issues. Despite a tragic death at the age of 25, Shakur's influence is memorialized in iconic interviews where his political upbringing is ever-present, in films such as *Poetic Justice* (1993), and in his music with over 75 million records sold worldwide.

ELAINE BROWN

After joining the Black Panther Party in 1968, Elaine Brown was appointed to lead the movement in 1974. As a Black Panther, Brown had been critical in helping establish free community programs, such as free breakfast for children, the free busing to prisons program, and the free legal aid program. Brown also edited the Black Panther newspaper. Despite her successes, Brown faced sexism within the party, particularly in her time as leader. She ultimately left the party due to sexism and violence against women within the ranks, focusing on her music career before returning more publicly to activism, specifically prison reform.

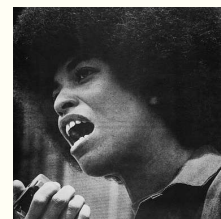
J. TARIKA LEWIS

Joan Tarika Lewis was the first woman to join the Black Panther Party. At 16, Lewis heard Newton and Seale speak and was inspired to join the movement, particularly to support their community survival initiatives such as free food programs and child development centers. Lewis is a musician and visual artist, and she provided art for the movement's newspaper. She has continued her career in the arts after leaving the party.

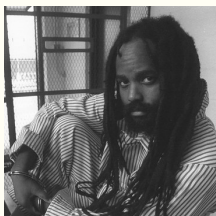


ANGELA DAVIS

Angela Davis is an activist, author, and scholar known for her active participation and thought leadership in liberation movements across the globe. Notably a former member of the Black Panther Party and the Communist Party and rising to notoriety on the FBI's list of the Ten Most Wanted Fugitives for her alleged association in a highly politicized murder case, Davis is now a sought-after voice on feminism, abolition, and more.



MUMIA ABU-JAMAL



Mumia Abu-Jamal is an activist and journalist, whose association with the Black Panther Party ultimately led to his 1982 trial, conviction, and death sentence for killing a white police officer. After continued local and international calls for freedom, Abu-Jamal's death sentence has since been reduced to a life without parole, and he has been incarcerated in Pennsylvania for the last four decades.

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."

— Angela Davis

EAST NEW YORK, BROOKLYN

DEMOGRAPHICS → (EARLY 2000s)

62%
Black and Latinx
Neighborhood

31.3%
Poverty Rate

23.4%
Homeownership
Rate

15.22%
Unemployment
Rate



Moses Ingram and J. Alphonse Nicholson. Photo by Marc J. Franklin.

- * In 2003-2004, the average annual death rate in East New York and New Lots was 15% higher than in Brooklyn overall, and 20% higher than in New York City overall
- * The death rate due to drugs in 2003-2004 was 50% higher in East New York and New Lots than the rate in both Brooklyn and NYC overall

In the 1950s, Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and African American migration from the South to East New York for employment increased, while jobs in the area decreased after World War II. These two social realities created a compounding of socioeconomic obstacles that the neighborhood of East New York has yet to overcome. Today, East New York remains the subject of predatory zoning policies, lack of affordable housing, and rapid gentrification.

NINA SIMONE

Nina Simone (1933-2003) was an American musician, singer, lyricist, and activist. Simone began learning piano at the age of three, often playing at her church in North Carolina. While Simone aspired to be a classical concert pianist, she was denied admission to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, which she attributed to racism. To make money, Simone began playing piano in an Atlantic City nightclub, where she was also required to sing.

A prolific pianist, Simone explored and blended genres within her own compositions, from classical, folk, pop, R&B, and beyond. As her career picked up steam, Simone didn't shy away from using her music as a tool for social justice. Her song "Mississippi Goddam" was a response to the multiple racially motivated murders of Black Americans in the South, from Medgar Evers to Emmett Till, to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Alabama. The song became a civil rights anthem in the 1960s, and Simone became associated with the Black Power movement. Simone's music is often still a playlist for revolution.

"I stopped singing love songs and started singing protest songs because protest songs were needed. You can be a complete politician through music."

– Nina Simone

*There'll be no one unless that someone is you
I intended to be independently blue
– Love Me or Leave Me*

*But oh, I'm just a soul whose intentions are good
Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood
– Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*

*Breaking rocks out here on the chain gang
Breaking rocks and serving my time
Breaking rocks out here on the chain gang
'Cause you done convicted me of crime
– Work Song*

PLAYLIST

Feeling Good

Black is the Color of My True

Love's Hair

Work Song

Love Me or Leave Me

Don't Let Me Be

Misunderstood

Four Women

BEHIND THE SCENES

An Interview with Actor J. Alphonse Nicholson



How did you get your start in theater?

I started at 18 years old at North Carolina Central University, working my way through the program and realizing exactly what I wanted to do. I left school and immediately started auditioning for the theaters in our community. Some of them were small community theaters, not quite on the regional level or the LORT level yet. Eventually, I landed over at Playmakers Repertory Company and found a home there for about four years, having a nice foundation to gain equity points, but also work with some really talented actors that you wouldn't normally see on television or film, or in theaters here in New York. Some actors were coming from New York, and I grasped a lot of information from them, being a sponge to a certain extent.

Most of the time I was the youngest person in the room, so I was just trying to gather all the information I could. I learned you can travel around the country and make a living by doing theater. Not the best living, but it's a living, nonetheless. Whether at Actors Theatre of Louisville, City Theatre of Pittsburgh, where I first did *Sunset Baby* back in 2015, Playmakers Repertory Company, or California Shakespeare Theater out in Oakland, California, (where I met my wife, that changed my life). And here in New York, working my way up the ranks, which



J. Alphonse Nicholson

consisted of Off-Broadway shows and plenty of readings and auditions...hitting my TV debut...everything kind of lines up. But all coming from that foundation of theater.

And shout out to my high school in Greensboro, North Carolina—James B. Dudley High School—that really instilled a sense of self-knowing in us: who you are and where you come from. Knowing that your story is important, and that it should be told. People that look like you should be able to tell stories about people that they know and love in their community.

Luckily, in my career [I've been able to tell] stories that were by us, for us, that

we share with other communities. Telling stories that you're familiar with is great, and learning stories that you're not as familiar with just expands your range and knowledge of the universe and who you are.

Did you have other artistic passions or pursuits that have informed your practice as a performer?

Having a musical background definitely had an influence on me as a storyteller. We tell stories through music, just in a different way. Tapping into the music side things, by being a street drummer, any city I go to, I pull my buckets out, find a corner, and street drum. In New York, landing here and being here for eight years, that was where I made a living for a long time. So, music was essentially connecting all those things for me and laying down a path for me. It

wasn't an easy living, but it was fun. I really enjoyed it, and when you really enjoy what you're doing, it doesn't quite feel like a job.

Now I'm doing this show. I'm tired and it's hard work, but at the same time, you get out there every night and something turns on and makes you want to do it. That's kind of like music. You can be in a certain type of mood, or down, and then turn a song on and it relaxes you, or brings you to a certain place and hypes you up. Music is the through line for my career, for sure.

J. Alphonse Nicholson and Moses Ingram. Photo by Marc J. Franklin.



You mentioned your first experience with *Sunset Baby* was ten years ago at City Theatre Company in Pittsburgh, where you also played Damon. What's it been like revisiting the play and your character? Are there certain parts of Damon that are resonating differently ten years on?

So much can happen in ten years. Lot of great things, a lot of ups and downs. Co-parenting, learning what that is, truly. My son was only four or five when I first did this play. Now he's going on 13, which is crazy. I'm a much different father now than I was then, with a different understanding of what I have to do for him to be a provider. Similar struggles that Damon shares in this play. It's a huge lesson. Reminding myself and my children that who you choose to have children with can change the trajectory of your life. It's a very delicate situation. Learning those things, and then applying them to a role that I feel is so important, and one that we don't always see written in this particular way. I'm just glad that Dominique took the time to carve him out and make him a whole person. Although he seems somewhat of an antagonist, I think we find out that he's just a helping hand. He's a resource and a guide to help Nina get to where she has to go.

There's a huge community behind this play, from your castmates, to members of the creative team, and beyond. Can you tell us what community means to you and the role of community in your artmaking?

Community is everything, especially for us as thespians. You can't do this work

without all the people and pieces that come together. Even this [interview] is part of this storytelling. So, if we all do our part, when we all serve our community, it just makes it a better community. Sometimes people who you work with become really good friends. Community is essential to survival, and essential to success in the theater community—having some people to be there for you.

When you don't serve your community, when you're a disservice, or you don't honor the things that you have and cherish the community that you have, it becomes irrelevant. You teach other generations that it doesn't matter. I think theater and community teach people that the world matters, that people matter. It's nice to always have someone with you, someone that you can call and count on. The theater community feels like that to a certain extent because we spend so much time with each other.

But then, obviously, we have our own communities outside of the theater community, and those are very strong too. Who do you go to when you go home? Who's there for you to help you come out of these characters and come down from work? It's nice to have people who do something different than what I do...to be able to call and catch up with them. It's nice to get away from [the work] sometimes and be able to de-role, as we say.

I just learned that term this past month. Ann James, who was our Intimacy Coordinator, gave us some really cool tools on how to come down from the show—how to come down from all the emotions. Whether that's a cup of tea,

a book, music—something to help you decompress all the information that you just delivered and served. Because your neurological system, unfortunately, doesn't know you're acting, and doesn't know that those things aren't real. So, your body starts to feel like it's real. Your brain starts to say, "Hey, you were arguing, you're yelling," and your body starts to react to those things. So, finding some type of process helps you bring all those things down.

**How do you stay curious in this field?
Are there any tools or framing devices
that keep you excited about the work
you do and inform your approach?**

I call it a kaleidoscope life, where all the colors are there when you put it up to your eye...all these shapes...and different magical things happen. But that's just for a moment, so when you take it down, it's back to reality, like, "Ooh, that was cool, that was fun." [Beat]. And then you go back to it.

We spend 90% of our time in the dark while creating these plays in colors and lights. So, when you go outside, there's this thing that happens, like, "Oh, I was in a whole different world."

But understanding that joy...a kaleidoscope is such a childlike thing, right? So, remembering the child in you, remembering the joy that comes from creating art, having fun with that kaleidoscope, and not abusing it. Never break it, because then you'll be sad that you broke your toy; it's not there anymore.

So, whatever your toy is, whatever that joy

is for yourself, cherish it. And sometimes it's only there for a minute. Sometimes it feels the same, and then all of a sudden you shake the kaleidoscope up and it's different. It's like, "How did that happen?" Right? So, shake some things up for yourself to allow a different picture. But always have fun; always find the joy in what it is that you do. It will take you further in life. For me it has, anyway. ✨



J. Alphonse Nicholson. Photo by Marc J. Franklin.

BEHIND THE SCENES

↘ An Interview with Video and Projection Designer Kate Freer

**How did you get your start in theater?
What was your path towards a career in design?**

I started out my artistic journey in film. Both my parents are filmmakers and my grandfather was a photographer, so telling stories, and especially stories that have social impact, was an important value and tradition that I was lucky to grow up in. My main focus was editing with a particular focus on documentary film. I studied film at NYU, and it was there that I became friends with an amazing group of theater makers who invited me to collaborate with them. I had never experienced projections in live performance before and I was immediately hooked. That was years before any official university program opened to train projection designers. Luckily, I found myself connected to a community of other media designers who were excited about co-learning and sharing knowledge about new skills and systems. I could say I'm self-taught as I never had any formal theater training, but really I'm communally educated by my peers and many, many internet tutorials. I'm grateful to still be in a community with amazingly supportive individuals who embrace this open-source approach to information in service of the growth of our field as well as celebrating each other's successes. This work is much lighter and



Kate Freer, photo by Kate Freer

more fulfilling with that kind of support system.

Video and projection design are two of the newer design elements in the playmaking toolbox, and we all have a lot to learn about the incredible work designers are doing in both areas. In your own words, can you explain what projection and video design are?

Something I was surprised to discover when I got into this field was how long projections have been integrated into live performance. Basically, as early as people were creating photographs and films, they were utilizing them in theater. I often refer to “Gertie the Dinosaur,” which was

on the vaudeville circuit in 1912 where the creator, Winsor McCay, choreographed a routine with an animated dinosaur and at the end of the show would walk behind the screen and a smaller version of himself would walk into the film and ride away on Gertie's back. There was an amazing movement of theater artists in Europe using film in the 1930s, another wave in the U.S. in the 70s, most notably Wendall Harrington with *The Who's Tommy*. But the big shift was the emergence of digital video. Groups like the Wooster Group made a huge impact on downtown N.Y. theater. I came in the next wave, which was really when things exploded. This was when the tools for creating multimedia became much more widely accessible and the internet really became a huge resource for knowledge sharing.

I like to think of multimedia design as thinking beyond the screen. In filmmaking we're creating for an audience to view in a movie theater, on a TV, and now even on a headset. Everything is already cooked, and the audience is passively participating in a predetermined product. In the theater, media can be anywhere. It can come out

of the walls. It can be manipulated by the performer. It can live on LED screens or monitors or projectors or all at once. There can be live camera feeds or sound responsive visuals made out of code. Media can act as scenery, context, or character. It's an important tool in the creative toolbox that is becoming more and more popular in live performance.

As a designer, do you have a particular way of approaching a script? Are you reading with an eye towards certain details? Or are there questions you're taking note of for yourself as you read?

I'm always looking for my connection to a script. "What is my way in?" That is a question I always try to answer before my first conversation with the director or before I sign onto a project. Then I'm thinking about the role of the media in telling this story. Sometimes a playwright will write the video into the script, which is a great starting point. From there, it's a conversation with the rest of the team about the world of the show. I begin with research, both investigating context and style. I draw inspiration from the other design elements when building the content to ensure that we're architecting a cohesive world.

How did you approach your design on *Sunset Baby*? Did you conduct any research to help you build your vision?

I was lucky enough to design the premiere of *Sunset Baby* in 2013, so this production has been a wonderful opportunity to revisit the world of the play ten years later. Coming back to this show has given me the chance to look at how the events of

Russell Hornsby. Photo by Marc J. Franklin.



the 1970s and the early 2000s are relevant to our lives today. What are the threads that connect liberation movements? How has our city, specifically East New York, been impacted by the constant policing and targeting of Black communities? What is the role of the media? Because the camera is such a present element in this show, I've been curious about how this tool has both been used to oppress and to liberate. For *Sunset Baby*, it is a vehicle of Kenyatta's liberation in a sense, at least in one aspect of his life.

Collaboration is a key part of every theater production—what types of conversations are you having with your fellow designers and with Steve while working together on building the world of the play?

One of the reasons I love working with Steve and Dominique is that we are always talking about the underlying message of the production and how the media is supporting that. For *Sunset Baby*, we've been talking about the cost of activism on people's lives and community. We've been talking about relationships and representation. For me, the moments within the show when Kenyatta is speaking to Nina via the live video feed are the moments when Kenyatta can communicate unfiltered, represented the way he wants to be represented. We as the audience have this direct line into his interior world.

Kenyatta's video addresses are being captured and projected live. Can you give us a window into the process of live projecting?

I love working with live video. It brings some of the magic of cinema into performance while embracing liveness. We can give a different perspective on the action that's happening in real time by changing the focus or changing up the angle. It is always an important collaboration with the director figuring out the system and the choreography. Is the camera on stage, visible, and being manipulated by the actor? If so, is it wireless or wired? How many cameras? For this production we've hidden the cameras outside the visible world of the show. We're sending the signal over ethernet into the control computer and manipulating it based on the performer's actions.

Your work is multimedia: encapsulating video, projections, and more. What have you learned from working at the intersection of various forms of media aiding live performance? What has kept you curious as you navigate various challenges within your work?

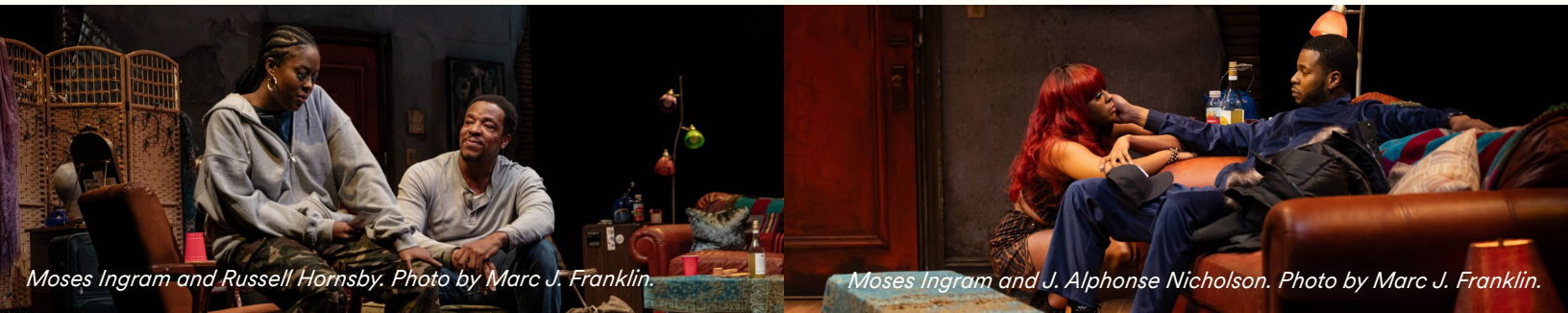
I love working in live performance as every production presents a new challenge and opportunity to learn. I'm most interested in working on productions that have a message. Productions that are working towards social change or envisioning a world that can hold us all. Working with teams that are deeply invested in the vision as well as creating a joyful process. If I get to push against my learning edge with new techniques and technologies, that's a bonus. ✨

DEEPER DIVE

Discussion Questions

Pre-Show

- * What comes to mind when you think of the word revolution? What makes a revolution? What makes someone revolutionary? Are there specific movements or people that come to mind when you think about revolution?
- * How have the adults in your life shaped your understanding of revolution? What overlaps exist in your thinking? Are there generational divides between your understanding and theirs?
- * In her playwright note, Dominique writes that revolution to her means freedom. What connections do you see between revolution and freedom?



Post-Show

- * In one of her letters, Nina’s mother, Ashanti X, writes, “what we do with our power is our revolution.” After watching the play, what reflections do you have on revolution? Can you give an example of different moments characters used their power in an act of revolution? If you discussed revolutions before class, has the play influenced your idea of what a revolution can be?
- * Throughout the play, Nina calls Damon a survivor. Why do you think she’s described him this way? In what ways are Nina and Kenyatta also survivors?
- * Theater is a collaboration between a huge ensemble of creatives. Let’s think about the ways these creatives supported one another. What did the design tell you about these characters that furthered your understanding of who they are? What does the set design of Nina’s apartment tell you about her? Why do you think the projection designer chose a large video projection, as opposed to a smaller one? Did the characters’ costumes influence your opinions of them? Does everyone in class have the same interpretation, or are there different resonances?

Classroom Exercises

Exercise 1: Exploring Character I

- * Pick one character from *Sunset Baby* whose point of view you identified with. What did you connect with? Why? Explore that character's voice—what else do they have to say that we haven't heard yet?
- * Now, what was a moment in the play where your character disagreed with another character? What did they disagree on? Why? Try exploring the second character's voice. Even if you don't personally agree with them, how may they make their case?
- * Feel free to experiment with different creative forms. If words aren't coming easily, try movement. How do these characters live in your body? How do they move differently? What about them informs their movement?

Exercise 2: Exploring Character II

- * Both Nina and Kenyatta are described as having a quiet power: Nina has a hard, quiet power, Kenyatta has a soft, quiet power. As a class, come up with an adjective or two that could describe a fictional character. On your own or in small groups, set a timer and create a character with that trait. Try writing a monologue or journal entry from their perspective. As a class, explore each other's work. How similar are your characters? How different? In what ways do they manifest the shared character trait? In what ways are they unique?

Exercise 3: Exploring Modes of Expression

- * In *Sunset Baby*, characters express themselves through letters, video diaries, and conversations. How does each medium influence the way a character delivers their point of view?
- * As a class, popcorn ideas of different creative outlets. Ideas can include anything from monologues and scenes to poems, songs, dance, drawing—anything that feels like a mode of creative expression.
- * On your own, pick two of the creative outlets. Set a timer and begin with the prompt “My revolution is...” See how far you get. Set a second timer and move into your second medium. How can you translate what's communicated in your first medium into your second? What changes as you take a monologue, for example, and make it into a poem? Or a rap and make it into a drawing?

Additional Resources

Read

National Museum of African American History:

[The Foundations of Black Power](#)

[The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change](#)

[Seeing Black Women in Power](#)

Other Articles:

[How Afeni Shakur Put Black Women First in the Fight for Liberation](#) – *TIME*

[Women of the Year: Angela Davis](#) – *TIME*

[Stokely Carmichael, A Philosopher Behind the Black Power Movement](#) – Code Switch, *NPR*

[How the Black Power Movement Inspired a New Generation of Activists](#) – *TIME*

[Why We Should Teach About the FBI's War on the Civil Rights Movement](#) – Zinn Education Project

[Eight Black Panther Party Programs That Were More Empowering Than Federal Government Programs](#) – *Atlanta Black Star*

Watch

[Women and the Black Power Movement](#) (11-minute watch)

Listen

[The Shakur Family Legacy, Tupac & Beyond](#) – Fresh Air (46-minute listen)

Pedagogical Resources

[Learning for Justice: Teaching the Civil Rights Overview](#)

[Learning for Justice: Teaching the Civil Rights Movement Framework](#)

[Learning for Justice: Discussing Race, Racism and Police Violence](#)

Learning for Justice: Civil Rights Movement Podcast

[The Black Power Party and the Transition to Black Power](#)

[Malcolm X Beyond the Mythology](#)

[Listen, Look and Learn: Using Primary Sources to Teach the Freedom Struggle](#)

Plays by Dominique Morisseau

*Confederates**

Mud Row

*Pipeline**

*Skeleton Crew**

*Paradise Blue**

Blood at the Root

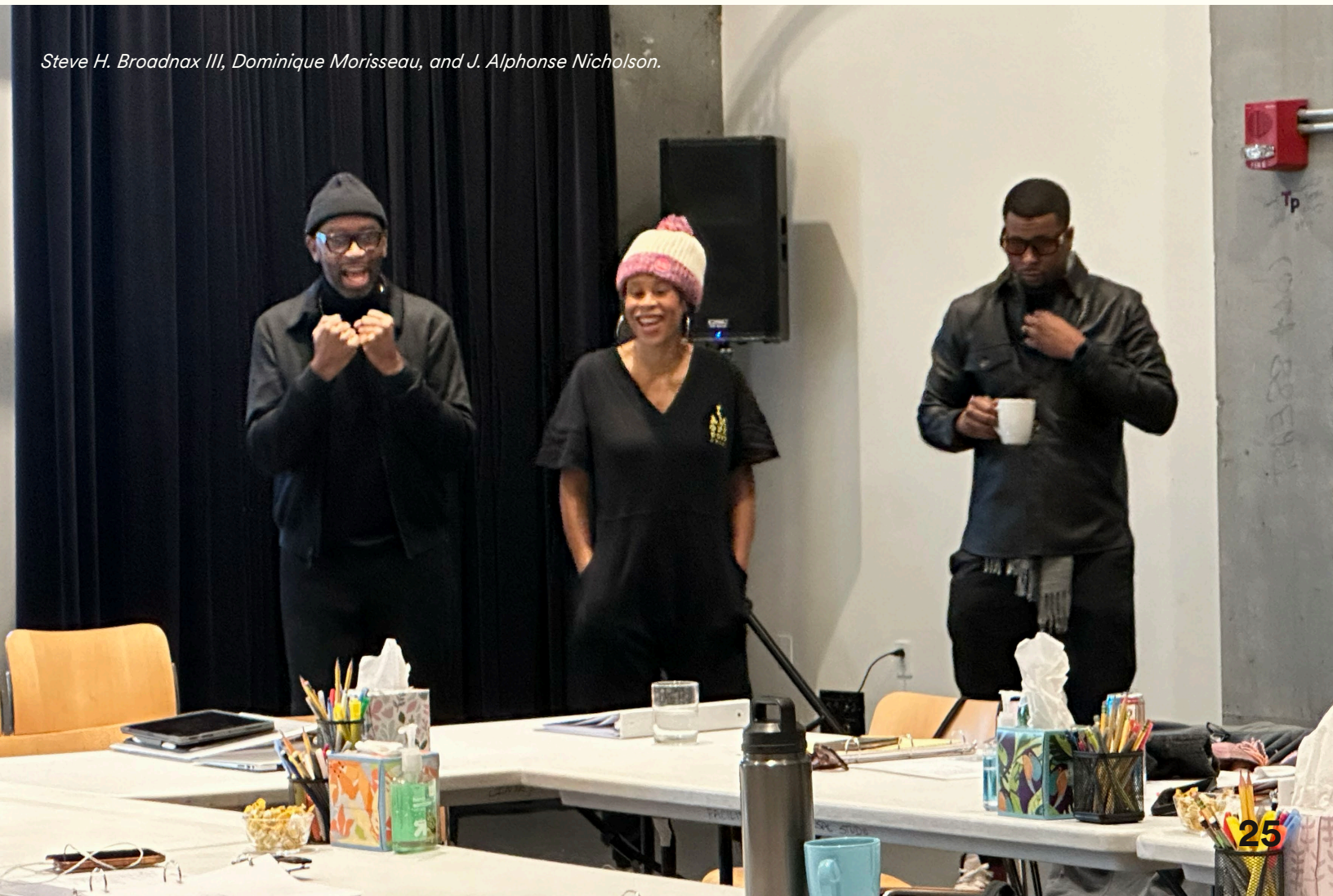
Sunset Baby

*Detroit '67**

Follow Me to Nellie's

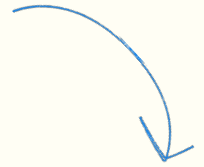
**Available at the New York Public Library*

Steve H. Broadnax III, Dominique Morisseau, and J. Alphonse Nicholson.



ABOUT SIGNATURE

A HOME FOR STORYTELLERS. A SPACE FOR ALL.



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

Our Mission

Signature Theatre is an artistic home for storytellers. By producing several plays from each Resident Writer, we offer a deep dive into their bodies of work.

What We Do

Signature Theatre is a space for artists and audiences to call home. Signature creates opportunities through the spaces and support it offers the theater community. For playwrights, Signature's unique playwright-in-residence model offers the stability and support of home. For audiences, Signature offers access to all, offering a welcoming creative community and affordable ticketing programs. Only Signature Theatre offers an immersive journey through a playwright's body of work to theatergoers seeking intimate human connection and extraordinary cultural experiences.

Our History

Signature Theatre was founded in 1991 by James Houghton and its resident playwrights include: Edward Albee, Annie Baker, Lee Blessing, Martha Clarke, Will Eno, Horton Foote, María Irene Fornés, Athol Fugard, John Guare, Stephen Adly Guirgis, A.R. Gurney, Katori Hall, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Samuel D. Hunter, David Henry Hwang, Bill Irwin, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, Romulus Linney, Kenneth Lonergan, Dave Malloy, Charles Mee, Arthur Miller, Dominique Morisseau, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sarah Ruhl, Sam Shepard, Anna Deavere Smith, Regina Taylor, Paula Vogel, Naomi Wallace, August Wilson, Lanford Wilson, Lauren Yee, The Mad Ones, and members of the historic Negro Ensemble Company: Charles Fuller, Leslie Lee, and Samm-Art Williams.

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

Free student matinees are supported by Partners Group Impact, and Nina Matis & Alan Gosule.

Homepage



Student Membership



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