

# TAP\_Archive\_Project\_811\_OSF\_Confederates\_PODCAST

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## SPEAKERS

Andrew Proctor, Dominique Morisseau, Amanda Bullock, Nataki Garrett

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### A Andrew Proctor 00:00

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### A Amanda Bullock 00:26

Welcome to The Archive Project. I'm Amanda Bullock, Director of Public Programs at Literary Arts, in this week for Andrew Proctor. The Archive Project is a retrospective of some of the most engaging talks from the world's best writers for more than 35 years of literary arts in Portland. This week's program is the second of three in this season's series with Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Artistic Director Nataki Garrett is back on the mic, this time in conversation with playwright Dominique Morisseau, whose new production "Confederates" will be on the OSF stage this fall, directed by Nataki. "Confederates" explores racial and gender bias in America through the parallel stories of two women living over a century apart - an enslaved Black woman turned Union spy and a brilliant professor in a modern day university. Nataki and Dominique discuss their experiences as Black women in contemporary theatre, and the challenges of that space. Part of their discussion centers on the work to widen the audience for theater and other artistic performances. They speak candidly about the importance of not only experiencing other lives - lives different than your own - in art, but especially the critical importance of seeing one's self. Dominique said that she started writing "Confederates" because she needed to see herself - a Black woman - in history. Let's join Nataki and Dominique.

### N Nataki Garrett 01:47

Dominique, will you tell us a little bit about yourself as a writer, as a thinker, as a person with a political mind? As a family member? Who are you?

### D Dominique Morisseau 01:59

(laughs) I'm some of those things. I'm a mom. I'm a wife. I'm a playwright and actor, a poet, and activist. And I'm a woman. I'm a Black woman, and a lover of stories. I am a LOVER of stories - of good storytelling.

### N Nataki Garrett 02:25

Yeah, I love that. And your stories are so filled with a kind of beautiful, loving, and generous focus on the life and spirit of Black people. You know, a lot of the time when I watch and read your plays, I feel like I'm seen as a Black woman. I feel like I'm being seen. And the play that we're going to talk about a little bit later, "Confederates," is probably the one that... I remember when I first read it and I was like, "Is this sister in my living room?" like "Is she having these conversations with me? Is she on my phone calls?" Because it is such a clear magnifier of Black female, Black women's existence from this particular lens of the play. I was introduced to you through the play "Confederates." I was engaged in a conversation with the people who were running OSF prior to me, my predecessors, and they sent the play to me before it was sort of released - to see if I would be interested in directing it. And I knew about your work, I'd seen your work. I have a couple of sister friends who had been in your work at other theaters across the country. And so I feel like I had a limited familiarity with your particular voice as a playwright. But our first conversation was to talk about "Confederates." And I remember feeling in that kind of way that where reverence, meets admiration, meets like connection. Feeling a little bit like... a little shy, to express how I felt about the play, and you, because it was so clearly your sort of loving gesture around the existence of Black womanhood. And it's hard when you feel seen through the work, you know? And you quickly very, very early very quickly, like laid it on the line, this is who I am, you know, this is who I'm going to be. I'm not going to be something else. And so from that point forward, all the things that I thought I loved about you as a writer and as a thinker, and as a political mind... All those things expanded. So I'm really excited about this conversation with you.

D

Dominique Morisseau 04:46

You know... I feel like we met each other's legend. (laughs) You know? Before we met each other, you know, I mean? I just knew you as this... I'd heard about you as a Black woman director, and then I heard about you as the new Black woman to be appointed and the Artistic Director position over there at OSF, and I was like, "Oh, wow, yes, come on," and, you know, "Way to go!" But I just always, you know, and as your name has been echoed to me in the in the DC area, right? You just sounded like someone I'd want to get to know and want to meet. When you told me - kind of what you just said a minute ago was like, you know - that "Confederates" felt very resonant to your experiences, you know? And I was thinking like, "Yeah, well, cuz you've been in those like institutions, you've been in like, predominantly white institutions as a Black woman in leadership." Right? I have been in predominantly white institutions as both a student and guest educator in a lot of spaces. And, and I was like, Well, I think that there's stuff that's happening, like, in all of these places that people are not talking about. And, and, I was like, and it's not just universities, this is like, institutions, isn't it? You know, there's something going on with institutions and the way we build institutions. Our first conversation and my first meeting of you just felt like, "Yep!" and, you know, "Here we go!" Like we - there was already a history. We have not even talked, and we already share history.

N

Nataki Garrett 06:21

Exactly, exactly. That intersection is profound, but also really disconcerting, because what you're speaking to is the fact that there are so many of us Black women in these particular situations where we're encountering a very specific kind of harm and ridicule within these institutions. At the same time, you know, with any kind of institution, there is this idea that if you can just move yourself far enough ahead, there is this sort of point of freedom. So it's like you're in this hope space seeking freedom. But you have to sort of, you know, walk uphill in the snow, both directions, in order to get there. And it's, it's, there's sometimes I feel like... there's some sort of medal for survival, but there isn't a lot of focus on the healing that happens after survival. And there also isn't a lot of focus on making sure that you're, you're laying down a foundational path, so that other people who come behind you don't have the same experience. So what I find to be the most interesting about "Confederates" is it speaks to that path as a real thing. There's a real connection between past and present. And, and it's a call to action, in a way, to say, "Hey, are we gonna be 165 years out making it normal for these same things?" You know? Would you mind giving us a brief synopsis? "Confederates" is a play written by Dominique Morisseau. It's an American Revolutions commission. And to frame American Revolutions: American Revolutions was a commissioning program

supported in part by the Mellon Foundation. It started in 2008. And it asked playwrights to focus on moments of change in American history. And so this is Dominique's gift to this conversation around American Revolutions.

**D** Dominique Morisseau 08:22

Yeah, yeah. I mean, well, it actually came from, so... Lou Bellamy at Penumbra Theatre... at our esteemed Penumbra Theatre in Minneapolis, reached out to me, saying that he wanted to commission me in connection with you - with OSF, you know? And his emphasis became mine, which was - he had read this Ta-Nehisi Coates article that was talking about why, well, that was actually questioning why more Black writers and Black, I guess, historians and storytellers don't study more of the Black experience and the Black participation in the Civil War. And I was like, oh, okay, that's interesting. He's like, you know, for American Revolutions, we want to explore that. And I said, you know, I always ask the question, when you ask me, "Well, what were Black people doing in this era?" I go, "And what were the Black WOMEN doing?" Because here's the thing, when I think of Civil War, and when I think of stories that I grew up understanding, like, what our experience is in the Civil War, I picture movies like "Glory," you know, or I see you know, I learn of infantries, you know, Black regiments, and things like that, but I don't really hear where... Black women are utterly invisible in those stories also in the documenting of those histories. It was just like, "Where were we?" I was like, "What was... Wasn't Harriet Tubman...? and so I thought then I, I start wanting to know what Black women's role was in our own liberation. Because I think what we're for... Anyway - whether or not Ta-Nehisi meant this, what I felt convicted by in his questioning was why don't we know more about our own hand in our liberation? That's what I heard. (laughs) That was the question I received. And I thought, "Well, yeah! Well, I do want to know what our role was in our own liberation." Because if you don't tell the story full and true, abolition is given more to the hands of white abolitionists than it is to Black liberation and freedom fighters, who were architects of their own movement. Who were architects of their own freedom. And so for me, that was important. And then just to look at myself as a Black woman, I go, "Where, where, where's the vision of me in that moment?" That is not just through Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth, but I'm like, there are so many enslaved Black women who were rebels. Just like we didn't know Claudette Colvin for many years, we only knew Rosa Parks. Now, we invoked women who stood up in a civil rights movement, and would not, you know, give up their seat, you know, for a white patron over themselves. You know Rosa Parks became the most iconic name. And now you see people kind of going back and going, "Claudette Colvin was a teenager." You know? And you're like, well, she was a single mom, and she didn't have the picture of the... you know, she didn't have the Black respectability picture around her to be the face of the civil rights movement. But we're just now going back and going well, and I go for it now and for every Claudette Colvin there was like 10 other ones, too. It was always... You know, many unnamed rebels. They're not going to be the most famous and the ones who, you know, who had lightning strike them, you know, and they're in a perfect moment of light upon them when the movement was happening. But there are so many ways of resistance that were happening. And so I wanted to tell a story about two women: one an enslaved rebel who was growing more into her rebellion, and becoming a union spy, and fighting her way to freedom. And then another one, a Black woman professor in a contemporary university, predominantly white university, who is also navigating that space in that institution of higher learning, in search of her own liberation. So it's really about these two women navigating spaces of institutional racism. And as the play goes on, the line gets really thin between the past and the present.

**N** Nataki Garrett 13:01

Yeah, I love that. And you use this particular way of sort of discovering that as this doubling in the play, which I'm going to ask you about in a second. But first, I want to speak to this idea of...this is not mine - a friend of mine, who's a judge in in Portland, used this language a couple of years ago, and I was like, I think I understand what that means. Just because you use those words, "stealth work." There's something about this undercurrent of stealth work, that both Black women - both the one in the Civil War times, and the one who's in modern times - where there's this like, connection to work that is unseen by by the white gaze, that is being questioned also, by the people that that work is supposed to support. What do you think

about this idea of stealth work and Black women? Because it feels like it's a tool of women, in particular women of color, and I actually had to go back and think about the moments in my life where I thought some Black woman was, you know, was stepping on me, but what she was really doing was like stealth work. You know, the ways in which she supported me on the other end was, like, profound when I actually opened my eyes wide enough to see all the work that was happening. Can you speak to this idea of stealth work in your play?

D

Dominique Morisseau 14:22

Oh, that's a deep thought. Because I actually use the word stealth in a similar fashion, but maybe a little bit more direct, you know, we talk about... we talk about liberal bombs, right. You know, when we explode sometimes when we come, you know, people only respect the activists who explode, who are loud, and who have megaphones, and who come in letting you know that they're attacking. No one really respects, or even considers, that there are stealth bombs too, you know? Not everyone is attacking a system with an announcement. (laughter) And so there are other ways in which you can have, you can be, I think, a freedom fighter, and working for not only your liberation, but other people's liberation - for other people's equity and justice. And that doesn't always look like who's the loudest? And who's the most radical, who's the most optically radical. Because radical is thought, right? It's actually, it's not, it's not just behavior, really. It's thinking that's radical. My husband and I argue about radical all the time, because we argue about whether or not I am radical, right. And I'm like, I feel so minimally radical "compared to"..., right? You know, everything's always compared to... To him, I am completely radical, compared to most of the people that we engage within our daily lives. And I'm like, I don't know that that's fair, or true. But then I go, when I think of who is like radical, like, radical thinkers and radical actors, you know, I don't... I feel pretty modest. Pretty modest, you know? But my thinking is, I do believe my thinking is radical, you know. And radical is a word that scares people, sometimes I think that they find a danger associated with radical. But radical just means nonconformist, right? Like, it means like, there's something... a dramatic way of moving and thinking that will shake up what is normalized, and that's not bad. And that doesn't always come with danger or violence. That actually can come with grace and mercy and compassion, and freedom, you know, and so and then, I totally believe in that, right? And so, to your question, I think, inside of the play, two Black women are having that navigation in the professor's world - well, really, in both worlds - and even in both worlds, two black women are having a conversation on whether or not they are stealth, or, you know, or just a big old missile, you know? A loud missile or a stealth worker toward freedom, because they are... one seems more, I think, integrated into the system over the other. In both systems - in the institution of slavery and in the institution of higher learning. They both feel like one is more ingratiated into the system than the other. And now recognizing each other's - both of each other's labor, toward liberation and their different approaches to it, which I think is also important.

N

Nataki Garrett 17:43

Can you talk a little bit about the use of doubling, and you can give away as much as you want to. But I'm more really interested in the intended impact of the doubling. What it means to have that transformation between one time and another time to the body of the character.

D

Dominique Morisseau 18:03

So it's funny because so the main two characters, Sandra and Sarah, one is slave rebel and one is a professor, they are the only two people in the play who do not double. They stay... Sandra stays in her contemporary world, and Sara stays in her, you know, Civil War world, you know? But every other character, and there are three other characters - well really six other characters in the play, are played by three different actors. And each of those characters goes back and forth between the past and the present. So you have a Black man character, who is the brother of Sarah, the slave rebel, but the student of Sandra, you know? You have a white woman, who is the Master's daughter, to the enslaved rebel Sarah, but the student assistant, to the professor, the Black woman professor and the president. And then you have a

Black woman, who is the a fellow field enslaved woman in Sarah's world, and a fellow colleague, untenured colleague, as compared to Sandra's tenure, inside of the professor's world. And so, in each of these dynamics, what I'm interested in exploring is how the past and the present - how the dynamics shift or don't shift, you know, with men and women, we're looking at Black men and Black women and their status shift from the past to the present, you know? And how sexism is infused inside of that or isn't, you know, depending... When we look at white women to Black women in the past and the present and the status shifting, that happens there. And again, whether allyship is or is not present, whether allyship even can or cannot be present there. And then we look at Black women to Black women, and we look at where a status shift in the past and the present or if there even is a status shift at all, from the past to the present, and those two different kinds of relationships. And then with socioeconomic status then means. So we're looking at a lot of things, we're looking at race, gender, class in the story through those three doubling roles.

N

Nataki Garrett 20:29

And for you, I mean, there's the social intellectual impact of that. And then also, I'm so curious about how it penetrates the heart space, because what you're also watching is these Black women's experiences with these characters moving through time, and what it does to the spirit.

D

Dominique Morisseau 20:52

I think it's important to.... I don't want to give away the play.... in the past and the present between the two main characters, Sandra and Sarah, there's a very strong connective tissue, between these women. One is how they relate to their own bodies as women, and that's as much as I'll give away about that. But they both have something that causes them to have a complicated relationship to their bodies as Black women. And so they take that into everything that they do. It has defined them in both of their different worlds and how they are perceived, how they are trusted, and how they also can trust others, you know? And then it also impacts how they are perceived by others. So how much people do or do not dump on to them, project on to them and how much they then have to be the vessel of a lot of projections. (laughter) You know, projections from men, projections from white folks, or white women, projections from other Black women that, you know, who again, you're not sure they're stealth or dynamite, you know? It's really, and how much that navigation can impact their spirit, their wellness, can threaten to make them completely weary in their own life experience.

N

Nataki Garrett 22:25

Yeah, there's this theme of allegiance that occurs, conflicting and intersecting allegiances to family, to gender, to racial identity to social movements. Is it fair to say that the characters are facing an inner conflict between the loyalty to their communities and those intersections within themselves? Maybe the better question is, how do you relate to those ideas of these intersections? Intersecting allegiances?

D

Dominique Morisseau 22:53

You know, I think that... well, one of the things is, I think when you're a Black woman in leadership, because leadership is the reason why those allegiances happen, or that you feel convicted by those allegiances, right? Because no one really cares when you're not in leadership. (laughs) This is Black women in leadership, that's when you have to, like carry all of the stuff. You have to carry everybody's, you know, like all the baggage just gets hurled at you, because you're in leadership. And people have really... I in my own body experience as a Black woman in leadership - and that leadership means different things. It means like as an educator, if I've been a leader in the room, as a theater leader, you know, I'm the Executive Artistic Producer of my hometown theater. But I also am a playwright in a very visible space as a playwright who, when I go into rooms, with my plays, I make it very clear that I'm not a quiet playwright,

that I am a participant in the production of my work. And that means in the thinking that goes around the work, you know, especially when I am in the town, or when I am present, or when I'm there, you know, but even when I'm not, you know? But especially when I'm there, when I'm premiering a work or, you know, that I want to engage with the, the theater, administrative staff, you know, and talk about the plan around my work and that has not always been met with a willful spirit by all.

N

Nataki Garrett 24:29

Yes, I know exactly what you mean.

D

Dominique Morisseau 24:31

And I think we all struggle with that. But it's, but it's, again, it's Black women in leadership, in any kind of leadership space, or even when I step up, and I am a leader, in my own experience - in my own life. That is almost too much for people sometimes. That's when you have to navigate all of that stuff. You know, all of the like, what, well, you are here, you should have allegiance with me here, or we're aligned. We're both women, or we're both Black, or we're both Black women, we're both this so, you know? OR - we're none of those things. We share none of those things in common. And so, um, why should I listen to you at all? (laughs) You know? It's like this all of the above, like, Who are you even talk to me? Like, I don't even have any respect for like your whole body of existence. Like you just you, you've meant nothing. So if you don't care, then you know, then no one will. So you better be the one to do the the speaking up and use your voice because no one - if they can ignore you, they absolutely will. It's preferred. So in that messaging, I have had to - I have a spirit of resistance. So that just, I immediately resist that messaging, but I definitely received that messaging throughout my life in various ways.

N

Nataki Garrett 25:44

Yeah, I too, have had that message resounding on almost a daily basis. And even more so since I took this position as Artistic Director here at OSF. There is a tendency towards erasure, there's a tendency towards silencing, and that even more recently that my well being can be challenged - my actual life, you know, has been threatened. And the sort of general apathy around even taking it fully as a real threat is really clear to me. I'm curious about, you know, the the play sort of looks at spans time between the Civil War and present day. There has been a lot of shifts in the world since you wrote the play to now. How are you looking at the play now? And I know that there's a production that's going to premiere at the Signature Theatre in New York next winter. Are you rewriting? Are you? Are you? Are you in the room thinking about new things? I'm just so curious about where you are on the journey of the play?

D

Dominique Morisseau 26:56

Well, yeah... I mean, I don't know that I've, you know, I keep reading the play... Actually this is one of my favorite things I've written. You know, I don't know, everybody has their picks, you know, you're definitely not going to get me to pick which child I love best or anything, you know. But, at the moment, you know, and as it should be, the most recent thing I wrote is the piece I should be charged about, you know. I'm charged by this play, because it just feels like it is, um, it is an opportunity for me as a writer, I have been the most raw and vulnerable and honest and defiant as I can possibly be inside of like my work, you know, inside of where I live in my work. Where me and my work meet. And so I'm super excited about it. But I'm also like, I'm, I'm a living, breathing vessel, you know? And the play is, too. And so every day things strike me. And I go back and I read I go, do I need to add anything? Or is that is that here? Is that... is that? Is that teased out on this monologue? Or do I need to adjust this monologue? Is that teased out in this scene? Well, we'll see! I don't know anything yet. I haven't, like I don't have like a plan to rewrite right now. Because I don't know. It's like someone... I go back and I reread I go, I it could be in here. This might be it, you know? Or I might want to massage that just a little bit differently. You know, just to make sure it's

saying the thing that I want it to say, you know? And I don't know yet. I won't know until I'm hearing it, until I'm talking about it with other artists, really smart actors, and you know, my directors, all these wonderful directors we have, you know? YOU! Stori Ayers is directing it at Signature and she's a genius...

**N** Nataki Garrett 28:34

Yeah, I'm going out to see Stori's version of it, and I don't normally do that.

**D** Dominique Morisseau 28:37

Oh yessss!

**N** Nataki Garrett 28:38

'cause I wanna hear what Stori says about it, you know? I know what I'm gonna say about it. Well, I don't actually know I'm going to say about it, BUT I have a vision, but I'm curious about Stori's vision, too.

**D** Dominique Morisseau 28:46

Me too! I'm curious about all the visions of this thing, because I, you know, 'cause like, there's just so much you could be doing... or not doing.... or, you know? It's like, what I learned about it in one reading in front of an audience I did have - and it was an electric reading. I've never...I have had only one other reading of a play like that before in my life and that was "Detroit 67" at The Public, you know, and that was the reading that got that play produced at The Public. But it's like, that night when like, just everybody in your community is out and they just all want to be there. And they're just like, on fire, you know? Yeah. And so that was... for a reading of a play. And it was, you know, it was electric! And when that happened, what I learned... because it was just a reading... that was directed by Goldie E. Patrick. And what I remember about that moment in time was this is just a reading and this audience...it's like they saw a whole play. It's like they saw a whole play. And I remember... and I saw a whole play watching the reading and I was like, there is a way that you can overdo this play, right? Like there is possibly a way to overdo this play because now I'm realizing the story...If as much as you can keep people...They have to stay in the story. They're already with it. Because the story itself is its own thing. It's moving in a way that excites me, you know. So, I mean, I'm excited to see what that could do. But I'm also in the world, because the world has changed, or hasn't, you know, what really, of late has really struck me again and again and again, for the play are two things: Nikole Hannah-Jones and critical race theory. And I said, "My God, it's like my play all of a sudden came around the corner." I wasn't trying. I wasn't trying. But it suddenly became... I mean, it's, you know, there's a big conversation about Black women and tenure here, you know. And the questioning that goes around giving a Black woman tenure, you know? And I feel like with women in Congress, I'm watching, I'm like, you don't want to hear this at all. But you definitely don't want to hear this out of their mouths. How dare they say a word to you? And whatever that is, whatever is coming inside, like what's coming from the gut... Like, you just hate them on site... You know what I mean? Hate them on site! You know, racism is some deep stuff, right? But it's, it's deeper than racism. Sexism is some deep stuff. Misogyny is some deep stuff. And I think most people do not think that misogyny has even touched them. Do you know what I mean? That was like, Oh, I don't, I'm definitely not... I don't hate women. And I know what I do. I don't hate. I don't feel like I hate you. Oh, so you don't feel like you hate me? So what about... what if I feel like you hate me? Does that mean....

**N** Nataki Garrett 31:42

Yeah exactly. What if my experience of you feels like hatred? I often say, Dominique, that people discover their anti-Blackness and their misogyny about me, on the way to meet me. They usually discover it in the

moment, like I might have a donor in the middle of crafting some sort of possibility of collaboration with us through their means... And in the middle of that they go, oh, there's resistance. And they don't know what that is. What they say about it is, "I don't know the direction this is heading," They use this other kind of language, but what it really means is something just got rattled in their consciousness. And that rattling is 500 years of convincing them that I am not the conduit for their joy, or I - the thing that I'm delivering - is not something they can consume. That's 500 years. The nation has worked very hard to assemble this thinking about Black women in particular, that says that you should be grateful to be on the elevator with with me. You should be grateful to be on this elevator. And therefore, because you're so grateful, your needs are not going to be met. And the thing that you should be happy about is you just get to be here.

D

Dominique Morisseau 32:54

But that thinking is real. And it's like I don't know, I don't know how many people know what it feels like to be... like, you can just feel that when you speak that you are despised before you even have... before your opinion is even made clear.

N

Nataki Garrett 33:10

Yes. Yeah.

D

Dominique Morisseau 33:11

Not your opinion that's despised... that YOU are despised for HAVING an opinion. What's fundamentally inside of white patriarchal supremacy is the authority to define reality, you know? And that's it. You get to define reality for everybody else. So your experience of the world is everybody else's experience of the world, because you get to define reality for us, and we don't get to define it for you. And that's, that is the true oppression, you know, I think that we're experiencing institutionally. That's why people go, "There's no such thing as institutional racism. Critical race theory is gonna make us hate our country...and that's not true." And, you know, it's like, because you want to define reality for everybody else... THAT is supremacist.

N

Nataki Garrett 33:59

Oooh, I'm gonna put that in my pocket, because sometimes you are looking for the words to be able to express it. And I keep saying, I keep thinking this too, because of the patronage of this theater that I run...the historical patronage. And because of that history here, you know, it's going to take a long time to even moderately shift that patronage, you know, so that it's more inclusive. What I mean to say is the bulk of the people who come to OSF - the bulk of the people who go to the theater - but the bulk of people who come to OSF are, you know, older white people of means and we have as a culture, as a theatre company, you know, in this town that this theater is in, we are really focused on nurturing that particular patronage, that group of people. And so I think about that, you know, OSF is producing "Confederates," it will open in late August - I think the 23rd of August and it will run to the end of the season. And I think about that, like who's coming into the room? Because here's the thing is I program plays because I want people like me to sit in the room and feel like it's for you. Right? So when I programmed "Fannie: The Life and Music of Fannie Lou Hamer," and I had a sister come up to me and say, "You know, what's so interesting about this piece is that I just really didn't think that white people still needed to hear this." And I was like, I'm not programming for white people. I mean, they're here, you know, and that's great. But I really programmed it for you, you know. Could you sit in that room and have an experience that is about you? When you know, the history of my organization, the history of theater says that you are actually the anomaly, not the person sitting next to you. And so I'm curious about that for you. Your plays are done on Broadway, your plays are done at Penumbra, and culturally specific theaters like that. Your plays are being done right now,

in this time, where a lot of the Broadway audiences are local, but what they're experiencing as well as audiences are coming in from Dallas and up from Atlanta - Black people to see Black plays. You know, what is.....

**D** Dominique Morisseau 36:15

More than the ones that are coming in from Connecticut and Massachusetts. Right?

**N** Nataki Garrett 36:19

Yes! Exactly.

**D** Dominique Morisseau 36:20

Those audiences have dropped off. Actually.

**N** Nataki Garrett 36:22

Yes, completely. ...And other audiences have come in, in their stead. And we have... the audiences that that we have ignored are the ones that are actually coming out to the theater. Part of your play being programmed at OSF for me is...at least it's a beacon that says, "This is for you. You should come here, you know. This is for you." I'm curious, though, for you, as a playwright - you know, there is an aspect to the American theater going audience as the status quo audience - the white, middle aged, middle class audience - there is something about that, that feels so dominant, that I feel like that plays are programmed for two different ideas, and two different reasons, and two different schools of thought. So I'm curious in that sort of duality that plays have to exist in especially because I think the same is true for plays that are written by dead white guys, you know, that there is a duality. And I'm curious about your take on that duality and the impact of your particular play in that dual space. Because if there are two Black women in the room, then your play for me serves that. But knowing that those two Black women in the room have to sit in a space in which they are the anomaly. I'm just curious about your thoughts about that.

**D** Dominique Morisseau 37:41

I'm a little tired of that. I'll tell you this - I, I think what, what... every time we have this conversation about audiences in theaters, I think it sounds to a very novice and uncultured ear or a very non-critical thinking ear....like very quickly, it sounds like, "We don't want those old white people." And that is just like... that would be just like such an over simplification and a ridiculous idea. That isn't said by anyone. And I just want to name that because it's just, it's a, it's just a way to dismiss the nuance of what is actually being called for which is that when I have seen my work, thrive, old white people have not been an audience by themselves. And they have not been the dominant audience. And they have had the time of their damn lives BECAUSE of that. BECAUSE of that! Because they're not sitting in a room with just themselves. What theater gives you an opportunity to do is to sit in a room with other people from all kinds of walks of life. And together, you're having this one thing and no one else can have. You are having a rare experience together - with strangers, not just strangers, like I don't know you, but we all kind of know each other's histories, we share history - But with people you don't share necessarily the same narrative with at all. You don't share any cultural history with, you know? I mean, maybe not even a shared language with, right? And yet we're all in the space now. Having a communal experience. There's nothing more humane. There's nothing more hopeful for humanity than to do that. Right? So for me, I'm exhausted by seeing an audience look like just one thing - especially when that one same thing is what it's always looked like. What is happening? Why is it 2022? What AREN'T we doing? How did this happen? And why are you comfortable with it? And when I have talked, you know, I did this at Lincoln Center because that's their audience for

sure. You know? And I think, you know, if you're competing for oldest, whitest, richest audience in New York... it's gonna be hard competition and Lincoln Center might win, you know? I mean, so that's like - that's how hard that is. And, and yet, I talked to Lincoln Center's audience who, when my play "Pipeline" was there... and I said, "Do you? Do you see who is sitting next to you? And do you want to see? Do you want to see young people? Don't you want to see young people? If you want to see young people seeing this show with you... Do you want to see how they would watch this show? I think you do. Wouldn't that be interesting? If you feel that way, if you want to see young people, and young people of color, see this show, you know, come talk to me afterwards. I got Lincoln Center's audiences donating to a fund that we created at Lincoln Center...

N

Nataki Garrett 40:28

I remember...

D

Dominique Morisseau 40:29

...so that different audiences will come see that show. Now I saw... they didn't stop coming. They just now were sharing their space. Now, the thing was they still thought it was their space to share, right? It's like, "Well, we're so happy to have them here in our space." (laughs) And, you know, like, I want you to know it's not your space - it should never have just been your space because money does not make something yours all the way. Right? For the people... you having the more money to feed into that... money is privilege... that does not give you more RIGHT to something. It gives you access. That's not the same thing. Right? You know, so I think theater has allowed us to think, "Well, I built that theatre. I gave all my hard working money to that theater. So I own a stake in it." And you are... you are a PIECE of that. But you're no MORE a piece of that than the person who steps in there for the first time. Out of some other different economic means. It also belongs to them. I think you have to... we have to learn to share, people. You know? And when we're affluent versus not, we have to learn to share space. Theater can teach us to share space.

N

Nataki Garrett 41:03

It's so true. We have to learn to share.

D

Dominique Morisseau 41:14

We gotta learn to share. And if theater can't teach that then nothing can. So... I just... to me, I am quite tired of seeing that same old audience with nothing else added into the mix. And I, as someone who also has - I'm on the board of Signature Theater, you know, I was on the board of Detroit Public Theater before taking the position there - But I'm still, you know, I'm still a participant on all these things. And I know how hard it is to get people to the theater, to change the landscape of theater. I think we have to take more of a conscientious role in all our participation of theater. To make it more equitable of a space. But I also think, you know, and since it's the other side of it, people have to show up, you know, they have to come, we have to program, and let them know they're welcome. But also, it takes a toll on me as an artist, when I don't see the people that I'm writing about in the audience. I'm like... "They're not here. They're not experiencing it." Well, I certainly appreciate everyone who appreciates my work, whether they share the background that also some of these stories....because our stories are universal - they ARE - they're universal. And they're specific, too. You know? I mean, the specific is what makes it universal because like this very specific Black woman's story IS your story, you know, you of another background and economic means. Like we do - we ARE each other. We are very much each other - socially, you know? And we can learn that through seeing each other's work. But also sometimes you have to see yourself as well. You need to see yourself. You need to see... I started writing "Confederates" because I said I need to see myself in history. If I haven't seen myself. I don't you... You talk about Black women studying our role in a

civil war. I don't see myself in that ever. I don't see myself in the Civil War. Where was I? Where was anything that's a reflection of me? I need to know that I was present and accounted for in history, that there's some part of me... some some extension of me. We all need to see ourselves. That is not to be taken for granted. And so it is sad to me, when I make this work to give us an opportunity to see ourselves, and it's not in front of anyone that's going to see themselves, you know? Maybe people will see themselves in a different way, you know? Maybe you'll see yourself through these Black folks. And that is good. It's just not enough. And I should never think that's enough. Not if I'm really trying to do something transformative with my work. I can't think that's enough. And you shouldn't want me to.

N

Nataki Garrett 44:12

Yeah, and you are doing something transformative with your work. I sat in the Lincoln Center audience to watch "Pipeline" with a large group of young, I think, high school aged Black and Brown kids and the matinee audience that was there. Actually, I don't know how I got that ticket. I was like online... I'm gonna press the button and, "Oh, I got it!"... like a lottery or something. And the beauty of experience was... I mean, that play is really about the lives of those people who I sat next to. And I needed to see it with them - because I understand, right? I was, you know... I'd like to think that I wasn't out of high school so long ago that I don't remember what that was like to be a Black person, a Black girl, in a high school that couldn't see me, hear me, or feel me. But I think what was really important was sitting next to, you know, a young Puerto Rican kid, you know, and his like... feeling his being moved emotionally, by that work... deepened my connection to what I was seeing, in a way that I could never have had as somebody who reads plays for a living - somebody who directs plays for a living. I needed the visceral connection and the understanding of what it means to share the armrest with that kid. And, and to also know, I'm watching him be transformed by it, I'm transformed through his transformation. And I'm so curious now about what that means for him years later, to have that experience. And I think people miss that. That's why I asked the question, because, you know, in order to come to OSF, you got to choose, you got to get in a car and go a long distance, you got to get on a plane, you got to fly out here to the middle of Southern Oregon, you got to get some sort of bus to get here. It's not like it's a direct, it's not like you're gonna walk out of your your living room and go around the corner to a play. Right, you have to make this choice. And so we don't, you know, people of color, have been coming to OSF for decades, just not em masse. And these plays for me, your play in particular, is a beacon for, for Black women, women of color, and for women to really sort of have a place and a connection to what they're seeing with this understanding that the people around them get to benefit from the that experience. So I love that you - the way you expressed it, and the most important thing that I'm going to take and put in my pocket, is you write these plays to have that communal experience. That that is the most important thing to see other people as you see yourself. And that is so so deeply beautiful, specifically, when I look at the women that you evoke in "Confederates," and their earnest desire to move through their circumstance and get to the other side. That's why I started with this idea that what I feel is that it's like you're in this circumstance, steeped in a circumstance, in it - continuing to survive it - because of your hope. You know, and I think that, as an industry, we have to continue to do that. You as a playwright and as a theatre leader, and a thought leader, me as an Artistic Director and stage director - we still have to stay in it, because we have to steep ourselves in our circumstance, as we move forward towards hope. Dominique, it has been so amazing having this conversation with you. You know, I took out my pencil because I was like, I need to write some notes down 'cause the things that coming out your mouth, you know? Your head and heart are so full of so much...so much good, you know, so much good that people can draw from. It's so important to hear from you, not just through the words that you write on a page, but also from you - you as a woman, as a mother, as a thinker. You know, as an artist, it's really important for me, it kind of... it's a little bit of fuel. So I hope other people, if they hear this conversation, they feel that fuel, because we all need it, we need a little bit of your fuel,

D

Dominique Morisseau 48:18

Same, Nataki. Same. And, I you know, and for you to be the leader that you are and to lead with the grace and the compassion and the fortitude, you know, that you have to push for change and to push for... to push us forward. No shift. No change. No pushing forward is comfortable. It doesn't feel always like you

push us forward, no stink, no change, no pushing forward is comfortable. It doesn't feel always like, you know, like a joyful thing to do in the moment. I do want to say that a friend of mine, putting up a play many years ago when I was you know, early 20s, and we were having a hard time - fighting with each other, putting up this show. And at the end of the, you know, when the show opened, he sent me - gave me flowers and it was a note inside that said, "Nothing moves without friction. Happy opening." You know, that has stayed with me for the rest of my life. Like nothing moves...without friction. If we can just be comfortable with a little friction, we know we're doing something. So I think if it feels uncomfortable, if you're having an uncomfortable experience sometimes with... things changing and the status quo being threatened, or being - shifting really because not threatened - it's not under attack, as much as it is moving. Moving as it should, into new space. Being moved forward is... there's nothing wrong with that. So I... anyway, I see you as someone, a big participant in that. Just like I see these women in this play as being participants in their own liberation and thus the liberation of other people. I think that same... I see the same for you and how you're moving OSF forward and how... but your presence there, and your work there, moves our field forward - moves our industry forward, which is awesome necessary. So, yeah, thank you for programming me there. I hope whoever comes, you know, I mean, of course, I want people whose bodily experiences represented on the stage to also be represented off, you know. But I also want everyone who experiences this play, no matter what their background is, to see themselves, find something to be convicted by, so that it can move you to doing something positive toward progression and, you know, in our in our world and in our country. Do, you know, I thank you for giving me a chance to be able to do that with my work p int that space.

N

Nataki Garrett 50:51

Dominique, it's been such a joy and a pleasure. Thank you.

A

Amanda Bullock 50:55

That was the Nataki Garrett and Dominique Morisseau from Oregon Shakespeare Festival. You can catch "Confederates" written by Dominique Morisseau and directed by Nataki Garrett at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival from August 23 to October 29, 2022. This has been Literary Arts The Archive Project, it's a retrospective of some of the most engaging talks from the world's best writers for more than 35 years of literary arts in Portland. The archive project is produced in collaboration with Oregon Public Broadcasting. To hear more subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thank you to Josh Horvath, Liz Lanier, Evren Odcikin, and Donya Washington from Oregon Shakespeare Festival for their work on this week's episode. Our Executive Producer is Andrew Proctor. The show is produced by Crystal Ligori and Donald Or for radio and podcast with oversight by Amanda Bullock and support from Liz Olufson Special thanks to Literary Arts' marketing staff Jyoti Roy and Hope Levy and the entire Literary Arts staff, board, and community. This show would not be possible without them. Thanks also to the band Emancipator for our theme music and thanks to all of you for listening. I'm Amanda Bullock, in for Andrew Proctor, and this has been another episode of The Archive Project from Literary Arts. Join us next time and find your story here.