

# BLOOD AT THE ROOT

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# BLOOD AT THE ROOT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

## **Penn State Graduate Acting Class Continues Successful National, International Tour With Award-Winning New Play *Blood at the Root***

UNIVERSITY PARK, PA, April 2014 – *Blood at the Root* is a bold new play written by rising star Dominique Morisseau (*Detroit '67*, *Sunset Baby*) and directed by Steve Broadnax, the head of Penn State's Graduate Acting program. Following a successful world-premiere tour of South Africa in 2013, the company returned to perform across the eastern United States before resuming their international tour this summer.

The work, commissioned by Penn State's School of Theatre, is inspired by the "Jena Six," a group of young black men in Jena, Louisiana, who were charged with attempted murder after assaulting a white student at their high school in 2006. Previous assaults on black students had gone largely unpunished, and the conviction and sentencing of the Jena Six serve as a strong reminder of the systemic injustice ingrained in the United States' judicial system.

*Blood at the Root* follows six students at fictional Cedar High School as they learn to look past their own experiences in order to see things from a different perspective. Though set in Louisiana, the decidedly American story proved universal on the company's three-week South African tour: "The response was electric all across the country," says company member Tyler Reilly. "Everywhere we went, people told us how wonderful it was that we were doing this show in their town. They thought we had written the play specifically for them, with their specific issues in mind."

The production continued to gain momentum on a statewide tour of Penn State campuses, where it ignited powerful discussions and a unique sense of community. In talkback sessions following each performance, the cast and audience engaged in conversation about their personal experiences and the power of reconciling differences: "It's like I'm seeing my own story up there," one student said. "The play is really bringing issues to light that no one wants to talk about, but we need to talk about them."

Those conversations are an essential part of the company's mission to make a difference in the communities it serves. To further that goal, they have developed curriculum around the show and have hosted workshops at high schools in Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C.

In April, the play's American tour extended to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, where the cast and creative team accepted the 2014 Hip Hop Theater Creator Award. In June they will return to South Africa prior to a European debut at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland in July and August.

Inspired by enthusiastic audience response in the U.S. and abroad, the company is thrilled to continue bringing this work to the world, and with a scenic design that calls only for six chairs and a painted backdrop, the production is ideally suited for touring.

*Blood at the Root* weaves music, dance and poetry to stunning effect and has proven that this story is not only one that needs to be told, it is one that must be seen.

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# BLOOD AT THE ROOT

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### The cast:

- **STORI AYERS** (Raylynn) is an actress, emerging director, and teaching artist from Washington, D.C. She is committed to new works that challenge social norms and create conversations in the community. Previous credits: *Doubt: A Parable* (Penn State Centre Stage) and *Flyin' West* (Live Arts).
- **BRANDON CARTER** (Justin) hails from Heathsville, Virginia. Previous credits include: *Antony and Cleopatra* (Richmond Shakespeare Festival) and *Sexual Perversity In Chicago* (Firehouse Theatre). [www.brandon-carter.com](http://www.brandon-carter.com).
- **ALLISON SCARLET JAYE** (Toria) is a performer, playwright, and teaching artist based in New York City. Her one-woman show, *Hurt People*, will be performing at the international United Solo Theatre Festival in November. More about Allison can be found at [www.allisonscarletjaye.com](http://www.allisonscarletjaye.com). Previous credits include: *House and Garden* (Pittsburgh Irish Classical Theatre) and *Julius Caesar* (Redlands Shakespeare Festival).
- **TYLER REILLY** (Colin) is a New York-based actor from Santa Rosa, California. Previous credits include *Angels In America* (Boston Theatre Works) and *The Seagull* (Publick Theatre). [www.tyler-reilly.com](http://www.tyler-reilly.com).
- **KENZIE ROSS** (Asha) is a native of Kalamazoo, Michigan, and graduated from Western Michigan University with a B.A. in Theatre Performance. Previous credits include: *Good Death* (Tectonic Theater Project/Edinburgh Festival Fringe) and *Love's Labour's Lost* (Penn State Centre Stage).
- **CHRISTIAN THOMPSON** (De'Andre) is an actor, singer and dancer from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and has performed at Carnegie Hall. Previous credits include: *Smokey Joe's Café* (Greater Ocean City Theatre Company) and *The Last Five Years* (State Theatre).



Stori Ayers



Brandon Carter



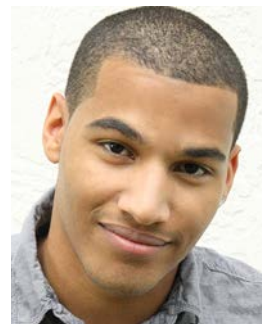
Allison Scarlet Jaye



Tyler Reilly



Kenzie Ross



Christian Thompson



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## The creative team:



**Dominique Morisseau** (Playwright) is a writer and actress, and a recent alumna of the Public Theater Emerging Writer's Group, the Women's Project Playwrights Lab, and the Lark Playwrights' Workshop. Her produced one-acts include: *Third Grade* (FTT Festival); *Black at Michigan* (Cherry Lane Studio/DUTF); *Socks, Roses Are Played Out* and *Love and Nappiness* (Center Stage, ATH). Dominique's commissions include: *love.lies.liberation* (The New Group), *Bumrush* (Hip Hop Theater Festival) and *The Masterpiece* (Harlem9/HSA). In February 2014, Morisseau's *Detroit '67* won the Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History, one of the largest prizes given for dramatic writing. *Detroit '67* is the first play in The Detroit Cycle, a three-play cycle on her hometown. It was developed at The Public Theater and was a finalist for the 2011 O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. The second play, *Paradise Blue*, was developed in June 2011 at the Voice and Vision Retreat, the Hansberry Project at ACT in Seattle, and at Dartmouth with the New York Theatre Workshop. Her work has been published in *New York Times* bestseller *Chicken Soup for the African American Soul*. Dominique is a Jane Chambers Playwriting Award Honoree, a two-time NAACP Image Award recipient, a runner-up for the 2011 Princess Grace Award, a recipient of the Elizabeth George commission from South Coast Rep, a commendation from the Primus Prize by the American Theatre Critics Association, and the winner of the 2012 Barrie and Bernice Stavis Playwright Award by National Theatre Conference. Dominique is also the 2012 PoNY (Playwrights of New York) Fellow.



**Steve Broadnax** (Director) is the Head of M.F.A. Acting at Penn State University. Other directing credits include: *Revenge of the King*, *In the Red and Brown Water*, *The Brothers Size*, *The Wiz*, *Fathers and Other Strangers*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Blues in the Night*, *Race*, *Three Ways Home*, *The Bomb-itty of Errors*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. As a writer, his works have been produced and workshopped regionally. Most recently, *Smash/Hit* had its world premiere at the St. Louis Black Rep. *The Hip Hop Project*, an award-winning, full-length original play he directed, choreographed, and conceived, has toured nationally and was showcased at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Washington, D.C. He has performed in *Dreamgirls* (Arkansas Repertory Theatre), and wrote and starred in the one-man show *R.L. at the Crossroads*, an homage to blues legend Robert Johnson, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland. He has worked in theatres such as Pennsylvania Centre Stage, St. Louis Black Rep, St. Louis Repertory Theatre, St. Louis Muny, Lincoln Amphitheatre, Westport Playhouse, Ozark Actors Theatre and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa.



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## The creative team:

**Aquila Kikora Franklin** (Choreographer) is an Associate Professor of Dance at Penn State University where she teaches West African, Hip Hop, and Mojah™ dance. She has performed, choreographed and taught in cities across the globe including Linz, Austria; Grahamstown, South Africa; Dakar, Senegal; Minas Gerais, Brazil; throughout China, Europe, and the United States. Franklin has also performed and choreographed for the Atlanta Hawks dance team. At Penn State, her creative work and research focuses on developing the Mojah™ dance technique, an original style that fuses modern (Horton and Dunham), jazz, West African, and Hip Hop movement into one form. Her interests also include studying the cultural and artistic expressions of the African Diaspora, the development and evolution of contemporary African and African-American concert and social dance, and using arts education as civic engagement. She shares her passion for dance and culture with young students as the artistic director of Roots of Life, a performing arts ensemble based out of the State College Area School District. Under the direction of her mother and dancer/choreographer, Terrie Ajile Axi, Franklin trained for over 20 years in Horton, Dunham, Hip Hop, jazz, ballet, and West African dance forms.

**Nathan Hawkins** (Lighting Designer) is a student in Penn State University's B.F.A. Lighting Design program. He was the lighting designer and master electrician for two years at the Annapolis Summer Garden Theater. Previous Penn State credits include *Doubt: A Parable* and *Into The Woods*.

**Karl Jacobson** (Scenic Designer) holds an M.F.A. in Scenic Design from Penn State University. Prior to *Blood at the Root*, he designed Penn State's production of *Love's Labour's Lost*. He completed his undergraduate work at Clarion University, where he designed over 17 shows and later served as the technical director for Clarion's summer theatre program. Karl was chosen as the runner-up for his design of *The Effects of Gamma Rays On Man-In-The Moon Marigolds* at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, which was held at the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference.

**Carly Reeder** (Costume Designer) holds a B.F.A. in Costume Design from Penn State University. Previous Penn State credits include *Into The Woods* and *Sweeney Todd*.

**Liz Sokolak** (Sound Designer) is a student in Penn State University's B.F.A. Sound Design program. Previous Penn State credits include *Leonard Bernstein's MASS* and *Good People*.



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Brandon Carter



Kenzie Ross



Stori Ayers



Allison Scarlet Jaye



The cast of *Blood at the Root*



Christian Thompson



Kenzie Ross and Brandon Carter



Christian Thompson, Stori Ayers  
and Kenzie Ross



Tyler Reilly and Stori Ayers



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# BLOOD AT THE ROOT

## SEEDS OF CHANGE: Roots, Art and Activism

*A conversation with director Steve Broadnax, playwright Dominique Morisseau, choreographer Kikora Franklin and scenic designer Karl Jacobson about their work on Blood at the Root and how the experience has impacted them*

**What is *Blood at the Root* about to you?**

DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU: For me, *Blood at the Root* is about social prejudice verses systemic injustice. We all have prejudices against each other, whether they're big or small. Sometimes they're racial, sometimes they're with gender, sometimes they're with ideas and beliefs. But it's the difference between having those prejudices against each other, learning to live with each other and enlightening ourselves, and a system using prejudice to completely marginalize a people. The system is supposed to be blind, justice is supposed to be blind and yet it isn't. So, I think those things are all coming up against each other in this play.

STEVE BROADNAX: Absolutely. It's about how we stand against those injustices, and it's about our ability to change them.

**How do you tell that story?**

KARL JACOBSON: I wanted the design to be a visual representation of the scars that time and history have inflicted, because I think this play really is about looking at your own scars and the scars we inflict on each other.

SB: And really, my goal is to tell a clear story. Clear—not tied up nice and neat where it all gets solved in the end, that's something different—and hopefully by the end it gives hope that you can make change.

**How have your own experiences informed your work here?**

SB: I'm from Arkansas, so I understand race in the South, custom in the South, culture in the South. I lived the racism in the South—segregation, busing to the schools—I lived that. Also, the environment: the heat and the humidity... my experience of growing up down there helped me create that world.

KJ: I'm from a small town in western Pennsylvania where people mask racism with humor and try to sweep it under the rug, but the truth is that it's still there. I think that was the idea that most appealed to me as a designer: no matter how hard to we try not to look at it, it's still there.



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## Can you talk a little bit about the play's title?

SB: I think it's a metaphor for the root of racism and hatred in the history of our country. Those roots run deep. The issues that the characters in the play deal with have depth and a cause that is immediate and now but also goes back way before them. This didn't happen overnight; it's rooted like a tree. It's deep in our history of why and how we got where we are.

DM: And actually, we picked the title before we even knew what the play was going to be. One of the lines in the song "Strange Fruit" is "blood on the leaves / blood at the root." So, we were like, "why don't we just call it 'Blood at the Root.'" I was like, "I don't know if I'm going to really hate that title later," but sometimes the title finds the play, and I feel like that's what's happened in this case, because it really has become about these roots and how we're going to cut them in order to have a different future as a country and as a world.

## The play is infused with dance and movement; when did that enter the process?

KIKORA FRANKLIN: Within the African and African-American aesthetic, movement, music, and the spoken word are completely interconnected and really function as essential elements of expression. We decided to celebrate that pretty

much from the beginning by incorporating movement and dance to help tell the story, and in fact dance is De'Andre's primary mode of expression. Steve, Dominique and I worked together to make sure the movement helped tell the story, whether it was for the ensemble or for a particular character, like De'Andre.

DM: And it's interesting how the writing kind of falls back and the story gets told by all these other elements because of what the writing sparks. I can't even imagine this piece without movement, because the story of incarceration is about the visual image. To not hear it or talk about it, but witness it and the inner struggle, the rage of those youth that are trapped is more profound than any words could tell. Dance and movement becomes the final language of the play.

SB: Dominique and I have talked a lot about the black male being silenced in this play, in not being able to express himself except through that movement. De'Andre can't find a place for his voice in society because society has shut him down, and I think men in general don't know that vulnerability, or know where to place that vulnerability to speak, so while De'Andre wants to shut off his emotion, it is in his movement and dance that we see his dimension and he finds that outlet to express himself.



*Karl Jacobson's scenic design*



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**What elements influenced or inspired you in your creative process?**

SB: Through necessity and limitation brings creativity. We had to carry this show internationally, and I had to decide what set and props we could travel with. Theatre is the only place where the community comes together to collectively use its imagination, and we use our imaginations so much in this play that I forget that we only have six chairs and a backdrop. When the actors make the tree, it's really there.

KJ: To me, the tree is the strongest image in the story. It's a mysterious, innocent thing that gets twisted and turned into a symbol of hate, which really inspired the design. I wanted the tree to grow out of the actors and into the symbol it comes to represent in the story.

DM: The image of nooses was big for me, but also listening to Louisiana music was a big part of the foundation. Parts of the protest, particularly, were inspired by old Civil Rights songs that kind of get re-vamped, and slaves hymns, too. I borrowed elements of the past and tried to make it contemporary.

**Have you encountered any surprises with this play?**

DM: I've never written a full play as a devised theatre piece or done it a way that gives this much ownership to the cast. There are people who have originated roles and certainly have ownership of my work, but I haven't ever done it where it's been this from-the-ground-up, with everyone's input, where I've used things that we've discovered and researched as a collective.

SB: This is also my first time working this closely in collaboration on a devised theatre piece. Generally I have a script, I direct, and I'm the leader of the collaborative effort. With a group of people where every one of us was part of that collective, that's new. I've said in rehearsal, "I ain't never seen nothing like this before, so either we're gonna fly, or we're gonna flop." But this work has taught me to take risks outside of the norm, outside of tradition, outside of the standard, and trust instinct. Its outreach has also been awesome. Going into schools and the communities and doing workshops with a piece like this is something that I've never done.

KF: I have to say that working with a diverse group of people for an extended period of time and having the opportunity to change and rearrange was really rewarding and challenging. It's been a unique and powerful experience.



*Kikora Franklin in rehearsal with Christian Thompson*

**In audience talkbacks, the actors often talk about how the process has challenged or changed them. Is that true for you, too?**

KJ: At first read, I knew it was a special piece. It goes where theatre is supposed to take you, and transcends what's on the stage and opens up your mind and soul to a conversation that is uncomfortable and makes you look inside yourself and the world around you. This piece reminds me that theatre is not just about telling a great story; it can also be a vehicle for change and conversation.

DM: For me, it's challenged my way of writing, the way that I build story, to try a different form, a different style of storytelling, and trust that I don't have to be the sole author of my work. It's also inspired a whole new side of my artistry, watching the piece not just be in conversation in a room by itself but that it's moving into workshops, conversations and talkbacks, that it's being used as a social justice model. It's really inspiring to watch that happen, and to watch the people that are participating in it grow from that model themselves, and become their own ideas of who they are as artists, as activists, as "artists," or whatever they wanna be. Watching them take form and really define themselves through this project has been a big form of inspiration and growth for me as an artist.

SB: It's the most purpose-filled art that I've ever made. I've seen this piece do work that is beyond what I could have imagined. It's affected the cast and everybody on the creative team, including myself, and I've watched us all grow. It has redefined my purpose as an artist. I think it's fruitless to even entertain work as an artist that doesn't do what this piece has done. I can no longer do art that doesn't have a purpose. There's simply too much work out here that needs to be done.



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PENN STATE | NEWS



*"Blood at the Root," a newly commissioned play by award-winning playwright Dominique Morisseau, will be performed by School of Theatre students at the Penn State Downtown Theatre Center March 25-April 5 before embarking on an international tour this summer. The play was inspired by the story of the "Jena Six," six black teenagers in Jena, La., who were charged with attempted murder for a schoolyard fight in 2006 after nooses were hung from a tree at their high school.*

Image: Michelle Bixby

## New play takes root, expands to international tour

The commissioned play 'Blood at the Root' explores issues of race, class, sexuality and discrimination — and the all-student cast seized the opportunity to share important conversations with peers at campuses ... and others around the world.

March 22, 2014

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — When the members of the School of Theatre's M.F.A. Acting class of 2014 finish their degrees, they will have a lot more than the Penn State mainstage on their résumés. They will have the experience of performing, marketing and touring — throughout Pennsylvania and internationally — a newly commissioned play that examines issues of race, class, sexuality and discrimination in a way that only live theatre can.

The School of Theatre commissioned up-and-coming playwright Dominique Morisseau, who recently won the prestigious Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History, to write a play for the class of 2014. Commissioning a playwright to create a new work for the graduating class is nothing new — the School of Theatre has been doing it since 2010. But what happened over the past year has taken the students — literally and figuratively — farther than they ever imagined.

The play, "Blood at the Root" was inspired by the story of the "Jena Six," six black teenagers in Jena, La., who were charged with attempted murder for a schoolyard fight after nooses were hung from a tree at their high school. Because previous assaults on black students had generated far lesser penalties, the conviction of the Jena Six sparked protests and civil rights demonstrations across the country.

The play "represents the culmination of a deeply

personal and highly collaborative process," says director Steve Broadnax, associate professor of theatre and head of the graduate acting program. "Together we developed a performance piece that celebrates looking beyond our differences in order to move forward."

"Blood at the Root" hits the mainstage at the Penn State Downtown Theatre Center March 25–April 5, fresh off the heels of winning the Kennedy Center's Hip Hop Theater Creator Award, which honors new theatrical works that engage hip hop "as an ever-evolving attitude of contemporary resistance and self-definition." The cast will accept the award at the Kennedy Center on April 7.

The story of the Jena Six may be one for the history books, but it's a 21st-century tale that played out in 2006-07. "Many people don't realize events like this are still happening," says Tyler Reilly, cast member and managing director for the tour. "This play points to conversations that are begging to be had."

The cast of six — five graduate students and one undergraduate — started those conversations in summer 2013, when they performed the play on a four-city tour of South Africa, culminating at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. "We knew the play worked in the rehearsal room, but because it's an American story, we were not sure how it would play out in South Africa," says Reilly. "What



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we learned was that the play's specificity of time, place and culture is actually what allows people to see themselves, their culture and their issues in the piece."

The cast members' experience in South Africa made them realize they needed to share the play with an even wider audience. When they returned to the United States, they formed their own tour company, designating specific responsibilities — such as managing director and marketing coordinator — to each cast member. They also began working with Penn State's Office of Student Affairs to schedule performances at the Commonwealth campuses, which began in January 2014.

Each presentation of "Blood at the Root" — starting with the South Africa performances last summer — includes a "talkback" at the play's end, facilitated by Broadnax, a cast member or other associated Penn State faculty. During a talkback session, the facilitator, cast and audience exchange questions and answers about the play's artistic, technical and social aspects.

"It became clear in South Africa that we were starting very important conversations," says Allison Jaye, marketing coordinator for the tour. "We feel we have a responsibility to provide a space where people can have these discussions. And we take responsibility for what we're putting out there."

What they're putting out there is not necessarily easy to discuss, but the talkback sessions have shown that the play resonates with a wide audience. In South Africa, Reilly says, "in every city, we were told why the play was relevant to them and why it was important that we were performing it in their city."

Jaye agrees, noting the play "has really become a conversation with the audiences we're taking it to." The response has been humbling, she adds. "It has been bigger and brighter and more enthusiastic than we ever dreamed. It has really become something bigger than us — it has become a 'service.'"

Providing that "service" has also provided the student actors with an experience they never anticipated. Before they performed in South Africa last summer, they never considered a tour, let alone an international one. But this summer, the company will not only return to South Africa in June, but also perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August. When Dan Carter, director of the School of Theatre, brought up the possibility of a tour, Reilly says, "we knew it was way too good an opportunity to pass up. But we also

realized that if we wanted it to happen, we needed to take the reins and make it happen."

Each cast member has a role beyond performing — in addition to managing director and marketing coordinator, there are coordinators for education programs, development, events and production. The students have organized several fundraising performances, including the U.S. premiere of the play at State College Area High School.

For Jaye, the experience has taught her anything is possible — if you're dedicated. "You have to keep up, and you have to get out of your own way. You have to be willing to go at the speed that things are going to take off," she says. "If one person is dedicated — if I believe in it with all my heart, and dedicate my time, energy and focus to it — then everyone else around me will begin to believe and be dedicated, too. That has been an invaluable lesson."

While "Blood at the Root" is based on a story of racial injustice, the cast says the play is about much more than race. "This is not a Louisiana story; this is OUR story," says Jaye. "This is happening here in State College, in Pittsburgh, in southern California, in Syracuse, N.Y. — all places I call home. And I want audiences to go beyond 'race' or deciding 'this piece is about race.' It's not just about that — race is a heavy-weight vehicle for the themes that 'Blood at the Root' brings up, which I believe are challenge and change."

During the course of developing and performing the play, it became clear the cast had an overarching goal — to get people talking. And if audience response is any indication, they have been successful.

"'Blood at the Root' doesn't just stop here," said an audience member at the Penn State Abington presentation. "It starts here. It plants the seed to have these conversations."

The tour of "Blood at the Root" has been supported by the Penn State School of Theatre, College of Arts and Architecture, Graduate School, Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost, Office of the Vice President for Research, Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses, Office of the Vice Provost for Educational Equity, Student Affairs, Africana Research Center, Commission for Women, Commission on Racial/Ethnic Diversity and LGBTQA Student Resource Center. For more information on the tour, visit the "Blood at the Root" Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/BloodAtTheRoot>. Tickets are available for the Penn State Downtown Theatre Center performances by calling 1-800-ARTS-TIX.



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## Altoona Mirror

### ‘Root’ gives voice to the unspoken

By Michael Casper  
April 1, 2014

Penn State Centre Stage’s new theater work, “Blood at the Root” takes social issues that are part of the unspoken fabric of America and transforms them from conceptual to real, and from historical to personal.

Commissioned by Penn State from acclaimed playwright Dominique Morisseau, the project was written through intensive work with six Penn State theater students, a junior and five master’s program actors who will graduate in May.

The first performances of the work last summer in South Africa received positive feedback. As the project developed, so also did funding that will allow the show to return to South Africa in June and then tour in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Morisseau’s storyline uses an incendiary racial incident from 2006 in Jena, La., as the takeoff point to also address compelling and complex aspects of class and sexual orientation.

In Jena, six black teenagers were convicted in the beating of a white fellow student from their high school. Other details from Jena leading up to the violence are included — notably three nooses hung from a landmark tree at the school — but Morisseau also seizes the opportunity to comment on other fundamental aspects of unfair treatment and inequality that continue to resist correction.

The issue of fairness that was debated then becomes fodder for examining both social prejudice, as well as systemic injustice.

Under the direction of Steve Broadnax, who also convinced Morisseau to bring the project to Penn State, the players not only inhabit their characters, they transpose them onto the observer by the sheer honesty and conviction of their performance.

Stori Ayers plays Raylynn, a quiet black student who

begins to question the cliques in her school’s culture and steps forward to run on real issues for class president. Her best friend, Asha, played by Kenzie Ross, is white but has grown up in and relates to her black family culture, yet these events throw into question her own cultural identity. Raylynn befriends Colin (Tyler Reilly), who happens to be the quarterback of the football team, when she helps him open his school locker. Their friendship gets tested when her younger brother, De’Andre (Christian Thompson) is implicated in a gang beating of Colin, who had been covering up his own gay identity.

Can Colin find the courage to put aside his own experience of victimization and stand up for the future of De’Andre, a juvenile who is likely to be tried as an adult?

The unfolding of these explosive events also provides for a whirlwind of discussion between the editor of the school newspaper, Justin (Brandon Carter), a black student who’s become adept at suppressing his own experience of injustice in favor of espousing safe news topics in the name of journalistic objectivity, and an enterprising writer, Toria (Allison Scarlet Jaye), who’s determined to write to make a difference, not just fill column inches.

Morisseau’s skillful writing creates visceral interactions that resonate, to ask: Are these issues still present today, are we effectively addressing them and whose job is that anyway?

Theatrical values are strong. Organic, fluid choreography by Aquila Kikora Franklin adds an electric quality that exudes a frustration at individual and systemic blindness as well as the redeeming potential of youth.

Central Pennsylvania is lucky to have this caliber of theater. The language is not for the timid, but it is central to realistically conveying the time, place and culture.



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## US plays get to the root of racism

By Stuart Thembisile Lewis

July 1, 2013

Race is a topic that is never far from the national consciousness of a country like South Africa, but two plays from the United States at this year's Festival make a powerful statement about the racism present in the "land of the free."

*Blood at the Root* is based on events in Jena, Louisiana, in 2007 when six black high school students were charged with attempted murder for a schoolyard fight after nooses were hung from a tree in the school courtyard.

The other production, *Roots, Rhythm and Revolution*, deals with the playwright's need to explore her African roots and the origin of her ancestors.

Poet and playwright Dominique Morisseau was commissioned by Pennsylvania State University to write *Blood at the Root*.

She chose the story of the Jena Six because it illustrated both ignorance of the history of race issues amongst American youth and the low value placed upon the lives of young black men in her country.

Director Steve Broadnax was amazed by the play's resonance with South African audiences, as

his understanding of South African race relations came through the writing of Athol Fugard.

Both he and Morisseau found particular relevance in the Sharpeville Massacre of 1976.

*Blood at the Root* was performed in Bloemfontein and at

the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and is moving to Cape Town this week.

"In every city, we have been told why it is relevant and why it is important that we are doing this play in that city," said actor Tyler Reilly, who plays a quarterback.

Wéma Harris, writer and star of *Roots, Rhythm and Revolution*, is deeply critical of the institutional racism that she and other African-Americans face back home. Ironically, Harris claims that racism has become increasingly overt under the presidency of Barack Obama, who is currently in Africa on state visits.

Harris mentions a friend with a doctorate from Harvard who was once arrested on entirely spurious charges while walking home. "No matter what you do with your life, to the cops you're just another black boy in a hoodie," she says, referring also to Trayvon Martin, the boy who was murdered in Florida in February 2012.

Harris decided to bring her play to Festival after attending for the first time last year. While it is easy to assume that inequality is unique to South Africa, both these plays are clear demonstrations that these issues are universal and resonate across international borders.

"This is not going away and we need to face it head on," Harris says.



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— www.centredaily.com —

## Question preconceptions: Prejudice, Racial Injustice Influence Change in PSU's 'Blood at the Root'

By Jason Klose  
March 21, 2014

"Blood at the Root" is an explosive new drama that explores the escalation of racial tensions when a student challenges the status quo at an integrated but racially segregated high school in the conservatively charged South. The drama focuses on six black Louisiana teens convicted of beating a white student after a noose was found hanging from a tree and addresses propaganda, individual freedoms and racial inequality in the judicial system.

Written by Dominique Morisseau, "Blood at the Root" was inspired by the Jena Six, the teens convicted in the beating of Justin Barker, a white student at Jena High School, in 2006. The conviction of the Jena Six was cited as an example of racial injustice in the United States, due to a belief that the defendants had been charged with too-serious offenses and had been treated unfairly. Exposing the miscarriage of justice and racial double standards in a bold portrayal, "Blood at the Root" also examines the crisis in relations between men and women of all classes and, as a result, the shattered state of black family life.

"Blood at the Root" is directed by Steve Broadnax, an associate professor of theater at Penn State. He said the overall concept for "Blood at the Root" is that "truth and reconciliation lead to positive change. I want the audience to walk away realizing the power of truth and reconciliation," he said. "To quote Dr. Martin Luther King, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' "

"Blood at the Root" explores the experiences of a group of high school students desperately trying to define themselves and navigate around those who do not share their self-identification. These students embark on a journey where they learn there is no progress without struggle and the struggle is embedded in uniting as a whole despite their differences.



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"This isn't a Louisiana story, or an African-American story, or a high school story; this is 'our' story," said Penn State MFA candidate Allison Jaye, who plays Cedar High School's newspaper reporter, Toria. "This is happening here in State College, in Pittsburgh, in the Deep South, in South Africa, in France, in Venezuela, in the Ukraine, everywhere. Every single country in the world has to face what they call 'the other.' "

What Jaye hopes is for the audience to go beyond deciding that the piece is just about race. "It's not just about race," she said. "Race is a heavyweight vehicle for the themes that 'Blood at the Root' brings up, which I believe to be 'challenge and change.' We must challenge in order to change, but we can't challenge if we don't see."

Commissioned for the third-year graduate acting class at Penn State, the show went on a South African tour last summer and the branch campuses this semester. After the main stage run in State College ends in April, the show will return to South Africa for a second tour this summer, followed by a monthlong run in Scotland.

After each performance the cast will conduct talkbacks with the audience, giving people who see the play an opportunity to participate and continue the conversation that's important to each and every one of us.

"My hope is that everyone can identify with a character up there," said third-year acting student Brandon Carter, who plays Justin. "That the way we have sustained hatred towards others for our race and sexuality (for hundreds of years) is not OK anymore," he said. "It's difficult and it's pretty uncomfortable, but we should make deliberate, conscious choices in the right direction. That's the only way we make progress."

Jaye said she wants audiences to see themselves, their friends, their families, their kids and their communities in this play, and realize that these are things that aren't just happening in other parts of the world, but are happening in their own backyards as well.

"The story's specificity creates a universality that charges the audience with a social responsibility of dealing with 'the other' in order to invoke change," Ayers said. "How do we judge and treat people who are different? How does that judgment keep us separate and void of progress? Audiences should learn about themselves, see a side to someone they wouldn't normally talk to, and question their beliefs."



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## SELECTIONS FROM THE CURRICULUM GUIDE

### How Real-Life Events Inspired the Story of *Blood at the Root*

*Blood at the Root* is a play commissioned by Dominique Morisseau for the current third-year graduate acting class at Penn State University. The play is inspired by the events surrounding the “Jena Six,” six black teenagers convicted in the beating of Justin Barker, a white student at Jena High School in Jena, Louisiana, on December 4, 2006. While the case was pending, it was often cited by liberal commentators as an example of racial injustice in the United States, due to a belief that the defendants had initially been charged with too-serious offenses and had been treated unfairly.

Six individuals (Robert Bailey, then aged 16; Mychal Bell, then 16; Carwin Jones, then 17; Bryant Purvis, then 17; Jesse Ray Beard, then 14; and Theo Shaw, then 17) were arrested in the assault on Barker, who was injured and treated at the emergency room. One, Mychal Bell, was initially convicted as an adult of aggravated battery and conspiracy to commit aggravated battery. His convictions were overturned on the grounds that he should have been tried as a juvenile. Prior to a retrial in juvenile court, he pled guilty to a reduced charge of simple battery. The other five defendants later pled no contest, and were convicted of the same offense.

The Jena Six case sparked protests by those viewing the arrests and subsequent charges—initially attempted second-degree murder (though later reduced)—as excessive and racially discriminatory. The protesters asserted that white Jena youths involved in other incidents were treated leniently. On September 20, 2007, between 15,000 and 20,000 protesters marched on Jena in what was described as the “largest civil rights demonstration in years.” Related protests were held in other U.S. cities on the same day.

Playwright Dominique Morisseau uses this historical event as a platform to develop the fictitious story for *Blood at the Root*. The story’s specificity creates a universality that charges the audience with the social responsibility of dealing with “the other” in order to create change: How do we judge and treat people who are different? How does that judgment keep us apart from one another and impede our progress? Everyone has an “other;” whether based in sexuality, race or gender, we all deal with people who are unlike ourselves.

This play explores the experiences of a group of high school students desperately trying to define themselves

and navigate around those who identify themselves differently. We meet these high schoolers at a point in their lives where their differences have kept them separate and in judgment of one another, so when the desire for change erupts within them individually, they find themselves powerless and are thus forced to confront and engage “the other” in order to move their community forward. These students learn during their journey that without struggle there is no progress and that that struggle requires uniting despite differences. United, they find their power to reverse injustice. Within the journey of these six high school students, Ms. Morisseau also addresses propaganda, individual freedoms and racial inequality in the judiciary system.



Working with students at the Duke Ellington School for the Arts in Washington, D.C.



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## The New York Times

### Justice In Jena

By Reed Walters  
Op-Ed Contributor  
September 26, 2007

The case of the so-called Jena Six has fired the imaginations of thousands, notably young African-Americans who, according to many of their comments, believe they will be in the vanguard of a new civil rights movement. Whether America needs a new civil rights movement I leave to social activists, politicians and the people who must give life to such a cause.

I am a small-town lawyer and prosecutor. For 16 years, it has been my job as the district attorney to review each criminal case brought to me by the police department or the sheriff, match the facts to any applicable laws and seek justice for those who have been harmed. The work is often rewarding, but not always.

I do not question the sincerity or motivation of the 10,000 or more protesters who descended on Jena last week, after riding hundreds of miles on buses. But long before reaching our town of 3,000 people, they had decided that a miscarriage of justice was taking place here. Their anger at me was summed up by a woman who said, "If you can figure out how to make a schoolyard fight into an attempted murder charge, I'm sure you can figure out how to make stringing nooses into a hate crime."

That could be a compelling statement to someone trying to motivate listeners on a radio show, but as I am a lawyer obligated to enforce the laws of my state, it does not work for me.

I cannot overemphasize how abhorrent and stupid I find the placing of the nooses on the schoolyard tree in late August 2006. If those who committed that act considered it a prank, their sense of humor is seriously distorted. It was mean-spirited and deserves the condemnation of all decent people.

But it broke no law. I searched the Louisiana criminal code for a crime that I could prosecute. There is none.

Similarly, the United States attorney for the Western District of Louisiana, who is African-American, found no federal law against what was done. A district attorney cannot

take people to trial for acts not covered in the statutes. Imagine the trampling of individual rights that would occur if prosecutors were allowed to pursue every person whose behavior they disapproved of. The "hate crime" the protesters wish me to prosecute does not exist as a stand-alone offense in Louisiana law. It's not that our Legislature has turned a blind eye to crimes motivated by race or other personal characteristics, but it has addressed the problem in a way that does not cover what happened in Jena. The hate crime statute is used to enhance the sentences of defendants found guilty of specific crimes, like murder or rape, who chose their victims based on race, religion, sexual orientation or other factors.

Last week, a reporter asked me whether, if I had it to do over, I would do anything differently. I didn't think of it at the time, but the answer is yes. I would have done a better job of explaining that the offenses of Dec. 4, 2006, did not stem from a "schoolyard fight" as it has been commonly described in the news media and by critics.

Conjure the image of schoolboys fighting: they exchange words, clench fists, throw punches, wrestle in the dirt until classmates or teachers pull them apart. Of course that would not be aggravated second-degree battery, which is what the attackers are now charged with. (Five of the defendants were originally charged with attempted second-degree murder.) But that's not what happened at Jena High School.

The victim in this crime, who has been all but forgotten amid the focus on the defendants, was a young man named Justin Barker, who was not involved in the nooses incident three months earlier. According to all the credible evidence I am aware of, after lunch, he walked to his next class. As he passed through the gymnasium door to the outside, he was blindsided and knocked unconscious by a vicious blow to the head thrown by Mychal Bell. While lying on the ground unaware of what was happening to him, he was brutally kicked by at least six people.

Imagine you were walking down a city street, and someone



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leapt from behind a tree and hit you so hard that you fell to the sidewalk unconscious. Would you later describe that as a fight?

Only the intervention of an uninvolved student protected Mr. Barker from severe injury or death. There was serious bodily harm inflicted with a dangerous weapon — the definition of aggravated second-degree battery. Mr. Bell's conviction on that charge as an adult has been overturned, but I considered adult status appropriate because of his role as the instigator of the attack, the seriousness of the charge and his prior criminal record.

I can understand the emotions generated by the juxtaposition of the noose incident with the attack on Mr. Barker and the outcomes for the perpetrators of each. In the final analysis, though, I am bound to enforce the laws of Louisiana as they exist today, not as they might in someone's vision of a perfect world.

That is what I have done. And that is what I must continue to do.

*Reed Walters is the district attorney of LaSalle Parish.*



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## Jena Six, Louisiana Town Move On

By Mary Foster

August 25, 2011

JENA, La. — One wants to be a lawyer. One, a soldier. Another, a sports agent. Some don't care to talk about their future or that part of their past, five years ago, when they faced up to 40 years in prison in the beating of a white classmate, an episode that sparked the biggest civil rights demonstration the nation had seen in years.

The "Jena Six" are ready to move on.

So is the young man who was beaten.

So is the town of Jena.

"This is a nice little town, it's really like Mayberry," said Jena mayor Murphy McMillin. "We were never portrayed accurately during all that. But now we're past it and focused on the future."

It was on Aug. 30, 2006, that a black student asked if he could sit under a tree on campus or if it was for white students only. The next morning there were three nooses hanging in the tree. The tension culminated Dec. 4, when Justin Barker was beaten. Six of his black classmates were arrested. Three days later, five of them were charged with attempted murder.

Reed Walters, the LaSalle Parish District Attorney since 1991, said he believes the incident drew the town closer together, including the march. Thousands of chanting demonstrators filled the streets that September day, led by figures such as the Revs. Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. At the time, Jena (pronounced JEE'-nuh) was left to fend off accusations of racism in the justice system — no one was charged for hanging the nooses, and protesters derided the attempted murder charges as excessive. The charges were later reduced.

"The world had been told that Jena was such an evil place," Walters said. "I think during that march people saw that was not true."

Members of the Jena Six are determined to move away — and learn — from their controversial pasts. They say they want

to be something one day: A sports agent, a lawyer, a military man. Those interviewed said they don't run into problems when they return to Jena to visit family.

"I've tried to wash those memories out of the back of my head," said Jessie Ray Beard, who was 14 when he was arrested in the beating. "I have other things to concentrate on."

Beard's attorney arranged for him to stay with another attorney's family in New York about three and a half years ago and attend the Canterbury School, a private boarding school in Connecticut.

"That first year was very, very hard for him," said Alan Howard, the attorney with whom Beard lives.

"It took a tremendous effort on his part to make it."

Beard has since gone on to Hofstra, where he earned an academic scholarship, is pursuing legal studies and business, and plays on the lacrosse team. He plans to go to grad school on the west coast and eventually work as a sports agent.

Robert Bailey Jr., who graduated from high school in Georgia, plays wide receiver at Grambling and is a member of the ROTC. After he graduates in 2013, he hopes to pursue a military career.

"Because of what happened, I grew up. I learned things too, like doing things the right way," Bailey said.

Mychal Bell, who was 16 at the time, was the only defendant to go to trial. He was convicted, but that decision was set aside. He ultimately pleaded guilty to a second-degree battery charge and received an 18-month sentence. The other five accepted a plea deal that gave them seven days probation, a \$500 fine and court costs.

Bell, a highly recruited football player before the beating, is a cornerback on Southern University's team. His attorney said it was best if he wasn't interviewed.

"Every time there's something in the press about him, he



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gets a lot of hate mail," said Bell's attorney, Louis Scott.

Theo Shaw, 21, is now studying political science and history at University of Louisiana at Monroe and plans to go to law school. He has done several internships in the field, he said, including one with the Innocence Project, a national nonprofit that works to free wrongfully convicted prisoners. His time in jail sparked his interest in law – he said he spent a lot of time reading up on the subject so he could file court papers.

"I do think it was a situation that helped me to develop character and be a better person," Shaw said. "But beyond that, I don't think of it much anymore."

Bryant Purvis is enrolled at Southeastern Louisiana. Carwin Jones did not return calls left with his father for comment.

The victim, Justin Barker, is the only one who still lives in Jena. Now 22, he's an inconspicuous young man: thin, with soft brown hair and large eyes, a Southerner raised to say "Yes, ma'am" and "Yes, sir" and stay quiet around strangers. So he's always surprised when someone asks if he's "that" Justin Barker, he told The Associated Press in his first media interview since the beating.

"That's the only time that whole thing comes up," Barker said, sitting in the dining area of his tidy new trailer. These days he works on an oil rig in Texas – seven days on, seven off – and helps his father cut timber when he's home. He recently divorced the woman who was his girlfriend when he was beaten.

The defendants initially claimed Barker had made a racial slur, prompting the attack. But they admitted that was untrue as part of the plea deal. As for Barker, all he remembers is this: He walked out of the gym and turned left to avoid a crowd when something hit him.

"I don't know why they attacked me," he said. "No one ever told me, and I don't have a clue until this day."

He woke up in the emergency room, his right eye swollen shut and his jaw fractured. Both took months to heal, and he still deals with TMJ – a popping in the joint where the jaw connects to the skull. He sued the defendants and was awarded \$22,000 for medical bills and \$7,000 in damages. Now he says he's put it all behind him.

"I'm just trying to get on with my life," Barker said. "I have put all that behind me."

Barker is one of the few young people that stay in town, as most leave to find jobs, said McMillin. These days, town officials are focused on ensuring there is a high quality of life in Jena. For the mayor, the term "Jena Six" has taken on new meaning.

"There is a new Jena Six — the mayor and the five city

councilmen," McMillin said.

The town's seven black churches make a point of getting together and interacting with folks who attend white churches, "and we have it on a regular basis," said the Rev. Jimmy Young, 70, pastor of L&A Baptist Church. Young is black.

Walters, the district attorney, won't talk about the case. But he does have one regret.

"I wish I had been able to explain things better," he said. "I don't think I did a very good job of that."



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