



# ***SKELLETON CREW***

by

**Dominique Morisseau**

directed by

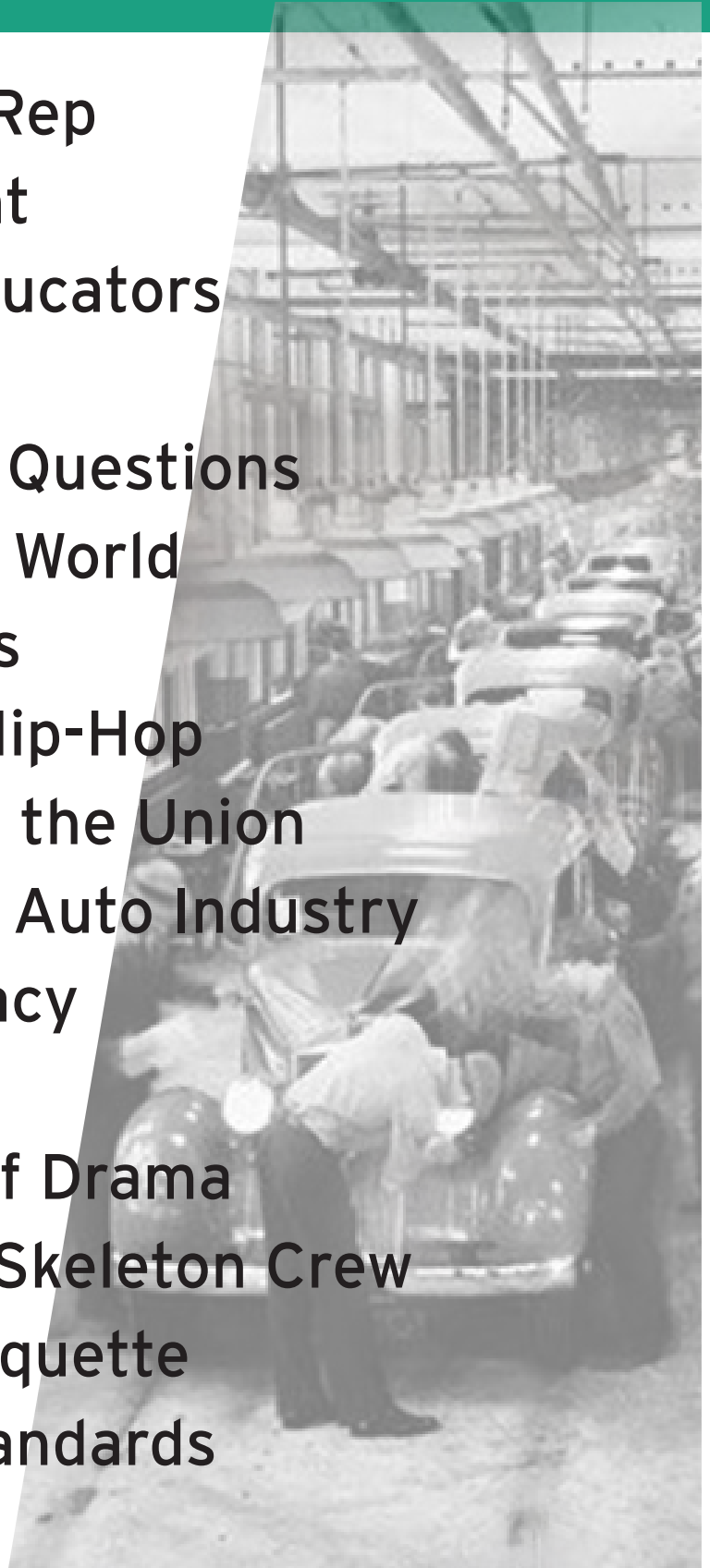
**William (Bill) Earl Ray**

# **DEEP DIVE**

**ARTISTS  
REP 18/19**  
WE DO THEATRE

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**ABOUT**

# ARTISTS REP

WE DO  
**THEATRE**

**Artists Repertory Theatre's mission** is to produce intimate, provocative theatre and provide a home for artists and audiences of varied backgrounds to take creative risks. Artists Rep is Portland's premiere mid-size regional theatre company and is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodríguez. Founded in 1982, Artists Repertory Theatre is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland. Artist Rep became the 72nd member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in 2016 and is an Associate Member of the National New Play Network (NNPN).

Artists Rep has become a significant presence in American regional theatre with a legacy of world, national, and regional premieres of provocative new work with the highest standards of stagecraft. The organization is committed to local artists and features a company of Resident Artists, professionals of varied theatre disciplines, who are a driving force behind Artists Rep's creative output and identity.

# THE PLAYWRIGHT



**Dominique Morisseau, Playwright**

Dominique Morisseau's roots in Detroit are deep. She grew up in the College Park neighborhood, in the house where her parents still live. She has an extended family of three hundred people there, plus more from her husband's side of the family.

Born in 1977, she attended the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (only 40 miles from home), studying theatre. In the largely white theatre department, she found that she was not being challenged with juicy roles that she could identify with and was spurred to write her first piece for the theatre: *The Blackness Blues – Time to Change the Tune (A Sister's Story)*. Although it was originally conceived as a play for three actresses, more and more African American women on campus wanted to be a part of it and the cast grew to twenty. The experience revealed to her the importance for all people to see themselves represented on stage, in stories, in all forms of artistic expression – and led to her deep commitment to writing about people on the fringes who are all too often overlooked, unseen, and unheard.

*Skeleton Crew* is part of Morisseau's Detroit Cycle, three plays set in Detroit at transformational moments in the city's history. *Paradise Blues* is set in 1949 in a Detroit neighborhood, when jazz icons Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and many others performed before the neighborhood was destroyed to make way for urban renewal projects. *Detroit '67* is set during the riots that tore the city apart. *Skeleton Crew* is set in 2008, when the recession was devastating the auto industry and leading the city to bankruptcy.

In many ways, the Detroit Cycle is a love letter to her hometown. She has spoken of the horror and anger that flooded her when she heard Mitt Romney say "Let Detroit go bankrupt" during his 2008 campaign. She was stung by what seemed to be cavalier ignorance, and appalled by the idea that all the people of Detroit – the factory workers, the teachers, waitresses, all those who put together modest lives through hard work and steadiness – should be punished for the greed and excess of corporate executives. Like almost everyone in Detroit, Morisseau has family and friends who lost their jobs and then their homes to the recession. When visiting home a few years ago, she and her husband talked with a young woman who was living in her car. Morisseau says, "It felt perverted. This is the Motor City. This is where people make cars. Now it's become a city where people are living in their cars."

She began writing her Detroit Cycle plays in 2011, and *Skeleton Crew* is the last of the three, premiering in January 2016. To write it, she interviewed people who'd worked at all levels in auto plants, from those on the floor, retirees, managers, and union workers, and was deeply impressed by the pride that everyone had when talking about their work. She also pulled from the experiences of her family and friends, folding the stories of her loved ones into her characters' plights.

Like all of her work, *Skeleton Crew* is a deeply compassionate, fiercely moral work. Her characters are caught in traps they had no hand in building, continually having to choose between sacrifice and selfishness, between friendship and security, between ethics and survival. They are warm, funny, competitive, astute, and under normal circumstances, loyal to the last – but in the 'new normal' can they really afford to be loyal?

Dominique Morisseau stands shoulder to shoulder with great American writers like August Wilson, Arthur Miller, and Clifford Odets. Like them, her concern for the dignity and grace of the 'little guy' permeates the work, embodying what Linda Loman says of her salesman husband, "attention must be paid." She has also been compared favorably to Tennessee Williams for the deeply romantic musicality or powerful rhythm of her language. Her gift to Detroit – and to all of us – is to truly see, to truly represent, to truly stand for people who are too often overlooked. She says, "I want the people of my city to feel that they have been immortalized in art, that there's someone who sees them and recognizes them and loves them enough to scribe them."

# A LETTER TO EDUCATORS

We are excited to welcome you and your students to Artists Repertory Theatre to experience *Skeleton Crew* by Dominique Morisseau!

This study guide was created to enhance your students' theatre experience. There is material for your students to utilize before and after the performance. Our goal is to increase theatre exposure and understanding, as well as to encourage meaningful conversation and provoke thoughtful discussion about the play you attend. Within this guide, there is information about the play's themes, setting, characters, pertinent articles, basic theatre etiquette and more! We hope this information will enhance your class's theatre experience!

Artists Rep provides many opportunities for young people to get involved! Students can shadow professional theatre artists in a variety of disciplines, observe tech rehearsals, and become a member of our Student Ambassador Program! Please feel free to contact us or give your students our contact information.

Enjoy the show!

Karen Rathje  
Education Director  
Artists Repertory Theatre  
[krathje@artistsrep.org](mailto:krathje@artistsrep.org)

# PLAY SYNOPSIS

**TIME:** 2008 (during the Great Recession)

**PLACE:** An automobile manufacturing factory in Detroit, Michigan

As the Great Recession (2007 - 2009) reaches Detroit, the Motor City's automobile factories are rapidly closing. The factory workers who are still employed are living paycheck-to-paycheck, while doing backbreaking labor and working brutally long shifts.

Despite this, four hard-working individuals have somehow managed to become a makeshift family. Faye, a factory lifer and the union representative, is desperately hiding the fact that she has been living in the break room as she waits for her upcoming retirement and her pension; Shanita is about to become a single mother; Des is working hard to move beyond the factory; and the foreman, Reggie, is a newly promoted white collar supervisor who must find a balance between pleasing higher ups and the people he used to work with, while he is aware that the factory may shut down any day.

When Reggie confides to Faye about the impending factory closure, Faye's entire existence is threatened. She fears for her own future security and retirement benefits as well as the security of her young co-workers who are dependent upon their jobs for survival. Tensions rise as important materials continue to be stolen during the night from the factory floor, causing stricter rules to be imposed as the factory nears its demise.



Packard Plant

Issues of the working class, race, and poverty are explored, as the employees desperately try to figure out their next steps. Skeleton Crew examines the choices people make when they are forced to choose between their loyalty to their fellow employees and their own survival in a society that is constantly changing.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reggie began as a worker on the factory line, but worked his way up to being a supervisor. Why does Reggie struggle with the power and privilege that comes with his new role?
2. Faye is the union representative for everyone working at the auto-plant. Why does she hold off telling everyone about the factory shut-down?
3. Rules are an important part of this story. Reggie and Shanita rigidly follow the rules, while Faye and Dez feel the rules are pointless and purposefully break them. Why do you believe Morisseau created this dynamic among the characters?
4. Reggie becomes upset when management refers to Faye as “dead weight.” Is this term dehumanizing? Does dehumanizing a person make it easier to avoid empathizing with them?
5. What moral responsibilities, if any, do large corporations have to their employees? To their customers? To society?
6. Does the size of a corporation affect its ability to express compassion and empathy? Why or why not?
7. Why are rules important to the story? Should one follow them even if they disagree with them? Why or why not?
8. Does “family” have to be biological? Can a group of people who support each other be considered “family?”

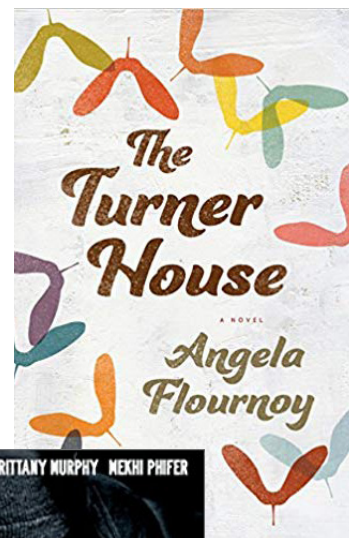
## GET INTO THE

# WORLD OF THE PLAY

This collection of books, movies, and music are inspired by the world of Skeleton Crew.

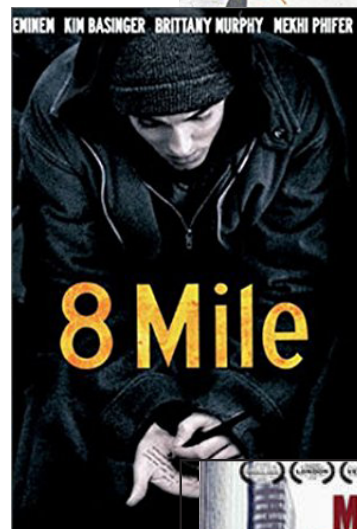
## BOOKS

- The Most They Ever Had by Rick Bragg
- The Mangle by S.L. Stoner
- The Turner House by Angela Flournoy



## MOVIES

- 8 Mile (2002)
- Four Brothers (2005)
- Man Push Cart (2005)
- Norma Rae (1979)



## MUSIC

- J Dilla (Dounuts, 2006)
- Slum Village (Fantastic, Vol. 2, 2000)
- Common (Like Water for Chocolate, 2000)
- Dionne Warwick (Just Being Myself, 1973)
- Lil Wayne (Tha Carter III, 2008)





# FACTS ABOUT DETROIT

1. The first mile of concrete ever paved was in Detroit on Woodward Avenue between in 1909.
2. Detroit is the home to the oldest surviving ginger ale brand in the US called Vernors Ginger Ale. It was created in 1866.
3. Detroit is the birthplace of Motown in the 50's and Techno in the 80s.
4. Detroit has the second largest theatre district after New York City.
5. Detroit was one of the final stops in the US on the underground railroad before the escaping slaves reached Canada.
6. Detroit's motto is "Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus," which means "We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes."
7. Famous musicians from Detroit include: Aretha Franklin, Berry Gordy, Eminem, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross & The Supremes, and Smokey Robinson.



# J DILLA & THE EVOLUTION OF HIP HOP DURING SKELETON CREW

by Kisha Jarrett

In the stage directions of Dominique Morisseau's Skeleton Crew, she describes the "sound of auto plant machinery that hums and rattles while the hip-hop drum beats [J Dilla-inspired] blend into the rhythm, creating a cacophony of working class hustle." Hip-Hop music and ambient factory sound play an important part in establishing the world of Skeleton Crew, set in an auto plant in 2008 Detroit, especially the influential sound of J Dilla.

Detroit's James Yancey aka J Dilla, was born into a musical family (his mother, a singer and his father, a piano and bass player) in 1973. According to his mother, he could match harmony pitch-perfect as a baby and began creating his own beats at 11. In 1996, a 23-year old J Dilla formed the group Slum Village which garnered the attention of Busta Rhymes, Tribe Called Quest, and De La Soul for his inventive melodies and rich drum sounds as a producer.

In the 90s (often considered the golden age of hip-hop), rap split between two major factions; harder 'gangster' rap and neo-soul. Neo-Soul sound was conscientious rap interwoven with smooth and melodic R&B and was comprised of groups like D'Angelo, Mos Def, Common, Me'Shell NdegéOcello, and Q-Tip. While the harder sound was comprised by artists like Wu-Tang Clan, Nas, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Jay-Z among others.

By the end of the 90s, J Dilla had created and produced original songs for some of the biggest musical acts of the time including: Janet Jackson, The Pharcyde, Busta Rhymes, Brand New Heavies, Something For the People, and even won a Grammy for his work with Tribe Called Quest.

During the Dirty South rap years of hip-hop (thought to be from 1997 to 2007), groups from Atlanta, Houston, and Memphis dominated the R&B and Rap charts with a specific sway and swagger to their sound. Hard hitting producers like Shawty Redd dropped beats still considered to be some of the best of the genre. This time period ushered in acts like: Gucci Mane, Young Jeezy, Three 6 Mafia, Paul Wall, Mike Jones, Chamillionaire and saw the rise of OutKast, Killer Mike, Goodie Mob, Ludacris, Busta Rhymes, Missy Elliott, and T.I. among others.

Sampling has always been a hip-hop mainstay, but in 2008 when the beats switched back to the familiar 4/4 time signature, the combination of sampling and usage of Auto-Tune created a musical influence that reached far outside the hip-hop community. No Rap album demonstrated this better than with Lil Wayne's Tha Carter III. This style was quickly adopted by pop musicians, is still employed today, and has even found its way into mainstream country music.

While the 4/4 time measure was traditional, J Dilla looped in three, five, and seven bars which made his sound completely unique and was why he was a pioneer of the Motor City hip-hop landscape. His distinctive drum sounds and grimy, organic sound palette revolutionized hip-hop production, and echoes of his innovative use of samples can be heard in the work of Kanye West and Bilal.

Dilla died in February of 2006, three days after his birthday and the release of his final album Donuts due to complications with Lupus. His legacy lives on through the artists that he worked with and his music, which he largely gave away for free while he was alive. You can hear some of J Dilla's work on the Artists Rep Spotify playlist.

# YOU'VE JOINED THE UNION... NOW WHAT?

In *Skeleton Crew*, Faye is the union factory representative for the United Automobile Workers (UAW), aka The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America. Since the end of the 19th Century, American workers have joined together in unions to exercise a voice in their own livelihoods.

Originally founded in the 1930s, the UAW grew exponentially from the mid-1930s to the early-1950s by successfully organizing sit-down strikes and harnessing the power of collective bargaining. Even though the UAW was known for securing high wages and benefits for autoworkers, the union went into a steady decline in membership due to the massive economic turmoil of the Great Recession (late 2000s to early 2010s). The automotive industry took an epic hit due to the massive economic decline and resulted in the creation of a destitute lower class, particularly in Detroit.

Sudden massive layoffs are a huge concern for Faye, Dez, Shanita, and Reggie because employees who lose their jobs in a layoff usually have no guaranteed right to any sort of severance pay. Though there are some states with laws in place that require notice for employees, there is the looming possibility of no such law in *Skeleton Crew*. With Faye's retirement around the corner, the imminent threat of a factory closure and the rising tensions between the company representatives and workers pushes her into a moral dilemma. Does she advocate for her fellow workers or does she wait it out until retirement, exhausted from a lifetime of fighting? Though Faye is the union representative she is torn between self-preservation and her duty to negotiate for her fellow workers, an unfair judgment that many workers had to face during actual automotive factory closures and resulting layoffs.

# THE RISE & FALL OF THE AUTO INDUSTRY

by Katie Blank

During the 20th century, the “Big Three” of cars - Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler - all set up shop in the greater Detroit metro area, giving the City the moniker “Motor City.” Detroit became the fourth largest city in the United States. In 1950, Detroit had a population of 1.85 million people and 296,000 manufacturing jobs. The city hit a peak of success, but the eminent decline was soon to follow.

In the 1960s, gas prices hurt the automobile industry, and the population of Detroit began a steady decline as racial tensions increased, and the automotive industry dwindled. By 1980, Detroit’s population dropped to 1.2 million people and would continue to drop, alongside the automotive industry, for years to come. Automation began replacing workers and increases in the cost of labor and benefits caused factories to relocate overseas.

The Great Recession of 2008 was another blow to the automotive industry. Two of the “Big Three,” Chrysler and General Motors, declared bankruptcy. Factories were regularly shut down and thousands of people were suddenly unemployed. Since factory jobs provided necessary income for so many families, many were forced to leave the city to find work. In 2013, Detroit filed for bankruptcy, making it the largest municipal bankruptcy filed in the history of the United States. As of 2017, Detroit’s population was a mere 670,000 people.

# BUREAUCRACY IN SKELETON CREW

by Chidube Egbo

Reggie, the factory foreman, consistently struggles with his role within a bureaucracy at the automobile stamping plant where he works. Although the word bureaucracy is most often used to refer to governmental agencies, bureaucracies are all around us - in businesses, schools, churches, and more. The order and structure of a bureaucracy can lead to great success. However, a bureaucracy can leave people with a sense of helplessness because bureaucracies sometimes have a complex structure of rules and principles that are difficult to follow.

Reggie is the unfortunate middleman between the workers in the stamping plant and upper management, outlining the stark separation between those who make the decisions and those whom the decisions affect. When the factory is on the verge of closure, Reggie bears the responsibility of that knowledge and the awareness of how it will affect everyone else. Reggie is in an extremely difficult, heart wrenching position. If he does not obey his superiors, he could lose his impending job transfer, which would jeopardize his livelihood, while at the same time he feels for the impact of the bosses’ decisions on his fellow workers.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## **Blue-Collar Worker**

An employee that works in a non-agricultural field that utilizes physical labor, such as manufacturing, construction, or mining, etc.

## **White-Collar Worker**

An employee that works in a professional, managerial, or administrative setting at a company. These positions do not often require physical labor.

## **Automotive Stamping Plant**

A factory in which large sheets of metal are put into a press to become specific car parts    Assembly

## **Line**

A series of workers and machines, each performing a single task in sequential order to create identical products

## **Foreman**

A supervisor

## **Skeleton Crew**

The minimum number of employees needed to operate or maintain a business

## **Human Resources (HR)**

A department within a company that handles hiring, benefits, & work-related conflicts (such as discrimination, harassment, & worker disputes)

## **Pension**

A regular payment made during a person's retirement.

## **Lay Offs**

The process of letting go of employees due to a company's financial difficulties

## **Severance Package**

A deal between company and employee that allows the employee to continue to receive their salary after being laid off

## **Union**

An association of workers that band together to negotiate for certain working conditions, such as salary, benefits, safety standards, and more

## **The United Automobile Workers (UAW)**

A union for automobile plant workers formed to protect workers' rights and negotiate benefits with business owners.

# ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

## **PLOT**

The sequence of events in a play revealed through the action and/or dialogue

## **THEME**

The central topic the play investigates

## **OBJECTIVE**

The goal a character has within a play

## **CONFLICT**

The clash between opposing forces, ideas, or interests that creates tension

## **STAGING**

Patterns of movement in a play, including: entrances, exits, and movement on the stage

## **TECHNICAL ELEMENTS**

Elements such as sets, costumes, lights, music, props, and makeup used to create a unified and meaningful design for a theatrical production.

# THEMES IN SKELETON CREW

POWER

MASCULINITY / FEMININITY

RACE

SOCIAL JUSTICE

LOYALTY

# WHAT ARE THE RULES OF THEATRE ETIQUETTE

We are so excited you are here! The audience is one of the most important parts of any performance. Experiencing the play is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make your theatre experience enjoyable for everyone.

## **BE PROMPT**

Arrive in plenty of time to settle, find your seats, and get situated. Please visit the restrooms before the show begins.

## **BE RESPECTFUL**

Your behavior and responses affect the quality of the performance and the enjoyment of the production for the entire audience. The performers can see and hear you, just as the audience can see and hear you.

## **TURN OFF CELL PHONES**

You may think texting is private, but the light and motion can be seen by actors and audience members and are distracting to those around you. Please do not check your phones, text or take photos during the performance.

## **HAVE FUN AND PARTICIPATE**

Rather than remaining totally silent, please note the difference between appropriate and inappropriate responses.

## **APPROPRIATE**

Laughter  
Applause  
Participation (when requested)

## **INAPPROPRIATE**

Talking (including whispering)  
Groaning / Booing  
Using Cell Phones / Devices

# OREGON COMMON CORE STANDARDS

## THEATRE STANDARDS - HIGH SCHOOL

### **Responding: Perceive and analyze artistic work**

Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices. (TH.7.RE1.HS1)

### **Responding : Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work**

Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works. (TH.8.RE2.HS1)

Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work. (TH.8.RE2.HS1)

Justify personal aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation n and observation of drama/theatre work. (TH.8.RE2.HS1)

### **Responding: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work**

Examine a drama/theatre work using supporting evidence and criteria, while considering art forms, history, culture, and other disciplines. (TH.9.RE3.HS1)

Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work. (TH.9.RE3.HS1)

Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience. (TH.9.RE3.HS1)

### **Connecting: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art**

Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work, using theatre research methods. (TH.11.CO2.HS1)





UP NEXT

SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS

by

**Bess Wohl**

directed by

**Shawn Lee**

