



Review: Pipeline

By Shawnta S. Barnes – November 4, 2018

On Saturday, November 3, my husband and I attended *Pipeline* written by playwright Dominique Morisseau at the Indiana Repertory Theatre (IRT). If you are concerned about education and our youth, you need to see this play. It will be at IRT until November 11.

Morisseau was a teacher for 16 years before she was a playwright, and I believe her personal experience being a teacher for over a decade allowed her to write an accurate depiction of the issues in our education system. In an interview included in the play program, Morisseau shared:

I was reading Michelle Alexander's The New Jim Crow, and I was really struck by the school-to-prison pipeline, and what it means to have people go straight from school right into prison – how you can systematically create that kind of structure, so that it's not just individual, it actually becomes a way of socializing in our community.

Last month, I finished reading Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. As a black educator, I want to be part of the solution to ending the pipeline because the main people who find themselves in the pipeline are black boys. I'm a mother of two black boys, so ending the pipeline is personal.

However, what I wasn't prepared for was the striking parallels to my life. I felt like I was watching a possible future for my children, a future I never want to see come to pass. The play centers around Omari. He is a black male high school student who has found himself in trouble at school, and his mom is a high school English teacher in the inner city. This is my 13th year as an educator. I'm currently an elementary library/media specialist, but for nine years of my career I taught English in both middle school and high school. The stress Omari's mom, Nya, was under is the same stress I have been under since my twin sons entered preschool, yes preschool. On one hand, I'm working in a public school, and I'm trying to bring diverse learning experiences to the students who attend my school, the same experiences I want my sons to have. On the other hand, I'm constantly worried about how my sons are doing at school and the experiences they are having.

My husband and I believe we moved into a decent school district in Indianapolis. We try to expose our boys to the right experiences outside of school, so they will be well-rounded people. They were identified as being smarter than their peers right before kindergarten. They were deemed smart enough to be accepted into a private school for gifted students that we had to pass on because we couldn't afford it. If my sons are so smart and talented, then why am I so stressed? Why do my sons, who are in second grade, still have difficulty adjusting to the learning environment at school even though they always make honor roll? Just last Friday, I had to talk to one of my sons on the phone while I was at my school. His teacher was not sure how to get him back focused on completing his assignments for the day.

While watching this play, I felt vindicated and angry. Morisseau showed a story that is the story of too many students. My husband said, "I was so smart like Omari, and I had that anger inside like he had too." What I appreciated is this play shows why the anger of students like Omari is justified. It lifted up all the cracks in the system, families, and communities. It is an easy

out to blame the school system for all that is wrong with children. Families are part of schools, and schools reside inside of communities; it is all connected.

Last week I finished reading *Birth of a White Nation: The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today*. After watching this play, I was reminded of author Jacqueline Battalora's thoughts about the American dream:

The American ideology of hard work and success is not only problematic because it is not sustained by facts; it is also harmful. Children are told from their earliest years that everyone can succeed in America if you work hard. This message fails to account for the dramatically unequal playing field upon which people work to succeed . . . The message is that any failure to accomplish the dream is the result of personal failure. You simply did not work hard enough.

My husband and I felt a huge weight when we left the play. As black parents, the weight is always there; it just felt heavier last evening. We could do everything right as parents to help our boys achieve the American dream, and all of our efforts might not be enough if the system does not change.

Morisseau did not give a solution at the end of the play, but she did give audience members an opportunity to analyze our current educational system, to consider our role within it, and to ponder what can be done to bust up the pipeline.