Directed by Dawn Meredith Simmons

In Partnership with BRIDGE
Berkshire Resources for Integration of Diverse Groups through Education

WAMTheatre.com multiculturalbridge.org

PIPEDLINE
by Dominique Morisseau

Directed by Dawn Meredith Simmons

STUDY GUIDE
compiled by Talya Kingston & Gwendolyn VanSant

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The Plot

In Dominique Morisseau’s PIPELINE, Nya (played by Alexandria King) is a dedicated, inner-city public high school teacher who is committed to her students’ achievement, while she sends her only son, Omari (played by Hubens “Bobby” Cius), to a private boarding school. When Omari is involved in a controversial incident which threatens him with expulsion from his school, Nya is forced to reconcile Omari’s rage, her own parental decisions, and the public and private school systems, as she rallies to save her son.

About WAM

WAM Theatre is a professional theatre company based in Berkshire County that operates at the intersection of arts and activism. Every time an audience comes together for a theatrical event, a community is formed. WAM Theatre engages that community by 1) producing theatrical events for everyone, with a focus on women theatre artists and/or stories of women and girls 2) donating a portion of proceeds from those theatrical events to organizations that work to benefit the lives of women and girls in our communities and worldwide. Since launching in 2010, WAM Theatre has donated over $65,700 to seventeen beneficiaries from our main-stage productions and provided paid work to more than 470 theatre artists.

About BRIDGE

BRIDGE is a grassroots organization dedicated to catalyzing change and integration through promoting mutual respect and understanding among diverse groups serving as a resource to both local institutions and the community at large. BRIDGE serves as catalysts for change and integration through collaboration, education, training, dialogue, fellowship and advocacy. Through a 360 degree perspective on community and civic participation, BRIDGE has designed a holistic approach to community and public health. BRIDGE’s goal is to impact hearts, minds and behaviors that result in positive cultural shifts and systemic changes in policy, law and practice towards a more just, safe and equitable society.

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Learn more at WAMTheatre.com
If I’m interested in exploring a topic or issue—not just random ideas and topics, but things that move me, where I can’t sleep, and I’m wrestling with something internally that I haven’t found quite all the words to express how I feel about it. Then I go: Well, okay, if I want to talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, who do I want to explore this story through the eyes of? With Pipeline, I knew I needed a teacher, I needed a mother; so it could be a mother/teacher. That’s easy, that’s what I know very well.

It surprised me when I realized her son went to a private school. I didn’t figure that out until the second scene. Some plays, I have a big chart or a map; I think I know where I’m going. This wasn’t that at first. I kept surprising myself. Like Omari, I just kept going, and by scene five or whatever, he was running away. But then I’m like, “Well, is he going to come back? I want to see him. I need to see him.” I just go scene by scene, as an audience member of my own work.

I knew it was a mother and a son, but I didn’t know I was going to see the father. And then as they talked about him, I thought, I need to see him. I want his side of the story. I don’t want to just talk about an absent father like this typical, clichéd thing. I really wanted to see who we’re calling an absent father. And this absent father doesn’t believe he’s an absent father at all, actually. He feels like a present father, so then it’s about our definitions of absence.

Even if I don’t agree with everything everybody does in my plays, I do love them, because I’m trying so hard to understand them. Because they reflect our world, and I want to make the world better... It’s funny. When I was in elementary school, I had this debate class. I had to debate gun control; I was pro-gun control and my opponent was supposed to be anti-gun control, but I don’t think that she understood the assignment, because she kept arguing for gun control with me, and I was so bored by the conversation. I was like, “She’s not even counterpointing me!” I clearly got an A, because she did not do her side of the thing, but it was making me so mad. So I think I am ignited by debate, and I like a worthy opponent. I like to see things from all ends, if only to just strengthen my own ideas. But when I don’t get that pull on the other side, it’s a real drag.

As an educator, I’ve never really done well with systems. I’ve worked in public schools, I’ve taught in private schools, I’ve worked in not-for-profit. I love students. I don’t always love the powers that be that sort of police your ways of engaging your students. But I do believe in equality in education, and I believe in supporting public schools and giving them the resources that they need to be able to be successful for our young people. That’s where I think there’s been a failure in policy, around how we support public schools in cities, and we blame administrators who are low on resources for failures. I know some very shady things happen in public schools, so I’m not like, “This is all good.” But I think if the critique is not happening from a place of inside information, if it’s happening from a very removed place—I don’t see how you can serve anyone from a distance. You can’t serve young people from a distance. You got to get your hands dirty. You got to get right up in there with them if you’re going to want to be of service to them. Everything else is just fluff and air, and the kids see through that right away.

Post-show questions

1. In theatre we refer to “stakes” as the intensity of the drama, what characters are willing to, as Dominique Morisseau says, fight or die for. What were the stakes in Pipeline?

2. What moments surprised you in the story? And why?

For more information about the playwright: http://dominiquemorisseau.com/
Character Descriptions

The following are the characters of PIPELINE and the way that Dominique Morisseau describes them in her script.


OMARI - Black man, late teens. Smart and astute. Rage without release. Tender and honest at his core. Something profoundly sensitive amidst the anger. Wrestling with his identity between private school education and being from a so-called urban community. Nya’s son.

JASMINE - Black or Latina woman, late teens. Sensitive and tough. A sharp bite, a soft smile. Profoundly aware of herself and her environment. Attends upstate private school but from a so-called urban environment. In touch with the poetry of her own language.


Before the Show:

• Do any of these characters remind you of someone in your life? Or a character from a TV series or book that you know?

• Pretend that you are the costume designer for PIPELINE. Pick one or two characters and sketch what you think they would wear.

• Using the same style, write a brief character description for yourself. Do you fit into this world? How?
**After the show:**

- Who did you relate to the most?
- Which relationship in the play (between two characters) did you find most engaging?
- Do you remember any line or gesture or way of moving that you associate with a particular character from PIPELINE? If so, why did this stand out to you?

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**LAURIE** - White woman, 50’s. Pistol of a woman. Teaches in Public High School and can hold her own against the tough students and the stressed environment. Doesn’t bite her tongue. A don’t-f**k-with-me chick.

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Sandra Secane-Serí as Jasmine in WAM’s 2018 Fresh Takes Play Reading of Pipeline.

Photograph by David Dashiell.
What is the “School to Prison Pipeline”? 

The American Civil Liberties Union defines the School-to-Prison Pipeline as a “national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.” In the pipeline, students who commit in-school infractions are diverted out of schools and into jails, often a result of zero-tolerance school policies.

Who is in the pipeline?

These policies disproportionately affect students of color, LGBTQI+ students, students in the foster system and students with disabilities. Black American students, for instance, are 3.5 times more likely than their White classmates to be suspended or expelled, according to a nationwide study by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. Black children constitute 18% of students, but they account for 46% of those suspended more than once. Also included in the research is an indication that Black and Latinx students are most often disciplined for more subjective offenses, acts such as throwing food, cursing, disobeying a teacher, loitering, or making excessive noise, whereas their White schoolmates are less likely to be suspended for more concrete offenses that include smoking, skipping school, or vandalism. For students with disabilities the numbers are equally troubling: 8.6% of public school children have been identified as having disabilities that affect their ability to learn, these students make up 32% of youth in juvenile detention facilities.
Police officers in schools play a critical role in this pipeline.

In 1975, only one percent of U.S. schools reported having police officers; today, most urban schools have police and resource officers on site. In New York City, public schools employ more cops than counselors. Since the increase of school shootings, many schools also have metal detectors and surveillance cameras under the pretext of keeping students safe. The presence of police officers in schools often leads to harsher, sometimes brutal treatment of students.

According to a 2011 report from the Justice Policy Institute, “when schools have law enforcement on site, students are more likely to be arrested by police instead of discipline being handled by school officials. This leads to more kids being funneled into the juvenile justice system, which is both expensive and associated with a host of negative impacts on youth.”

Since 1990, national spending on prisons has increased three times as quickly as spending on education.

The realization that zero-tolerance policies in schools have led to criminalization and incarceration for students of color, has prompted calls for cultural competency and anti-racism training (BRIDGE is a great resource for this in Berkshire county), as well as restorative justice and other, less punitive discipline practices.

“I sensed that schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so we would not ask: Why - for us and only us - is the other side of free will and free spirit an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern. When our elders presented school to us they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing. Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace a country. But it does not.”

- Ta-Nehisi Coates (Between The World and Me)

Further reading:

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander and Cornel West (This book inspired Dominique Morisseau to begin writing PIPELINE)
Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, and raised in Chicago. She was the author of more than twenty books of poetry, including *Children Coming Home* (1991); *Blacks* (1987); *To Disembark* (1981); *The Bean Eaters* (1960); *Annie Allen* (1949), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize; and *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). She also wrote numerous other books including the novel *Maud Martha* (1953).

In 1968 she was named poet laureate for the state of Illinois. In 1985, she was the first black woman appointed as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, a post now known as Poet Laureate. She also received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, the Frost Medal, a National Endowment for the Arts Award, the Shelley Memorial Award, and fellowships from the Academy of American Poets and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Her most famous poem is the one Nya teaches her class in PIPELINE, *We Real Cool*.

*We Real Cool* holds in its eight lines the whole lives of a group of teenagers, from their coolness to their demise. It could be a motto, it could be a song, a chant, a lyric rage against the powers that be.

Your Identity Fictionalized:

- How often do you see members of your race, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation portrayed on television in degrading roles? How often in empowering roles?
- Do you feel like you see yourself in books, television, video games etc.?

White supremacy culture is the culture of White people and whiteness being considered better and right. It defines norms, behaviors and attitudes regarding whose identity belongs. White Supremacy groups are hate groups. This identical proper and common noun phrase is distinguishable and linked at the same time.
Richard Wright  (1908 - 1960)

“Men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread.”

Richard Wright was born at Rucker’s Plantation, Mississippi. His parents were born free after the Civil War; both sets of his grandparents had been born into slavery and freed as a result of the war. Even though he left school after 9th grade, he was a voracious reader and writer, going as far as forging notes so he could take out books on a white coworker’s library card, as African-Americans were not allowed to use the public libraries in Memphis.

He wrote novels (Native Son, The Outsider, The Long Dream), short stories (Uncle Tom’s Children), memoir (Black Boy), poems and non-fiction (Black Power, White Man Listen!) Much of his literature concerns racial themes and injustices that he personally encountered in his life.

Richard Wright was criticized for his concentration on violence in his works. In the case of Native Son, people complained that he portrayed a black man in ways that seemed to confirm whites’ worst fears. However, the book brought Wright fame and freedom to write. It became the first book by an African-American writer to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. A stage version, written by Richard Wright and Paul Green, followed in 1941, and Wright himself later played the title role in a film version made in Argentina.

In PIPELINE, Omari explodes at his teacher after being repeatedly questioned about NATIVE SON.

Do you think it would have been different if his teacher were also black? Why?

Do you think it would have been different if there were more students with his skin color in the class? Why?

Do you think it would have been different if the class had included many different depictions of African-Americans? Why?
white supremacy culture in the theatre

Microaggression: In concert with the culture of white superiority, also referred to as white supremacy culture, microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.

PIPEDLINE playwright, Dominique Morisseau listed some of the microagressions that she has personally witnessed and experienced at the theatre:

1. That time at a prestigious theatre festival when black women were responding exactly how I want them to respond to my play—loudly and expressively and “ummm hmm”-ing—and an older white patron approached them at intermission and said: “Can you enjoy the play a little quieter, please?”

2. That time my play was being performed at a Tony award-winning regional theatre and older white patrons saw me coming to my reserved seat (that they were sitting in), and refused to get up from that seat until an usher assured them that I was the playwright.

[Behavior like this] is harmful. It further marginalizes audiences of color and tells them they are not fully welcome in the theatre, except by permission of the white audience. It tells the upper-middle-class white audience that theatre is their home first and the rest of us are just guests.

In response to these incidents, Dominique Morisseau wrote the following guide for audiences coming to see her plays:

Playwright’s Rules of Engagement

You are allowed to laugh audibly.
You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response.
My work requires a few “um hmms” and “uhn uhnns” should you need to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize.
This can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.
This is also live theatre and the actors need you to engage with them, not distract them or thwart their performance.
Please be an audience member that joins with others and allows a bit of breathing room. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “amen” should you need to.
This is community. Let’s go.
**Action Steps**

1. **Educate Yourself** (read an article/book or listen to a podcast - for recommendations see this guide or ask in the theatre lobby)

2. **Volunteer Your Time** (begin by committing one hour of your time in the next three weeks to a local social justice organization)

3. **Take the Not In Our County Pledge** (In 2017, BRIDGE launched a Berkshire County-wide campaign to unify communities throughout the county to stop hate, address bullying, and build safe, inclusive communities for all. You can sign the pledge in the theatre lobby and display the #AllHandsIn pins and stickers).

4. **Learn and integrate knowledge around the following:** Microaggressions, Bias incident, Hate Crime, Hate Speech

5. **Create microaffirmations:** small welcoming messages, of belonging for all each and everyday through your intentions awareness and actions.

6. **Start a conversation and listen actively to those with with perspective that are not your own** (Text someone right now and set up a time to talk about this show)

7. **Attend a formal dialogue** (Contact the following local groups to find one: BRIDGE Race Task Force, BRIDGE TRJ South, Berkshire Immigrant Center, NAACP meeting, Elizabeth Freeman Center).

8. **Make a donation to an organization working towards racial justice** (such as BIO, NAACP, BIC, BRIDGE)

9. **Continue to support historically black spaces** (such as Macedonia Baptist Church in Great Barrington, Second Congregational Church in Pittsfield, Price Memorial AME Zion in Pittsfield, Samuel Harrison Society in Pittsfield, Town of Great Barrington Du Bois Legacy Committee, etc) **and P.O.C. (aka people of global majority) owned businesses.**

**The Pledge:**

I commit to working together with my neighbors to create safer, more integrated communities for all residents in Berkshire County. I do not stay silent in the face of intolerance or hate based on race, religion, sexual preference, gender identity, ethnicity, country of origin, ability or any other factor. I work to acknowledge and heal all forms of hate, bigotry and bullying. I pledge to renew my commitment to this work every day.

**The campaign unites the county through:**

1. A unified visible logo, pledge and shared values

2. A commitment to not be silent when ignorance, hate or intolerance arises

3. A collaborative approach across our county
Resources

Books:

- Native Son by Richard Wright
- Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison
- The Bean Eaters by Gwendolyn Brooks —poetry collection that includes “We Real Cool”
- The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander and Cornel West
- Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas —young adult novel about an African American girl navigating the aftermath of her best friend’s fatal shooting by the police
- Piecing Me Together by Renée Watson —young adult novel about an African American teen in a predominantly white private school
- All American Boys by Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely —young adult novel about two young men, one black, one white, confronted with the problem of police brutality
- Black Boy White School by Brian F. Walker —young adult novel about an African American teen from East Cleveland who attends a private boarding school in Maine attempting to navigate between two different worlds
- Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria and other conversations about race by Beverly Daniel Tatum
- We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity by bell hooks
- Dear Ijeawele or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds by adrienne maree brown

Podcast recommendations:

Code Switch, Seeing White, 1619, The Read.

BRIDGE provides training and racial justice organizing work in the Berkshires, as well as interventions and facilitation when incidents occur.

They can be reached by phone at: 413.394.4305
and by email at: Adminsupport@multiculturalbridge.org

More information about BRIDGE can be found at www.multiculturalbridge.org

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