

HEART OF A WOMAN, HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

By **Dawn Monique Williams**, DIRECTOR, ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, AND DRAMATURG

The Heart of a Woman

By **Georgia Douglas Johnson**

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, a Harlem Renaissance era writer, authored a collection of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman*, in 1918, hers are the first words we hear in Dominique Morisseau's *Paradise Blue*. Morisseau both pays homage to this early Black American playwright by having Pumpkin (a key figure at the Paradise Club) recite her words and by using Johnson's poem as a broader metaphor for the play: The heart of a woman becomes the symbol for the Black community.

There are two women in Morisseau's play. Pumpkin, the "go-along-gal" and girlfriend of the club's proprietor. She sees to the daily operations of the club that doubles as a boarding house: cooking and serving all meals, laundering, cleaning, entertaining and playing host at Blue's whim. Pumpkin loves music and poetry, she is book smart and easy going and never wants to leave Paradise. Silver the "spider-woman," who arrives with a rumored and mysterious past and plenty of money to spend. She's been many places, and protects herself from everybody. She sees the potential in Paradise. One heart going forth, one heart falling back.

That's the tension in play, the desperate need to reconcile desire, longing, and seeking with the shelter yet confinement of a home. And each character is on that journey, not just the women. For some of these denizens, Paradise Club is liberation and for others it is a prison. P-Sam and Silver see opportunity in the walls where Blue sees only ghosts. For Pumpkin and Corn it has been all they've known for so long they dare not dream of something more. They are each at a precipice, go forth or fall back.

Albert Eugene Cobo was elected Mayor of Detroit in 1949. This republican businessman ran his campaign on a promise of urban renewal which ultimately decimated Black neighborhoods like Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. In the play there seems to be some hope of saving Paradise Club from the clutches of the city and a newly elected Mayor Cobo with his sights set on ridding Detroit of its blight. Morisseau takes us to a time just

before the imminent domain crisis erupts, where we witness the complexity and nuance of worldviews held by these characters.

Paradise Valley was a mecca for Detroit's Black community from the 1920s through the 1950s; historically one of the most prominent areas for cultural, social, and economic advancement for Black people in the U.S. It was the place to be to rub elbows with celebrities like Billie Holiday, Sammy Davis Jr., and Joe Louis. People would come from all over to listen to swing, bop, and jazz standards alike, enjoying the vibrant nightlife. This is where Morisseau has us arrive. And while Morisseau mines the full landscape of these characters' hearts as they wrestle with the realities they face, the constant reminder is there for the audience that ultimately the choice to run or stay, to starve or thrive was taken away from thousands of Detroit's citizens in the late 1950s. Mayor Cobo's efforts saw to that when those neighborhoods were razed to make way for the Chrysler Freeway (a stretch of Michigan Interstates 75 and 375) dividing Black Bottom and Paradise Valley and displacing Black residents.

FOR FURTHER READING

Detroit's Black Bottom and Paradise Valley Neighborhoods, a website operated by Wayne State University's Reuther Library: REUTHER.WAYNE.EDU/NODE/8609

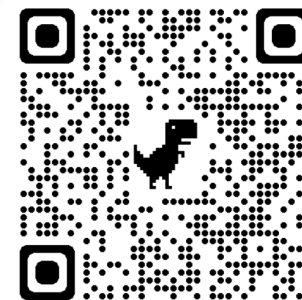


PHOTO: View of the Detroit City skyline seen from Windsor, Ontario, across the Detroit River, 1927
CREDIT: Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University