

***Jezelle the Gazelle***  
Classroom Curriculum for 5th Grade and Older

**OBJECTIVES**

- Introduce the short play to students as a powerful form to tell meaningful stories, develop fully-realized characters, debate complex topics, and take storytelling risks.
- Offer students points of connection to other texts, writing skills across forms (dialogue, character development, concision, etc.), other topics of study (history, current events, etc.), and broad issues of identity (race, gender, language, cultural background, sexual identity, etc.).
- Give students the opportunity to “play on air,” taking on the roles of playwright, director, and actor.

**INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY**

This clear-eyed coming of age story — originally created for the 10 x 10 Festival at American Theater Company — was recorded live at New York’s Pershing Square Signature Center in November 2019.

**Dominique Morisseau (playwright)** is the author of *The Detroit Project (A 3-Play Cycle)* which includes the following plays: *Skeleton Crew* (Atlantic Theater Company), *Paradise Blue* (Signature Theatre), and *Detroit ‘67* (Public Theater, Classical Theatre of Harlem and NBT). Additional plays include: *Pipeline* (Lincoln Center Theatre), *Sunset Baby* (LAByrinth Theatre); *Blood at the Root* (National Black Theatre) and *Follow Me to Nellie’s* (Premiere Stages). She is also the TONY nominated book writer on the new Broadway musical *Ain’t Too Proud - The Life and Times of the Temptations* (Imperial Theatre). Dominique is alumna of The Public Theater Emerging Writer’s Group, Women’s Project Lab, and Lark Playwrights Workshop and has developed work at Sundance Lab, Williamstown Theatre Festival and the Showtime series “Shameless” (3 seasons). Additional awards include: Spirit of Detroit Award, PoNY Fellowship, Sky-Cooper Prize, TEER Trailblazer Award, Steinberg Playwright Award, Audelco Awards, NBFT August Wilson Playwriting Award, Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, OBIE Award (2), Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship, Variety’s Women of Impact for 2017-18, and a recent MacArthur Genius Grant Fellow.

**Goldie E. Patrick (director)** is a Detroit native, now based in the Washington DC area with a BFA from Howard University. Directing credits: *Paradise Blue* (Detroit Public Theatre) *Confederates* (reading) (Center Theatre Group) *HERstory: Love Forever, Hip Hop* (John F Kennedy Center), *Blood at the Root* (Howard University), Associate Director credits, *Between the World and Me* (Apollo Theatre National Tour) Assistant Director credits: *By the way meet Vera Stark* (Signature Theatre) . Playwriting credits: *HERstory: Love Forever, Hip Hop* (John F. Kennedy Center) *Name Calling* (Theatre Alliance), *Surrender* (Atlas Performing Arts Center), *Unpacked* (DC Black Theater Festival). Goldie is founder and Executive Director of F.R.E.S.H.H. Inc Theatre Company in Washington DC.

**Mirirai Sithole (performer).** Off-Broadway: *If Pretty Hurts Ugly Must Be a Muhfucka* (Playwrights Horizons), *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* (MCC), *The Homecoming Queen* (Atlantic), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (Signature); *Mother Courage and Her Children* (CSC); *Frontières Sans Frontières* (Bushwick Starr); *Autumn's Harvest* (Lincoln Center). Regional: *School Girls...*, *Skeleton Crew*, *Our Town*, *Christmas Carol*. TV: "Bull," "The Affair," "Master of None," "Broad City," "Russian Doll." Awards: Lortel, Drama Desk Ensemble, Rosemarie Tichler. BFA Adelphi University.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Allow students to listen to the play at least twice through. Introduce one or two questions to students before their second listen to guide their deepening understanding of the play and its performance.

- As you listen to the play, consider how Mirirai Sithole's performance shapes your introduction to Jezelle. What does Sithole do with her voice alone to help you understand who Jezelle is? Think about volume, register, tone, speed, etc. Do you think you're missing out on anything by only hearing Jezelle's voice and not seeing her performance? What do you gain by only having sound?
- Why do you think Dominique Morisseau decided to make *Jezelle the Gazelle* a one-person play? Imagine what the play would be like with different actors playing Rasheed, Spider, and Jezelle's mother.

- What would change? What would be different? Would you want to hear that play and why?
- Nicknames are important in Jezelle’s story — Jezelle and Rasheed come up with the nickname “Spider” and Jezelle’s mother calls Spider “Don King Jr.” and also calls Jezelle “Jezelle the Gazelle.” Why do you think names are so central in this story and community of friends? Jezelle says she thinks her nickname is “corny,” but she wears the T-shirt with the name on it that her mom has made anyway: how do you think wearing that name makes Jezelle feel?
  - Throughout the play, Dominique Morisseau sometimes writes “Beat” or “Long beat.” This means that the actor should take a pause. As you read the text and listen to the play, find each “beat”: why do you think the playwright included those breaks? What do you think is happening — either onstage or in Jezelle’s mind — during those moments?
  - Do you think Jezelle is telling this story several months or years later, thinking about what happened to her, or is she experiencing the story with the audience in real time? Could it be performed either way? How might that change the performance? When she says “I still go to the track” at the very end, how much time do you think has passed?
  - *Jezelle the Gazelle* starts off as a fun and funny play and swiftly changes genre with no warning (“But that wasn’t cheers. That was screaming”). How did that moment make you feel as you listened? Did you see it coming? Why do you think Dominique Morisseau has this change happen so abruptly? What is the impact of that choice?

## TEXT CONNECTIONS

You may want to pair *Jezelle the Gazelle* with other texts — in the same or other literary forms — in your classroom, or you may want to offer students additional ways to deepen their engagement with the play.

### **Track series — Jason Reynolds**

Jason Reynolds’ best-selling Track series also depicts a community of kids who connect through their deep passion for running and racing. At the end of the first chapter of the first book (*Ghost*), the narrator says, “Running ain’t nothing I ever had to practice. It’s just something I knew how to do.” In

*Jezelle the Gazelle*, Jezelle tells Spider that, “I was born ready. My mama said I used to kick her in the belly so hard she thought I was tryin’ to break through. She said I knew I had lightnin’ in my feet even then.” As you read *Ghost* (or other books in the series), think about:

- Why does running matter so much to the characters in the *Track* books (*Ghost*, *Patina*, *Sunny*, and *Lu*)? How does this compare to Jezelle?
- How are the friendships that form through racing in each text similar to and different from each other? What would Jezelle’s experience be like on a track team like this one? Can you write Jezelle into a scene from one of the books?

### ***For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* – Ntozake Shange**

In the post-episode interview, director Goldie E. Patrick describes getting to know and respect Dominique Morisseau and her work: in talking about Morisseau’s power as a playwright, she says, “Ntozake and you,” referencing Ntozake Shange, poet and playwright of works like *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Students can read the Lady in Brown’s monologue from *For Colored Girls*, which also retells a childhood story.

- Students can consider, after reading this excerpt, how Morisseau uses poetic language and rhythm in *Jezelle the Gazelle*: what makes a monologue poetry? (And how does Mirirai Sithole’s performance make the play feel more or less like poetry? Listen to how Patrick describes the poetic elements of the play.) Students can pick a passage of *Jezelle the Gazelle* and add new line breaks (enjambment), using the Lady in Brown’s monologue as a guide: how might changing the way the text appears on the page change the way the play would be performed and its impact?
- What other connections do students notice between the stories of Jezelle and the Lady in Brown and the way that Morisseau and Shange bring their narrators’ voices to life?

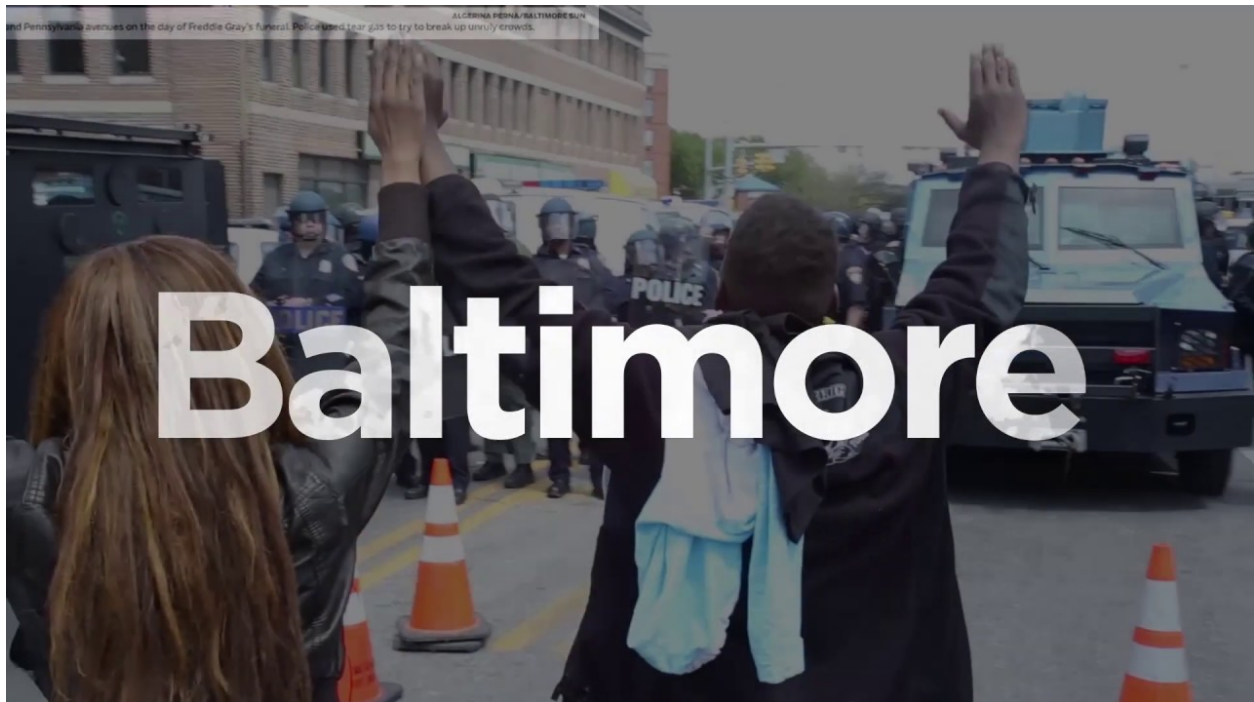
## REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS

### Art In Response to Violence

Dominique Morisseau wrote *Jezelle the Gazelle* in response to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Artists in all forms have responded to police violence towards Black people. Invite students to explore the examples of art responding to police violence below; a series of discussion questions are also included to guide students' conversations around these works of art.

### Music

Prince's "Baltimore"



## Mural



<https://africanah.org/sophia-dawson-every-mothers-son-series/>

## Dance



## Questions for Students

- Which artwork resonates most with you? Why do you think that might be?
- What do you think the goals of artists are in creating art in response to police violence? Do you think Dominique Morisseau has a particular goal in writing *Jezelle the Gazelle*?
- If you were going to create a work of art that responds to police brutality, what might that look like? What specific story or message would you want to convey? How would your set of identities affect that work of art?

## Research A Track and Field Athlete

Students can conjunction with a broader biography unit, research professional Black track and field athletes like Allyson Felix, Athing Mu, and Sha'Carri Richardson, exploring interviews and articles to understand how, and how much, race and gender have impacted their training, trajectories, and careers. At the end of the play, Jezelle declares that she will keep running “for Rasheed. For Spider. For Equal rights. For Democracy. For the only girl on every block. For Civil Rights. And for everybody still in the race.” What motivates these real-world athletes?

## PLAYWRITING PROMPTS

Your students can write their own short plays or monologues inspired by *Jezelle the Gazelle*. You can offer students the following playwriting prompts or create your own.

- *Jezelle the Gazelle* is a monologue — Jezelle not only narrates but also speaks the dialogue of the other characters she describes within the story. Write a short play for one actor about a life-changing experience, real or imagined, that features other characters’ voices along the way.
- *Jezelle the Gazelle* starts off as a fun and funny play and swiftly changes genre with no warning (“But that wasn’t cheers. That was screaming”), tragedy arriving as suddenly as it does in real life. How did that moment make you feel as you listened? Write a short play with a sudden change of genre/mood.

- Dominique Morisseau wrote *Jezelle the Gazelle* in response to the shooting of Michael Brown and protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Think about a significant event that has happened to a community you belong to or identify with — it can be a literal, geographical community or a broader community. How could you retell or respond to that event? Write a short play that engages with your experience and reaction to that event.

### **“PLAYING ON AIR” CHALLENGE**

Once your students have created their own short plays, you can form small groups and assign students roles: for each playwright's work, other students can be the director and performer(s)! Ideally, you can give students the chance to record their short plays just like on *Playing On Air* – complete with a Q & A section at the end about the writing, rehearsing, and performing process!

Explore the questions below with your student as they prepare to create their audio play:

- What does a director do in preparing an audio play for performance?
- How can an actor bring a character to life with only their voice? (tone, register, speed, volume, etc.)
- How can we use music and sound effects to bring the play to life?
- How can a playwright and actors and director collaborate to reach a shared vision of the story being told?

Your students may also choose to record their own version of *Jezelle the Gazelle*. If students go this route, they should consider:

- How can our interpretation of this play be different than the performance on *Playing On Air*?
- How do casting choices transform the story we are telling?
- What is most important in making an audio play successful?: The script? The actors? The direction? Is there one right answer?



## **RECOMMENDED PAIRED PLAYS**

More plays by Dominique Morisseau on [Playing On Air](#)

\* [Third Grade](#)

\* [Night Vision](#)