

STUDY GUIDE



SKELETON CREW

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

SKELETON CREW

GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
JUNE 5 - JULY 8, 2018

SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Rachel Weigardt-Egel, Ramine Ameli, Scott Kriloff,
Ellen Catania, Jessica Brusilow Rollins, Carolyn Marie Wright, Carissa Pinckney and Celia Rivera.**

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SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

SKELETON CREW



WRITTEN BY

Dominique Morisseau

DIRECTED BY

Patricia McGregor

SCENIC DESIGNER

Rachel Myers

COSTUME DESIGNER

Emilio Sosa

LIGHTING DESIGNER

Pablo Santiago

SOUND DESIGNER

Everett Elton Bradman

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Dennis Whitehead Darling

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

Ross Jackson

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

Jade Cagalawan

CASTING DIRECTOR

Phyllis Schuringa, CSA



Amari Cheatom as Dez



Caroline Stefanie Clay as Faye



Kelly McCreary as Shanita



DB Woodside as Reggie

SYNOPSIS

It is 2008, and the automobile industry in Detroit has been rocked by the national recession. In the breakroom of a car parts factory, four African American employees are concerned about their plant closing. Tough and caring Faye, who also serves as a union representative, has worked for 29 years and can receive her pension if the factory stays open one more year. Young Dez, who lives by his own rules, is saving money in order to open his own garage. Though pregnant, second-generation autoworker Shanita is determined to stay on the assembly line for as long as possible, and believes her flawless work record will see her through any changes at the factory. Reggie, who began on the line and has become a foreman, wants his crew taken care of but also to hold onto his position. As the fate of the plant unfolds, conflicts erupt and deep connections emerge, revealing the struggles, as well as the dreams, of each character.

SETTING Detroit, Michigan. Stamping Plant. Winter.

TIME Somewhere around year 2008.

RUNNING TIME Approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes. Including one 15 minute intermission.

PERFORMANCE NOTES There is profanity and the occasional casual use of the N-word; there are a few moments of smoking.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU (Playwright)

Dominique Morisseau is the author of *The Detroit Project (A 3-Play Cycle)* which includes *Skeleton Crew* (Atlantic Theater Company), *Paradise Blue* (Signature Theatre) and *Detroit '67* (Public Theater, Classical Theatre of Harlem and National Black Theatre). Additional plays include *Pipeline* (Lincoln Center Theater), *Sunset Baby* (Labyrinth Theater Company), *Blood at the Root* (National Black Theatre) and *Follow Me to Nellie's* (Premiere Stages). She is also the book writer for the new musical *Ain't Too Proud – The Life and Times of the Temptations* (Berkeley Rep). Morisseau is an alumna of the Public Theater Emerging Writers Group, Women's Project Lab and Lark Playwrights Workshop and has developed work at Sundance Lab, Williamstown Theatre Festival and Eugene O'Neil Playwrights Conference. Her work has been commissioned by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Women's Project Theater, South Coast Repertory, People's Light and Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Penumbra Theatre Company. She most recently served as Co-Producer on the Showtime series *Shameless*. 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, Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship, and being named to *Variety's* 2017 Women's Impact Report.



PATRICIA MCGREGOR (Director)

Patricia McGregor is a director and writer from St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. She has twice been profiled by *The New York Times* for her direction of world premieres. Recent credits include *Lights Out: Nat "King" Cole* (People's Light Theatre), *Skeleton Crew* (Studio Theatre), *Measure for Measure* (The Old Globe), *The Parchman Hour* (Guthrie Theater), *Hamlet* (Public Theater), *Ugly Lies the Bone* (Roundabout Theatre Company), *brownsville song* (b-side for tray) (Lincoln Center Theater) and the world premieres of *Good Grief* (Center Theatre Group), *Stagger Lee* (Dallas Theater Center), *Hurt Village* (Signature Theatre), *Hold-ing It Down* and *Blood Dazzler* (Harlem Stage) and *The House That Would Not Stand* (Berkeley Rep/Yale Rep). Other credits include *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Spunk*, *Becky Shaw*, *Adoration of the Old Woman*, *Four Electric Ghosts* and *Nothing Personal*. She has directed the 24 Hour Plays on Broadway and staged readings for HBO's writer's Access program. She was a Paul & Daisy Soros Fellow at Yale School of Drama where she earned her M.F.A. and served as Artistic Director of the Yale Cabaret.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

THE IMPACT OF URBAN DECLINE

SETTING (noun)

The time, place, and circumstances in which a narrative, drama, or film takes place (thefreedictionary.com)

UAW — UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE, AND AGRICULTURE WORKERS OF AMERICA

On February 11th, 1937, GM recognized the United Auto Workers as the sole bargaining agent for twenty of its production factories, after a strike and lock-in at the end of the 1936 to help insure better working conditions. This strike and subsequent formation of the UAW helped to start a middle class in Detroit. (UAW.org)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Hist-Com-Auto
tinyurl.com/Brittanica-Hist-Auto
tinyurl.com/AmerHist-Detroit
tinyurl.com/SugrueAutoImpact
tinyurl.com/NewYorkerSugrue

PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD



The time and place of a play, also known as its setting, not only locates the story but can affect how it unfolds. In *Skeleton Crew*, harsh economic realities in the world outside of the breakroom in which the characters interact exert pressures that force them to make emotional, ethical and pragmatic choices. For playwright Dominique Morisseau, that world is her hometown of Detroit, Michigan, in 2008, when autoworkers were not only struggling to hold on to jobs, but to also survive in a city where, according to sociologist Thomas Sugrue, “...a sixth of the residents are unemployed, where sixty per cent of children live in poverty, and where some tens of thousands of homes stand empty (*The New Yorker*, 2014).

When Henry Ford began mass-producing automobiles in 1913—an innovation that changed economic fortunes and lifestyles not just in the United States but the world—Detroit flourished. Jobs were plentiful in factories that assembled cars and produced parts, such as the stamping factory in which the play takes place, where sheet metal is shaped into bodies for automobiles. As a result, Detroit became a major destination in the Great Migration (1915-1960), when black Southerners went to northern cities, seeking better job prospects and less oppressive conditions. As white Southerners and workers from Europe joined them, by 1950 Detroit had a population of over 1.5 million citizens and a thriving middle-class, due in part to the UAW, a robust union that protected the interests of its workers, by fighting for equitable salaries, healthcare and pensions.

During the second half of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st, the automotive industry engaged in practices and faced challenges that led to its decline, which in turn weakened the economic stability of Detroit. In the 1940s and 1950s, the “Big Three” automotive companies—Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler—started setting up factories in areas outside of the central city, and smaller businesses followed, leaving behind large areas of city land that were too polluted with waste to be repurposed. After the U.S. endured a worldwide crisis in 1979 that drove up gas prices, smaller, more fuel-efficient cars made in Europe and Japan became popular.

DETROIT'S MIDDLE CLASS

Many middle-class African Americans managed to survive the decline of the auto industry by assuming local government jobs as “teachers and cops, social workers and firefighters, clerks and accountants, city attorneys and court reporters...Public-sector jobs filled some of the gap left by manufacturing and provided a new generation of Detroiters with relatively high wages, health care, and pensions (Thomas Sugrue, *The New Yorker*, 2014).” Still the severe economic challenges facing the city affected this part of the population as well. After cutting its “municipal workforce by nearly half to help make ends meet” in the 1990s and early 2000s, Detroit went bankrupt, which led to job cuts and slashed health and pension benefits. Yet, “Without public jobs, Detroit’s black middle class would have been a lot smaller, and the city’s decline would have been even steeper (ibid).”

DETROIT TODAY

After declaring bankruptcy in 2013, the city assumed control of its finances again in 2014. While Detroit is still challenged economically, there are signs of renewal: ownership of houses is on the upswing, as is the rehabilitation of the thousands of abandoned structures that dot industrial landscapes.

Companies started setting up in other states, where non-union crews made production less expensive. As the car industry continued to shrink in the city of Detroit, once-dense neighborhoods that had surrounded large factories became depopulated and small businesses such as markets and stores that had supported the neighborhoods disappeared. This decline accelerated in the 1990s as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) made the manufacture of parts and cars less costly in other countries, such as Mexico and Canada. Already reeling, the Big Three car companies would not have survived the national recession in 2008 without a bailout by the federal government. During this period, companies downsized or shut factories down—the threat that looms over the characters in *Skeleton Crew*.

In addition to the decentralization of the auto industry, other forces, often fueled by racism and discrimination, impacted many of Detroit’s African American residents. During the Great Migration, they were denied access to affordable housing. They were often subject to “redlining”—in which people of color are denied loans that make it possible for them to buy houses and amass equity. The part of Detroit in which many African Americans lived became segregated from the more affluent suburbs. As noted by a study from University of Michigan’s Dearborn Benson Ford Research Center, “Hardest hit by the loss of jobs in the central city were black workers, who could seldom find housing in the segregated suburbs or the mostly white small towns that attracted many firms (2004).”

The automobile, which for decades had sustained Detroit, also contributed to the city’s undoing. Until cars became readily available, citizens used public transportation such as streetcars to travel about their cities. Most roads in America were unpaved and difficult to navigate. The thriving automobile industry in the early part of the 20th century led to the building of major roads and to the development of suburbs, which in turn weakened the public transportation systems in many cities. Unable to afford cars, Detroit city dwellers found it difficult and expensive to travel to outlying areas to hold jobs.

Built-up tensions exploded in 1967 and led to several days of unrest known as the “Detroit Riots” and considerable loss of life, injuries, and destruction of property. A mass exodus of white residents from the city to the suburbs followed. As a result, the city of Detroit lost a healthy tax base and, therefore, basic services. Many of its predominantly African American residents spiraled further into poverty and debt. Crime rose, especially gang-related violence, afflicting black residents and alienating those who might have invested in new businesses and real estate.

Skeleton Crew is a tribute to the residents of Detroit. Morrisseau illuminates the truths of living in a challenging environment without sensationalizing the difficulties. While we seem to be living in a time in which those struggling economically are often blamed by political leaders for personal failings when they are, in fact, up against a system stacked in favor of corporate interests, we get to know factory employees who take pride in their work and are determined to survive; who, like all human beings, make mistakes and shine; whose decency and care not only emerge, but also sustain each other as job insecurities mount.

DISCUSSION POINT

What factors are essential for sustaining the health of a city? How are they interdependent? Which is most important for a city to maintain? Why?

WORKING CLASS WARRIORS

WORKING CLASS

Working class is a socioeconomic term used to describe persons in a social class marked by jobs that provide low pay, require limited skill and/or physical labor, and have reduced education requirements. While “working class” is typically associated with manual labor and limited education, blue collar workers are vital to every economy. (investopedia.com)

GILDED AGE

A period of U.S. history in the 1870s noted for political corruption, financial speculation, and the opulent lives of wealthy industrialists and financiers (collinsdictionary.com)

SOURCE

tinyurl.com/BrookingsWorkClass

PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD



The central belief of the American Dream is that it is possible for members of the working and middle classes to achieve upward mobility. While access to quality education, a capacity for innovation, hard work and luck can still make such advances possible, we seem to be living in another “Gilded Age,” where our country’s wealth is in the hands of a few, the middle class has declined, wages are stagnant, housing is unaffordable, and blue collar workers who have not transitioned out of certain industries into a service economy face chronic unemployment.

Additionally, these days politicians and journalists use “working class” to signify white, usually male, workers in deindustrialized Mid-West states who feel left behind by the global economy and condescended to by the liberal elite on both coasts. As with many economic and societal issues, the concerns of people of color, especially women, who because of persistent inequities are more vulnerable to economic devastation than white males, are usually not included in local or national conversations.

In *Skeleton Crew*, playwright Morisseau has not only made African American autoworkers of Detroit visible, she also presents them as “working class warriors” (a term she uses in her dedication), who while managing hardships are not downtrodden. Through Faye, we learn about the importance of unions in not only protecting workers but in helping them manage economic downturns. Dez has the makings of an entrepreneur: he’d rather save his money for his own garage business and depend on his skills and wits than pay dues to the UAW. Shanita is convinced she can advance if she follows the rules and sustains excellent work. Reggie is torn between honoring his roots as a line worker and taking care of his family by fulfilling his responsibilities as a manager. Each is determined to succeed within the system that has provided job security—for as long as it lasts—buoyed by the knowledge that each knows what it takes to survive.

DISCUSSION POINT

Have you or someone you know been a “working class warrior?”
What would you like others to know about your or their work life?

GROUPS AT WORK

CREW (noun)

a company of people working on one job or under one foreman or operating a machine
(merriamwebster.com)

SKELETON CREW (noun)

The most basic level of staffing, the bare minimum for the business or operation to function
(macmillandictionaryblog.com)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Fortune-WorkersFamily
tinyurl.com/HBR-Friends-at-Work
tinyurl.com/HBR-Coworkers-Neighbors

PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD



By virtue of their ages and interactions, the characters in *Skeleton Crew* engage in family-like dynamics. Faye is the matriarch watching out for the younger workers and making a sacrifice that benefits one of them. Reggie is like a buttoned up older brother trying to reign in his free-spirited younger sibling Dez, and, like an adult son, he is worried about Faye's health and well-being.

Since we often spend more time with co-workers at our job than our own family members, it is not unusual to develop attachments that inspire a sense of belonging, as if to a family. Some organizational experts believe that the route to a company's success is through cultivating a family-like environment. In *Harvard Business Review*, Christine M. Riordan proposes that treating employees like a family cultivates a sense of loyalty and fun increases deeper engagement on the job. Laura Vandekam is more cautious, suggesting that such an approach can backfire if layoffs are necessary. She also points out, "Many people have baggage from unmet childhood emotional needs, and expecting work to fill those voids is asking for trouble (*Fortune Magazine*, 2103)."

Psychology professor Art Markham proposes a middle way: co-workers should function like neighbors, rather than a family. He believes "...it's dangerous for most organizations to function as a family, because not all employees will pull their own weight. It's an inefficient and demoralizing way to work. But with our neighbors, we try to balance what we do for them and what we get from them over time. We construct covenants in which everyone shares a common vision and agrees to do what they can to work toward these common interests (*Harvard Business Review*, 2014)."

Serving as a team, with shared goals and individual and collective responsibilities for achieving them, is a common group configuration, and has a less socially based focus than operating as a family or neighbors.

In the end, while Reggie and Faye reveal a family connection, and Dez and Shanita may be more than friends, everyone is bound by a shared work ethic. In this way, they draw strength from being a crew, or a team, as they face an uncertain future—together.

DISCUSSION POINT

What are the upsides and downsides of relating to coworkers like family?
How is being a team different?

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S CRAFT — SPARKING A SHARED HUMANITY

MULTI-PROTAGONIST

(adjective)

The protagonist is the main character of a work of literature, theater, or cinema.

There may be more than one protagonist in a large piece of work or a work with several overlapping narratives.

(literarydevices.com)

In *Skeleton Crew*, playwright Morisseau touches our hearts and minds through her artful use of theater elements, including how she creates characters, dialogue and monologues. The complex humanity of her characters is striking. In the descriptions below, we see the selves they show to the world and the inner selves they reveal over time.

CHARACTERS:

FAYE - Black woman, mid-to-late fties. Working-class woman. Tough and a lifetime of dirt beneath her nails. Somewhere, deep compassion.

DEZ - Black man, mid-to-late twenties. Working-class young man. Young hustler, playful, street-savvy, and flirtatious. Somewhere, deeply sensitive.

SHANITA - Black woman, mid-to-late twenties. Working-class young woman. Pretty but not ruled by it. Hard-working. By-the-books. Believes in the work she does. Also, pregnant. Somewhere, a beautiful dreamer.

REGGIE - Black man, late thirties. White-collar man. Studious. Dedicated. Compassionate. The Foreman. Somewhere, a fire brims.

DIALOGUE:

A play's impact rises and falls on its dialogue. Powerful dialogue tells us who characters are not just through its content but also through characters' language choices, inflections, and rhythms, and how they approach, direct attention to, and convey their wants to other characters. It takes great skill to create dialogue that both sounds real and flows naturally, as it pushes the action of this multi-protagonist story into conflicts and ever-deepening revelations.

REGGIE

What do you want from me, Dez? Didn't I just say I don't have nothin' to tell you? The company hasn't folded yet. You just focus on your job and keep your stat sheet clean, and stop worrying about things nobody can control right now.

DEZ

Can't control? Or don't wanna deal with?

REGGIE

You got something you wanna say to me directly? Or you gonna keep grabbing at stuff in the air without landing on nothing. Because I already told you what to do if you wanna make sure you're covered. Do your job. Lay off the

disorderly conduct. And stay out of the shop room gossip. It doesn't suit you well.

DEZ

It doesn't suit me well?

REGGIE

No.

DEZ

What is it with you lately, man?

REGGIE

There's nothing with me.

DEZ

Act like you ain't come up in here the same way the rest of us did. The color of that collar don't change yo' origins. You forget that?

REGGIE

(Getting heated.) Don't question my collar, Dez.

MONOLOGUES:

Characters sometimes reveal their feelings and aspirations through extended speeches. Morisseau often endows her characters' monologues with poetic imagery that lifts their thoughts out of the everyday into flight. When Dez expresses concern to Faye about how she is living, she responds:

FAYE

I know everything about this place, Dez. The walls talk to me. The dust on the floors write me messages. I'm in the vents. I'm in the bulletin boards. I'm in the chipped paint. Ain't nobody can slip through the cracks past me up in here. I can see through lockers. I know what you got in that bag you bring in here everyday. But I don't expose it. Cuz everybody got they bag of s***. You got yours. And I got mine. Leave me to my own stink and don't go tryin' to air me out.

By drawing the world of *Skeleton Crew* so specifically and vividly, Morisseau uncovers what is universal about the characters' experiences. As she stated in a filmed interview (*Theatre Corner*, 2017), her aim is for the audience to "connect to the humanity of the characters." This happens because the characters' fears and dreams about the future, and the way they tease, scold, fight, comfort and become vulnerable with each other, are familiar to us and inspire respect in us, and may even empower us to endure.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH RAMINE AMELI

What is your title and how long have you worked at the Geffen?

My official title is Assistant Lighting Supervisor, but it's commonly known as Assistant Master Electrician. I have been at the Geffen for three years.

What are your primary responsibilities?

I assist the Lighting Supervisor in managing all lighting-related needs a production may have. When we receive a light plot from a designer, I check our inventory, print plots and paperwork, and schedule crew to come in and hang lights and program the show.

How does a lighting designer work with a script and director to make lighting choices for the production of a play?

The first thing a lighting designer does is look through the script for any indicators of time of day and location. Then with the help of the director, they establish a theme that will reinforce those elements and also convey a richer story through the lighting.

In what ways does lighting contribute to the impact of a play?

Since you use your eyes every day, your subconscious knows a lot about lighting. That being said, lighting plays a huge impact on the way you perceive the story in front of you. From a dark, rainy day to a fun Sunday by the beach, the lighting effects associated with these experiences are already recorded in your mind, and through stage lighting we help bring them back to you to get you even closer to those memories and feelings, which can make what is happening on stage all that much more fascinating.

What educational and/or professional experiences led to you being hired at the Geffen?

I studied Theatre Production and Design at Pepperdine University. When I started, I knew nothing about lighting. I took Intro to Lighting Design and loved it. After that, I focused my studies on lighting. My last year of school, I interned at Center Theatre Group and when I graduated I started working there as an electrician. I continued to pick



up jobs until my name was passed along and I got a job at the Geffen as a light board operator. Eventually, I became the Assistant Lighting Supervisor.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

The most challenging but also rewarding part of my work is collaborating with all the other departments in production. There are a lot of people working on different tasks and we have to share the space and often work together on a single project. It may involve making props and scenery light up or providing light backstage so actors can do quick changes. As challenging as it is, it gives you an incredible feeling when you see the finished product on stage.

What do you find most satisfying?

The most satisfying part of my job is when we create something truly unique. Sometimes that's drilling hundreds of fiber optic strands into a set to transform it into a night sky, or laying down over 2,000 feet of LED tape to make a simple square room into something from the future. All of these massive endeavors leave audiences and myself with an incredible sense of wonder. ■

SECTION 4

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette,” or how to behave at the theater.

The Audience’s Role: The audience plays an essential role at the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members’ concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring the performance to life.

Behaviors to Avoid: Since the actors can hear the audience so clearly, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them—and fellow audience members.

These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- Unwrapping candy or cough drops.

Use of Social Media: We appreciate you sharing your Geffen Playhouse experience via social media, but ask that you **do not do so inside the theater, where the use of electronic devices is prohibited.**

We recommend that you post your status **in the lobby after the performance**, and invite you to tag @GeffenPlayhouse and use #GeffenPlayhouse to share your experience and continue the conversation with us online.

Audience Awareness Activity: Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with:

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television.

DISCUSSION POINT

If you were onstage performing a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to questions selected from those suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Ask for several volunteers to share their groups' answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching *Skeleton Crew*? Engaged? Distanced? Entertained? Bored? Conflicted? Moved? Inspired? What made you feel this way?
- What did you enjoy most about the play? What did you find difficult to enjoy? Why? (Provide evidence from the production.)
- Did you identify or empathize with any of the characters? If so, which character(s) and why? If not, why not?
- How did this play either affirm what you know or educate you about the impact of deindustrialization on certain parts of the U.S.?
- Did anything surprise you about being immersed in the world of factory workers? If so, what? If not, why not?
- Did this play inspire you to engage in dialogue about the experiences of “working class warriors?” If so, how?
- What city or town has a special place in your heart? How did it shape you?
- What do you think happens to each character after the play ends?
- What is playwright Dominique Morisseau’s message?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, costumes, props, lighting and visuals contribute to the impact of the play?
- Would you recommend this production of *Skeleton Crew* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES



WATCH and LISTEN to *Skelton Crew* playwright Dominique Morisseau discuss her work in an interview with Michael Taylor at his Theater Corner, at tinyurl.com/MorisseauInterview.

LEARN about the history and legacy of the automobile at tinyurl.com/Hist-Com-Auto.

WATCH a stamping plant in action at tinyurl.com/NatGeoStampFac and cars being assembled at tinyurl.com/AssemblyLineGM.

VISIT the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles to experience its collection of cars. Information is available at petersen.org.

LEARN about how the automobile affected America and how the decentralization of the auto industry impacted Detroit at tinyurl.com/SugrueAutoImpact.

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And many more!



As of print date: May 30, 2018