



## THE LOCAL'S GUIDE TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

November 13, 2009

### TREE AT [INSIDE] THE FORD

By M.R. Hunter

Julie Hébert's new play at [Inside] the Ford thoughtfully examines the tenuous relationship between three generations estranged by race, time and long-held secrets that bind the unlikely kin into a family struggling to relate with one another.

The discovery of old, love letters sets into motion a personal quest and surprising reunion between two families connected by a shared past, and Hébert's poignantly wrought lyricism delves into the gray areas of a seemingly black and white issue with moving relevancy and sharply hewn frankness. Along with Hébert's sensitive text and clever direction by Jessica Kubzansky, the cast is exceptional—with special mention to Sloan Robinson's brilliant, powerhouse performance makes this production a worth-see.

Days after her father's death, Didi Marcantel (Jacqueline Wright) a gender studies professor from Louisiana, finds letters suggesting a brief but clandestine affair and a half-brother she has never known living in Chicago. But Didi's unexpected arrival to the Price home stirs up buried resentments as the answers she seeks raises even more painful questions about the past, forcing her and her half-brother, Leo (Chuma Gault) to uncover and face certain uncomfortable truths that lie at the root of their family tree.

Exacerbating the sudden reunion is Leo's mother, Jessalyn (Sloan Robinson), slipping in and out of lucidity from worsening bouts of dementia. Between her insensible mutterings, her heart-wrenching outbursts, and salty cursing, Jessalyn reveals the truth about Didi and Leo's father and their relationship in a time when society openly ostracized bi-racial unions. But the truth, delivered in an unreliable context of Jessalyn's ranting and raving finds cohesion when Leo's sensitive daughter, J.J. (Tessa Thompson) challenges him to read between the bloodlines of his father's



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Ensemble Studio Theatre - LA presents  
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Photo by Ed Krieger



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handwriting locked away in a security deposit box. Armed with incomplete, but comforting proof of his father's loyalty, Leo gently probes his mother with the right questions that lead to surprising answers for the Price-Marcantel clan in a satisfying and moving dénouement. Thompson's lovely voice achingly sweetens the end with a clear a cappella of folksong, "In Natchitoches."

Hebért's play beautifully expresses a broad range of universal themes: family, race, culture, identity, and time without losing focus on the particular dynamics that brings these characters together. Kubzansky expertly directs with an excellent eye and creative use of space, especially Didi reading the letters from an aloft boat jutting from the wings in mid-air. While some of the tension between Leo and Didi appears too physically demonstrated, the cast as a whole is simply superb and deliver naturally feeling performances without resorting to melodrama. While the incredulous start of Leo and Didi's relationship seems at times contrived, the lush, rhythmic dialogue and musicality of the characters' shared pain more than makes up for some convenient plot turns. Hebért does effectively unravel the back-story without tipping off the audience, using stereotypical circumstances to reveal that sometimes appearances and circumstances are deceiving.

Brian Sidney Bembridge's set and lighting design masterfully fills in the spaces during Jessalyn's monologues with haunting light that exposes trees from behind a scrim. Subtle, but effective sound effects by Bruno Louchouart adds lunacy to Jessalyn's condition with murmuring whispers.

Jessalyn writes in one of her letters to Didi's father, "You climb up that tree like a ghost." Symbolic, layered and telling, Hebért's play reveals the invisible connections hidden within a family, but like rings in a tree are visible throughout by time, memory and the truth of these.

**--M.R. Hunter**

"Tree"

Runs through Dec 13

Wed, Thurs, Fri & Sat at 8pm

Sundays at 3pm & 7pm

[Inside] the Ford

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Free on-site parking

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