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Tree Theatre Review - Ensemble Studio Theatre's World Premiere Delves Into Issues Regarding Family and Race

By Peter A. Balaskas



Jessalyn (Sloan Robinson) reads one of her love letters as Leo (Chuma Gault) and Didi (Jacqueline Wright) look on

(Hollywood, CA) November 14, 2009 – Dysfunctional families make fantastic, riveting drama. Throughout the history of theatre, legendary playwrights including **Sophocles**, **Shakespeare**, **Williams**, **O’Neil**, and most recently, Tony Award winning **Tracey Letts**, have explored the twisted, almost labyrinthine, complexities of the family dynamic. Some of these family dramas end on a happy note (most notably the comic dramas penned by **Neil Simon**); most do not. However, these dramas typically leave an imprint in our memories because, in one way or another, they connect with our own families.

Julie Hebert examines how race plays an important factor in family secrets and connections in **Tree**, which is making its World Premiere at **[Inside] the Ford Theatre** in Hollywood. Under the smooth direction of **Jessica Kubzansky** and a quartet of talented actors, **Tree** is a significant work that explores how a damaged, fragmented family seeks to heal itself by confronting painful secrets that are screaming to be revealed.



JJ (Tessa Thompson) comforts her mother (Sloan Robinson) during one of her breakdowns

In a Southside Chicago house, middle-aged, African American chef Leo Price (**Chuma Gault**) serves as a caregiver for his ailing mother, Jessalyn (**Sloan Robinson**), who fluctuates from a profane and furious type of dementia to good natured calm and clarity, resulting in a lovable banter between her and Leo, as well as with her granddaughter, JJ (**Tessa Thompson**), who looks after Jessalyn while Leo goes to work. It is hardly idyllic, but Leo does his best to maintain some sense of uneasy harmony, which can be easily disturbed by any outside, unwelcome influence.

That disturbance eventually walks up to the front door in the form of Didi Marcantel (**Jacqueline Wright**), a Caucasian college professor who teaches Gender Studies at LSU. At first, she claims she is a reporter researching African American cultures. But when Leo catches Didi in her lie, she reveals that they both share the same father. During the 1950s, where interracial relationships were forbidden and dangerous, Didi's father had a long love affair with Jessalyn. When her father died, Didi discovered love letters that Jessalyn wrote to him, exposing a side of her bigoted father that Didi has never seen throughout her life. After reading Jessalyn's poetic discourse, Didi attempts to salve her grief by reconciling with her half-brother and his family, as well as inquiring to the sometimes lucid Jessalyn regarding more about her past. And by doing so, Didi opens Pandora's Box regarding racial guilt, hidden secrets, and redemption.



Leo (Chuma Gault) and Didi (Jacqueline Wright) talk about their respective futures

For tonight's performance, Director **Kubzansky** wisely moves the ninety minute show without an intermission because to do so would break the smooth, kinetic rhythm of the acting, which is quite compelling. **Wright's** portrayal is perfect in the beginning as a self-righteous, self-indulgent, needy academic whose pursuit of her own past overshadows the pain she is causing to the family. During one of many confrontations with Leo, the chef hits the nail on the head when he calls her "a guilt-ridden liberal" whose quest to heal the wounds of racial divide is nothing more but a temporary cure for her own insecure ego. But when her determination turns into blind obsession, her wounded vulnerability is finally revealed as her grief causes her to break down in front of JJ (a sweet, genuine performance by **Tessa Thompson**, who shows more maturity than Didi).



Leo(Chuma Gault)listens to his mother (Sloan Robinson) discussing her past

The mother/son chemistry between **Gault's** Leo and **Robinson's** Jessalyn is the most electrifying facet of this show. Leo's devotion to his mother is evident from the very beginning of the play. He's a tired, weary man, but not defeated. He takes his mother's profane, uncontrollable outbursts with strength that never shows him as a victim. His scenes with Wright are forceful, but never bullying. And during the very brief times when he is savoring some peace, he interlaces his composure with a nice dose of humor. And **Robinson** grabs her role with a vengeance as we see many emotional facets of her Jessalyn. Besides the painful bouts of her dementia, Robinson transforms into a younger, optimistic Jessalyn as the love letters are read by her and Didi. And during her moments of clarity, we see the guilt she exhibits regarding the man she loves. This pain reverberates to her fellow cast members, as well as the audience, resulting in a play that succeeds in its search of healing emotional wounds within the family unit.

Tree opened November 7, 2009 and runs through December 13, 2009

[Inside] the Ford

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