



A Story of Love In a Family Tree

By Cynthia Citron

Among the many things that most people fear about getting old is losing their mind, their memories, their connection with the world. That fear is spectacularly personified by Sloan Robinson in Julie Hebert's new play "Tree", now having its world premiere at (Inside) the Ford in Hollywood.

Robinson, as the African-American widow Jessalyn Price, wanders from lunacy to lucidity as her son Leo (Chuma Gault) and granddaughter JJ (Tessa Thompson) try to cope with her dementia, her demands, and her devastating dreams. Mostly she dreams about the white boy she loved in her youth and the moments they shared so many years ago. (Including jumping together from the branches of a tree into the icy cold water of the pond below, a loving memory she recalls again and again.) This, despite the fact that she had subsequently spent some 45 years as another man's wife.

Into this unsettled household in Chicago comes a stranger from Louisiana---a brusque young white woman named Didi (Jacqueline Wright) who identifies herself as the daughter of Jessalyn's long-ago love. She brings with her a packet of love letters that she has discovered among her recently deceased father's possessions and is anxious to meet the woman who wrote them.

Didi, who teaches gender studies at a southern university and holds all the values of a prototypical white liberal, finds herself the butt of Leo's rage as he mocks her for trying to assuage her "white guilt" for the centuries of racial persecution and for assuming that the two of them have anything in common.

Despite Leo's initial hostility, however, and his desire to protect his mother from disturbing memories, the story of Jessalyn's lifelong love slowly emerges, and with it a number of surprises that impacts on all of them.

"Tree" is a strong and powerful examination of love, family, race, and the onset of madness. Ironically, though, it is an uplifting journey---a moving interlude spent with decent, caring individuals striving to do their best in an uncertain world.

The actors are flawless, thanks to their own abilities as well as the strong and capable direction of Jessica Kubzansky. Her outstanding work is enhanced by Brian Sidney Bembridge's scenic and lighting design and Bruno Louchouarn's original music and sound design. And although the lyrical language is all playwright Julie Hebert's, it takes its cue from a beautiful folksong from Louisiana, sung in French, whose last lines are "And if you have to get a dress/ Get it the color of ashes/ For that's the saddest color / For two lovers living only in longing."

"Tree" will be performed Wednesday, December 9 at 8 p.m., Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 3 and 7 p.m. through December 13th at (Inside) the Ford, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, in Hollywood. Call (323) 461-3673 for tickets.