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Jacqueline Wright in *Tree*.

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Family trees are complicated and sometimes difficult to trace. In the world premiere of Julie Hébert's **Tree** (at [Inside] the Ford) the Price clan is ripped apart when the a past secret reveals that two adults are siblings. Hébert's scenario has an African American chef Leo Price (Chuma Gault) confronted by a white woman who claims to be his half-sister. Didi Marcantel (Jacqueline Wright) comes to Price's house with love letters written by Leo's mother to her father and wants to know if Leo's mother has any letters from her father. Unfortunately, Leo's mother (Sloan Robinson) suffers from severe dementia and swings between bouts of hysteria and reliving the past, often thinking her son is a former student she taught.

What begins as a simple hunt for missing love letters unravels both Leo and Didi's worlds as they discover who their parents really were. A love affair between Leo's mother and Didi's father began in the 1950s when interracial romances were not only frowned upon and Leo is the product of their relationship. Didi yearns to have a relationship with Leo, her half-

brother, who vehemently denies the past and wants to forget Didi's father, Ray Marcantel, much like his mother has. Leo's daughter, J.J. Price (Tessa Thompson) pushes her father to learn more after her grandmother lucidly reveals some intimate moments of her relationship with Ray.

As the audience learns more, lies are revealed, truths are given, and heartbreak is inevitable. All of the actors give stunning performances; each one wrestling with different demons. Of particular note is Sloan Robinson whose turn as a matriarch losing her mind is emotional, comedic, lovely, and tender. The combination of Robinson's performance and Hébert's deft hand at differentiating between Robinson's dementia-filled moments versus her crystal clear memories of her past are a tour de force.

The stage design gives the sense of a larger world beyond the walls of a house in Chicago and peeks into the South, where Didi is from. No small feat considering the small theater space, but scenic and lighting designer Brian Sidney Bembridge makes every detail work, down to a lovely backdrop of weeping willows and an edge of a canoe dangling high above the stage. Nothing is placed without reason. Director Jessica Kubzansky carefully places lights down in moments the audience needs to digest the magnitude of what they have just learned; she does so sparingly but precisely.

It is evident that *Tree* has been given much care and love by Ensemble Studio Theatre LA's production from the choice of actors, staging, and mastery of the play. *Tree* is a tight 90 minutes with not a wasted piece of dialogue or stage movement. While family trees may be twisted, the knots that unfurl from Hébert's *Tree* reveal beautiful roots.

***Tree** continues through December 13th at Ford Theatre, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd., East Hollywood, CA. For more information visit the [Ford Theater's website](#).*

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