

Los Angeles Times

Culture Monster

Theater review: 'Tree' at [Inside] the Ford

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Obama drank Bud Light, but in Julie Hébert's "Tree," now at [\[Inside\] the Ford](#), a mixed-race family's beer summit comes with a lot more kick.

White gender studies professor Didi (Jacqueline Wright) shows up at the Chicago home of African American chef Leo (Chuma Gault) claiming to be his half-sister from Louisiana. Turns out Leo's mother, Jessalyn (Sloan Robinson), had a passionate love affair with Didi's father, known only to his daughter as a belligerent racist. The bitter Didi wants to find her father's love letters, hoping to recover some part of him worth mourning. Leo, caring for a dying Jessalyn, doesn't want to dredge up the past. The siblings battle it out, with Leo's young daughter, J.J. (Tessa Thompson), caught in the crossfire.

Hébert's characters — profane and stubborn — have an ornery charm. Director Jessica Kubzansky honors "Tree's" poetry without letting it sink the drama, and pushes her cast away from sentimentality. Every performance is strong, but Gault's Leo provides essential gravity. Guarded and sardonic, he deflects his sister's emotional salvos with steady wit. (Didi: "My father always wanted a son like you." Leo, dryly: "He had a son like me.")

This Ensemble Studio Theatre-Los Angeles world premiere is beautifully produced. Brian Sidney Bembridge's set and moody lighting are almost characters in themselves. Leo's warm, wood-beamed home sits slightly at an angle, like a house lifted by a hurricane that hasn't settled into its new foundation. Upstage, like images from a dream, Spanish moss clings to cypress branches, evoking the ambiguous beauty of the South. Every design element draws you in deeper, from Bruno Louchouart's original music to Leah Piehl's striking costumes.

In "Tree," there is no true love without pain. Hébert suggests that real families are the people who know you well enough to push you into becoming someone new. Now there's an idea to bring to the Thanksgiving table.

— Charlotte Stoudt

"Tree," [\[Inside\] the Ford](#), 2580 E. Cahuenga Blvd., Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. Sundays. No performance on Thanksgiving. Ends Dec. 13. \$12-\$20. Contact: (323) 461-3673 or www.FordTheatres.org Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

Photo: Tessa Thompson. Photo credit: Ed Krieger.