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Understanding Your Roots: Themes of Family Grow in Tree

by Janet Thielke

Tree, presented by Ensemble Studio Theatre-LA, opens Nov. 7; plays Thur.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 3 & 7 pm; through Dec. 13. Tickets: \$20; all Thur. performances are Pay-What-You-Can. [Inside] the Ford, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood (just off the 101 Freeway across from the Hollywood Bowl). 323.461.3673 (323.GO1.FORD) or FordTheatres.org.



Mom and Dad. Daughter and Son. Family. Few words are heavier than these, endowed by each individual with memories and images, expectations and associations. Who do you know better than your parents? Than your family? But what happens when these people surprise you, when you uncover something from your past that challenges your definition of these words and people?

Playwright Julie Hébert is dealing with such themes in her new play *Tree*, presented by Ensemble Studio Theatre-LA, directed by Jessica Kubzansky. In the play, a white Gender Studies professor Didi Marcantel (Jacqueline Wright) from Louisiana finds some letters written by her father suggesting she has a half-brother. She goes to find him, only to stumble in on the family in crisis. African American Leo Price (Chuma Gault) has his hands full caring for Jessalyn Price (Sloan Robinson), his aging mother with dementia, and his college-age daughter, J.J. (Tessa Thompson) when Didi confronts the family with her finds. The truth about both families lies buried in the letters and the equally convoluted mind of Jessalyn as she struggles through her dementia to remember her dangerous interracial romance with Didi's father.

"The play takes place in the house in Chicago where the half-brother and his mother live," says Hébert. "It's a contemporary discussion about race and about family, following these two people trying to figure out what it means to be related."

As inspiration for the play, Hébert cites a personal moment of having her definition of family challenged. "My mom and dad have a bunch of letters I didn't know they had. They were cleaning out a few years ago and were about to throw them out. They asked if I wanted them. It's about 200 letters he wrote to her when he was a marine in the Korean War." For Hébert, the distance between the person her father was and the person she grew up with was startling. "When I read the letters, the young man who was writing the letters was someone who was almost unrecognizable to me. It was a different guy than the guy I knew as my Dad. And so that was an interesting piece for me to explore.



Julie Hébert

"In the play, the woman has had a very difficult relationship with her father," Hébert says, "and she is seeing a different person, a different side of humanity she didn't know was there, a charm. She sees her father as a different human being and wants to explore that, wants to find out about that, is desperate to find out about that because he died recently in the play and so she's trying to work out her problems with her father."

The baggage of race presents further obstacles to the newly discovered siblings. "They have gone through different things and their parents went through different things, and how their lives are affected. It's about if they can find a way to

talk to each other, to wake each other up to some degree and be a family.”

Director Jessica Kubzansky agrees the plays’ jumping off point is with the question of “forbidden family or the family you never knew,” but continues to explore the different definitions of family and the complexity of each relationship within one family.



.Jessica Kubzansky

“The play is really about family in so many different ways,” Kubzansky continues. “About discovery of new family, about discovery of helping and caring for the family you already have, about discovering where you yourself land in the midst of all of that. About discovering new truths about yourself that maybe you didn’t know before when somebody shows up and forces you to look at yourself differently.”

For Kubzansky, Hébert’s lyrical writing has a large impact on the themes. “I think Julie has a sort of big range of writing styles. The thing I think is especially beautiful about the play is the gorgeous, beautiful lyrical poetry. She has an ear for the rhythms of language.”

Hébert’s ear for language is especially skilled at catching the cadences between the Mississippi delta and inner city Chicago, but also in the imaginative moments created by Mrs. Price’s wavering reality. “The play has some gritty realism as well as some absolutely mythic, surreal moments. What I love about the play is it sort of encompasses some realism and some absolute theatricality at the same time. Its world contains both of those things beautifully. And her writing is brilliant, funny, honest, and never sentimental. So the themes are rich and deep and that’s always yummy to work on.”

It’s apparent from their descriptions of the play Hébert and Kubzansky clearly have a shared understanding of the text. When they discuss working together, both sang the other’s praises and describe how they instantly “clicked” with the other.

“I had been aware of Julie for a while but I hadn’t really had a chance to get my hands on any of her writing. When I read the play and met with Julie—who I just think is wonderful—I thought her story was really beautiful, relevant and profound,” says Kubzansky.

“We hit it off very well,” adds Hébert. “We couldn’t believe we hadn’t worked together before.”

Perhaps one of the reasons they haven’t had the opportunity to work together until now is their equally impressive and equally packed schedules. Hébert is currently a co-Executive Producer and writer for the popular CBS series *Numb3rs*. While she enjoys her success in television, Hébert continually returns to the theatre, most recently in the Open Fist summer festival staging her play *St. Joan and the Dancing Sickness* (see [LAStageBlog](#) article).

On the difference between writing for television and stage, Hébert admits, “It’s pretty different. Writing for television is all verisimilitude. It all has to be real and plausible and playable and completely realistic and the story is prescribed according to the template of the show. Every show has its own way of telling stories and you have to fit into that. Writing a play feels more creative. It’s much more liberating to write a play; you can write much more poetic imagery, use much more lyric language or you can make different kinds of storytelling. Storytelling is much freer. There are a lot more possibilities for storytelling in plays.”

She admits, however, her process in writing is the same for both stage and screen. “I will say when I’m writing it seems to come from the same place. Sort of in my guts. It comes from the same place in terms of characters and stories and that sort of thing.”

Kubzansky similarly has her hands full, acting as co-artistic director for the Theatre @ Boston Court and coming to Tree from recently directing the acclaimed staging of *Hamlet* for Theatre 150.

While sometimes the differences between working on *Hamlet* and working on a contemporary piece are startling, Kubzansky says, “I’m incredibly grateful to be working on a new play. It would be really hard to go from *Hamlet* to something that’s established and been around for a while. I am delighted to go from a play with so much veneration and history behind it to a brand spanking new play that has never been seen before, and is still in discovery. To be honest, directing both plays has been a kind of discovery.”



When asked about her favorite part of the rehearsal process, Kubzansky laughs. “My favorite part of the rehearsal process is all of it,” she says. “I always feel really sorry for people who don’t get to be in rehearsal. I like rehearsals to be a place of complete discovery where actors are trying things that are going to enrich the character. Often times you try and try and try something that isn’t going to work, so you try a different choice but the flavor of that stays in the next choice you make and enriches the role. I love the discovery, I love the refinement, I love the happy accidents that happen where you’re like — genius! I would never have thought of anything like that but that’s amazing! And that’s the joy of rehearsal; that’s why it’s so much fun to be part of it.”

The discovery process is equally important to Hébert. “I’m finding out a lot from listening to the actors and watching the actors work with Jessica.”

For Hébert, the joy of seeing her play put up for the first time is being able to change the piece based on her increasing understanding of the characters by watching the actors go through the rehearsal process. “I’m refining it and sort of fine tuning it. I learn new things about the play, about the characters, about the interactions watching the actors do it.”

With such emotionally straining roles, the play demands actors of enormous range and depth—a challenge the cast has met and thrived on. Says Hébert, “They are fantastic. Oh my god, we are so lucky; they’re wonderful actors. They’re amazing, every single one of them is perfect and I just feel incredibly blessed they’re bringing these characters to life in a way that feels completely true and deep and funny and smart. I’m in love with them.”

Neither Kubzansky nor Hébert know what the next step for the play will be but luckily they have management on their side. “Tom Jacobson and Gates McFadden, the co-artistic directors, both have an intention to help the plays they produce as world premieres onto second and third productions,” says Hébert. “I know Tom has a real strong vision about that and making Los Angeles a place where new plays are born and then they go on from here. He’s been very inspirational and given me hope about the play moving on.”



And what does she want the audience to come away with from the world premiere? “One of the things the play talks about is how decisions we make can be based on information that is really shallow. I want them to come away with a sense one should always look below the surface of what you are expecting. I hope they walk away thinking about the amazing kinetic power of the mind; the amazing power of family.” She laughs, “You know, nothing big.”

For Hébert, the most important theme to take away is equality. “I think we can overcome our differences even when it seems like we can’t,” she says. A message we can all take home to our families.