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Bev Sykes

Enterprise drama critic

To call Saffron Henke's appearance in "The Syringa Tree" a tour-de-force is to grossly understate her brilliant performance.

During this 90-minute, one-woman show, Henke plays some two dozen different characters: black, white, old, young, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Zulu, English, Jewish and more. At times she is the solo character on stage; at other times she converses with two or three other people. Henke is mesmerizing in her ability to change body language, facial expression and accent, all in the blink of an eye.

It's a nonstop emotional roller coaster, with no intermission.

"The **Syringa Tree**" — conceived and written by Pamela Gien, a native of Johannesburg, South Africa — is a mostly autobiographical piece that spans four generations of South African citizens, black and white, as the country abolishes apartheid, and the black community wins the right to vote ... a right that comes at the expense of too many lives

The play ran for more than two years at an off-Broadway theater, and it won the coveted Obie Award for best play of the year.

The setting is a white South African suburb in 1963. The principal character is 6-year-old Elizabeth Grace (Lizzie), whom we meet as she plays on a swing hanging from the branches of a fragrant **Syringa tree**. Through Lizzie's eyes, we see the chaos and confusion of pre-apartheid South Africa and meet the rest of the characters, especially her beloved Salamina, the black woman who has been her nanny.

When Salamina gives birth to a daughter, Moliseng, this sets in motion events that will throw both her family and Lizzie's into turmoil, because the child lacks the identity papers required by South Africa's rigid police state.

Lizzie's Jewish father is an unconventional man, a physician whose home becomes a refuge for illegals living in the country. The doctor sees both black and white patients, and has them sit together in the same waiting room. Despite this apparently liberal mind-set, he seems to disappear when trouble surfaces, leaving his wife Eugenie to handle things.

When the police come, the whole house works together to ensure that Moliseng is not discovered.

The neighbors, Afrikaaner fundamentalists, refuse to let their daughter Loeska play with Lizzie; despite this slight, Lizzie remains militantly optimistic about life. She's a "lucky fish," she tells the audience, as she explains that the white spots on her nails show that she's destined to have a good friend like Loeska.

A crisis erupts when Moliseng becomes ill and is taken to a hospital in Soweto, where she is lost in the system. Salamina is distraught, and Eugenie must unravel the red tape and try to bring the child back

home again.

A tragic event that occurs when Lizzie attends university convinces her that she must follow her father's long-ago advice: "Don't ever make this place your home," he told her. And so Lizzie decides to escape to "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

We see little of Lizzie's life in the United States, but we do follow her when she returns — as an adult, with husband and child — to her former home, and a series of touching and powerful reunions. Few eyes remained dry in the audience.

Henke brings all these characters to life in a manner that feels as if the stage is populated by a full cast. The performance is simply masterful.

Director Peggy Shannon has taken a few liberties with Gien's original script by adding African dancers — Araba Brown, Sifiso Majola, Happy Ngcobo, Alena Ross, Roshni Shukla and Kenna Wright — to the background. Although providing African costume, dance and song for effect, the dancers are incidental to the main action and could have been left out.

"The **Syringa Tree**" is an emotional experience, and one that will be long remembered.

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