

The Syringa Tree:

A haunting tour-de-force at STC

By David Jacobson
Life Newspapers correspondent

In "An Actor Prepares," Konstantin Stanislavski recalls a great actor who arrived at the theater nine hours before performance so he could get into character. Today's actors don't have that kind of leisure, or patience. Still, at an audition an actor customarily pauses for a moment or two before the judges, eyes closed, to pull on a character like a pair of socks.

Toward the end of Pamela Gien's "The Syringa Tree," now offered by the Sacramento Theatre Company, a young white woman weeps in despair over the murder of her dear black friend, while the victim's aged and wise mother comforts her. Both women are played simultaneously by Saffron Henke, with instantaneous switches between character and emotion. Such a perform-

ance, done with authenticity, comes close to thespian miracle.

What's more, Henke performs solo for about 90 minutes, assuming 24 roles and at least ten African dialects and accents. Her one costume is a light coral dress, her one prop a simple swing on an elegant yet minimal set. Her only relief comes from occasional background songs and dances by a troupe in colorful African costumes as they perform as a kind of chorus.

But what we see is no mere stunt. It's an autobiographical recreation of life in and around Johannesburg during the turmoil and bloodshed leading to the end of apartheid. Elizabeth Grace, the focal character, lives through almost 30 years of love and pain, beginning at about the age of six. The story starts with her participation in the birth of Moliseng, daughter of the family's gentle black servant Salamina.

We share a sequence of crises, ultimately driving her from South Africa to relocate in Pasadena with her husband and ending with a brief and sorrowful return to her now-liberated birthplace. Because of the Bantu

Homelands Act of 1951, black Africans were required to live in ramshackle "homelands" and travel outside them with passports, granted only to allow them to work. Thus

Moliseng becomes an illegal alien in her own country, and those in the family must pretend that she's in the home only for a visit.

We go through a frantic search, by both white and black members of the household, for Moliseng after she suddenly disappears, poisoned by tainted milk. Fortunately she shows up in a hospital for blacks. We experience the tense relations between the Anglo Grace family and the white Afrikaans (Dutch) family next door, who seem to support the status quo.

We experience the shock of the black rebellion when Grandpa George Grace is stabbed to death in his modest shop. The crowning disaster is the murder of Moliseng at 14, shot down while angrily defying the white police.

But the play is demanding for the audience as well as the actress, and deliberately so. Gien requires that the play be performed on the barest of stages with no more than a swing and that the audience become an "imperative and active participant" to create a world that "exists powerfully in the imagination of the audience." Art always asks the viewer to complete the object, as when the Prologue to "Henry V" begs to work on the audience's "imaginary forces." But whether "The Syringa Tree,"



Photo courtesy STC

SAFFRON HENKE performs 24 roles in Sacramento Theatre Company's "The Syringa Tree," affecting at least ten African dialects and accents.



the history of mankind that took place in the country of Rwanda — and in an era of high-speed communication and round the clock news, the events went almost unnoticed

Main St. in Cameron Park at Experienced Books. 3300 Coach Lane, Suite A-1. The film is rated PG-13.

For more information call EDAC at (530) 295-3496.

SYRINGA TREE *continued from page B1*

winner of several awards including an Obie in 2001, demands too much of the audience will depend on time.

Based on audience response, viewers on opening night were generously rewarded for their concentration. In fact others in the party of four I shared the performance with came to the play with little preparation, and though they lost some of the details they were caught up in the magic by simply going with the flow. It's advisable, though, for anyone with even a slight hearing loss to take advantage of the "assistive hearing devices" available from the house manager.

Much credit for the success of the production goes to Director Peggy Shannon for both skill and daring, and to Matt K. Miller, who coached Henke in the art of solo acting. Pamela Z. Gray created handsome designs with light on a

scrim behind Henke and before the chorus. Locals Araba Brown, Alena Ross, Roshni Shukla and Kenna Wright are joined in the chorus by South Africa natives Sifiso Majola and Happy Ngcobo. Majola also contributed the choreography.

"The Syringa Tree" runs through April 10 at the STC Main Stage, 14th and H Streets. Performances are Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., Thursday at 12:30 and 8 p.m., Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 and 8 p.m., and Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$20-\$36. For tickets and information call (916) 443-6722 or 888-4-STCTIX. They can also be purchased through www.sactheatre.org. For discounts call (916) 446-7501, ext. 120. Based on availability, half-price rush tickets are available one-half hour before showtime.

E-mail jacobsondb@aol.com.