

# The Syringa Tree

by Pamela Gien

A program guide

April 1- 17  
at Riverside Theatre

Directed by..... Sean Christopher Lewis  
Featuring..... Saffron Henke

Scenic Design by ..... Shawn Johnson  
Lighting Design by..... Courtney Schmitz Watson  
Sound Design by..... Sean Christopher Lewis

Youth attendance of *The Syringa Tree* is sponsored by River Products Company, Inc.



# The Story

In late 1960's South Africa, young Elizabeth lives a carefree life of make believe and wonder amongst her ex-pat parents, their servants and her beloved nanny Salamina. When Salamina gives birth to a daughter named Moliseng, Elizabeth not only gains a new playmate but the equivalent of a little sister. But this is Apartheid-era South Africa where Moliseng and her mother aren't allowed to be anywhere without an official pass (state papers giving permission to the blacks to travel across the white owned areas). As time moves on we see Lizzie grow up and apart from her beloved Nanny and her daughter amongst the student riots, uprisings and personal tragedies with racial and political implications.

*The Syringa Tree*, is the story of a girl becoming a woman in the midst of one of the largest social moments of our times.

## Playwright, Pamela Gien

Pamela Gien was born in 1957 in Johannesburg, South Africa. She grew up there and moved to the US in the 1990's. A trained actress, *The Syringa Tree* was her first play. It came out of an acting class she was taking in Los Angeles with the famed acting coach, Larry Moss. In the class, Moss instructed the students to turn to the person next to them and tell them something that had happened to them. Gien began to describe how her grandparents were attacked on their farm, Clova, when she was ten years old. Her grandfather had been a gentle, kind man beloved by people of both races, and the attack came from out of the blue. As she continued thinking about the event more memories came flooding back. The next step of the exercise was to stage the story. This was a 25-minute improvisation in which she also talked about being a child and her nannies in the back of the house gathered around a large fire by the syringa tree, and learning the wedding dance. The improvisation left her class in tears and Moss encouraged her to write the play. She did, and Moss became the director. *The Syringa Tree* had its world premiere at ACT in Seattle, followed by a two-year run in New York. It has since toured the world.



Gien won the OBIE Award for Best Play 2001, the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Solo Performance, the Outer Circle Critics Award for Outstanding Solo Performance, a Drama League Honor, and a nomination for the John Gassner Playwriting Award.

The novel of *The Syringa Tree* was published in August 2006 by Random House.

# An interview with Saffron Henke on *The Syringa Tree*

This is the second time Saffron is entering the world of *The Syringa Tree*. In 2005, she performed this show at the Sacramento Theatre Company, where she was a Company Member. For that production she won the **Princess Grace Honorarium for Emerging Artists** and **Best Performance of the Region for 2005**.



**Q: What is it like to perform *The Syringa Tree*?**

**A:** *The Syringa Tree* is unlike any one-person show I've ever seen or read. The magic of this play has a lot to do with one performer making all these transitions. The best part of doing this show is that as a performer, the show works on you. You end up being the conduit for the play.

Often when you're on stage, you're wondering, "does the audience understand the play?," "do they like it?," and this can lead to getting nervous and stepping out of the play. With this play, I don't have time to think. I'm too busy.

**Q: You portray 24 characters of different ages and races, both male and female. How do you bring each of these characters to life?**

**A:** The way I've created all of these people has been to pick a simple gesture or vocal choice for each one that is very different from all the others. In South Africa there are three major dialects: English, Afrikaans, and numerous tribal accents like Xhosa and Zulu. There are actually many tribes but for the sake of simplicity, I'm choosing to do just one general dialect. All of these accents help to add another dimension to the work I'm doing, and hopefully will help the audience differentiate the characters. I try to make choices that are theatrical. It's less about having the accent be perfect and more a question of finding the character's voice. Then I do all the regular actor work which is thinking about the given circumstances for each character; where do they come from, how much money they have, how much education, and figuring out what is important for each one of them. The difference with this play is that instead of doing that for one character, I'm doing it for 24!

Each character looks a certain way in my head. They all wear specific clothes and sound a certain way. I've heard that people build their own versions of the characters when they watch the show, even though they all look like me. Your imagination does the work.

**Q: This is the second time you've performed *The Syringa Tree*. What is it like coming back to this story and these characters after six years?**

**A:** When I did this show in 2005, I identified more with the children, especially six year old Lizzy who is the narrator. This time I've found that I identify more with the parents, particularly Lizzy's mother, Eugenie. That's surprising to me. As I come back to these people, I still feel like I know them well but the way I think about them has changed, and so my support of their journey changes with that. I used to see Eugenie as nervous and weak, now I see her as the hero.

When I originally did this show, I was a Company Member in the Sacramento Theatre Company, and had been making my living as an actor exclusively for a number of years. The longest I'd ever gone without acting in my adult life, at that time, was two weeks. Acting was my only job, which meant I was in really good shape. People don't realize how much stamina you need as an actor. You have to be in good physical shape, but you also have to develop your emotional muscles and your memory. Memory is a muscle and mine is definitely getting a workout now! My life has changed since I've come to Iowa. I'm directing more, teaching more and balancing a number of jobs and those all factor into the process of re-entering this play. But it's been a great journey and I'm really looking forward to putting it in front of an audience again.

# Time Line of South Africa

**4th century** - Migrants from the north settle, joining the indigenous San and Khoikhoi people.

**1480s** - Portuguese navigator Bartholomeu Dias is the first European to travel round the southern tip of Africa.

**1652** - Jan van Riebeeck, representing the Dutch East India Company, founds the Cape Colony at Table Bay.

**1795** - British forces seize Cape Colony from the Netherlands. Territory is returned to the Dutch in 1803; ceded to the British in 1806.

**1816-1826** - Shaka Zulu founds and expands the Zulu empire, creates a formidable fighting force.

**1867** - Diamonds discovered at Kimberley.

**1879** - British defeat the Zulus in Natal.

**1880-81** - Boers rebel against the British, sparking the first Anglo-Boer War. Conflict ends with a negotiated peace. Transvaal is restored as a republic.



**1899** - British troops gather on the Transvaal border and ignore an ultimatum to disperse. The second Anglo-Boer War begins.

**1910** - Formation of Union of South Africa by former British colonies of the Cape and Natal, and the Boer republics of Transvaal, and Orange Free State.

**1913** - Land Act introduced to prevent blacks, except those living in Cape Province, from buying land outside reserves.

**1914** - National Party founded.

**1918** - Secret Broederbond (brotherhood) established to advance the Afrikaner cause.

**1948** - Policy of apartheid (separateness) adopted when National Party (NP) takes power.

**1950** - Population classified by race. Group Areas Act passed to segregate blacks and whites. Communist Party banned. ANC responds with campaign of civil disobedience, led by Nelson Mandela.

**1960** - Seventy black demonstrators killed at Sharpeville. ANC banned.



**1961** - South Africa declared a republic, leaves the Commonwealth. Mandela heads ANC's new military wing, which launches sabotage campaign.

**1960s** - International pressure against government begins, South Africa excluded from Olympic Games.

**1964** - ANC leader Nelson Mandela sentenced to life imprisonment.

**1966** September - Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd assassinated.

**1970s** - More than 3 million people forcibly resettled in black 'homelands'.

**1976** - More than 600 killed in clashes between black protesters and security forces during uprising which starts in Soweto.

**1984-89** - Township revolt, state of emergency.

**1989** - FW de Klerk replaces PW Botha as president, meets Mandela. Public facilities desegregated. Many ANC activists freed.

**1990** - ANC unbanned, Mandela released after 27 years in prison. Namibia becomes independent.

**1991** - Start of multi-party talks. De Klerk repeals remaining apartheid laws, international sanctions lifted. Major fighting between ANC and Zulu Inkatha movement.

**1993** - Agreement on interim constitution.

**1994** - ANC wins first non-racial elections. Mandela become president, Government of National Unity formed, Commonwealth membership restored, remaining sanctions lifted. South Africa takes seat in UN General Assembly after 20-year absence.

**1996** - Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu begins hearings on human rights crimes committed by former government and liberation movements during apartheid era.

**1996** - Parliament adopts new constitution. National Party withdraws from coalition, saying it is being ignored.

**1998** - Truth and Reconciliation Commission report brands apartheid a crime against humanity and finds the ANC accountable for human rights abuses.

**1999** - ANC wins general elections, Thabo Mbeki takes over as president.

**2006** - Corruption charges against former deputy president Zuma are dismissed, boosting his bid for the presidency.

**2006** - South Africa becomes the first African country, and the fifth in the world, to allow same-sex unions.





**2007** - President Mbeki, often accused of turning a blind eye to crime, urges South Africans to join forces to bring rapists, drug dealers and corrupt officials to justice.

**2007** - Hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers take part in the biggest strike since the end of apartheid. The strike lasts for four weeks and causes widespread disruption to schools, hospitals and public transport.

**2008** - Wave of violence directed at foreigners hits townships across the country. Dozens of people die and thousands of Zimbabweans, Malawians and Mozambicans return home.

**2008** - A judge throws out a corruption case against ruling ANC party chief Jacob Zuma, opening the way for him to stand as the country's president in 2009.

**2009** - Parliament elects Jacob Zuma as president. Economy goes into recession for first time in 17 years.

**2009** - Township residents complaining about poor living conditions mount violent protests.

**2010** - South Africa hosts the World Cup football tournament.

# An interview with director/sound designer, Sean Christopher Lewis



Sean Christopher Lewis is an actor, director, playwright, sound designer, and Artistic Director of Working Group Theatre. In addition to *The Syringa Tree*, he has also directed *Atlas of Mud*, produced by his company Working Group Theatre on the Riverside stage, and *Mary's Wedding*. Outside of Riverside, he directed *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe* at the Old Creamery Theatre, and *Hand Grenade Holly* at Arts Spark in Austin, TX. He was recently featured on *This American Life*.

## **Q. What drew you to *The Syringa Tree*?**

**Sean:** Having just returned from my first trip to Africa, the subject matter was an immediate draw. Also, I had no idea what it was on the page. It's actually a really difficult play to read because there are so many characters and such short scenes. It's really rather confounding and when Ron and Jody gave it to me I couldn't get through it. But I also knew it had been produced before so I took it as a challenge. It's hard not to take on a challenge - I felt my not understanding it on the page would force a more playful and imaginative staging. That's exciting to me.

## **Q. As an experienced solo performer, how do you work with an actor to help them craft a solo performance like this one?**

**Sean:** Solo performance is really a different kind of theatre. We allow more in a solo show because we're also asked to invent more. We have to work with the actor to accept that there are more people on stage than we see. Gesture and vocalizations are a huge thing I'm interested in as a director of solo pieces. Solo work is very physical and precise. You need to be simple and clear with everything.

## **Q. How is it different than working with actors in a play with a larger cast?**

**Sean:** An ensemble show has multiple moving parts so you're conducting the movement and flow of the action. You have to be constantly focused scene by scene because so many journeys need to be completed.

A solo show usually has a simpler focus. The main character is easy to identify and the journey they go on is usually incredibly clear. However, the journeys of the secondary characters are



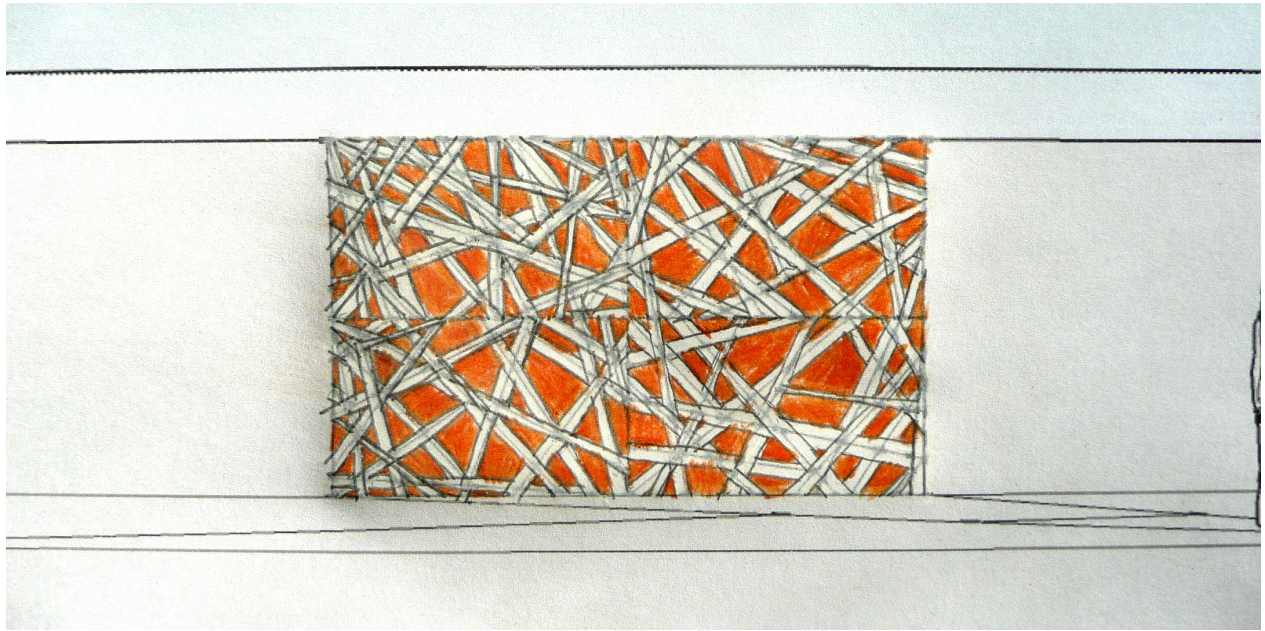
usually less fulfilled. Their story isn't going to fill them as a character in the way they would if you were doing Arthur Miller (where even secondary characters discuss entire back stories and off stage lives). So you need to create that from scratch and use that to choose how they move, posture and speak.

**Q. In addition to directing the show, you also designed the sound. How do you use sound as a director to help guide an audience through a show?**

**Sean:** I think we're saturated in sound. We hear it in movies and commercials, at the supermarket or mall - it's everywhere. In a way silence has become the more unsettling thing... that said I typically use a lot of sound. For me it's transition, mood and environment - certain worlds demand sound for us to leave our everyday lives and embrace what's in front of us. It can invite us in. It takes a lot of focus - there are monologues that work like arias - and I might treat them as such, underscoring them so they lift into something more epic. Sound can direct an actor- I've used it to help set the pace of a scene or speech. It's a collaboration. If the sound isn't melded that deeply in the performance of the actors than why have it?

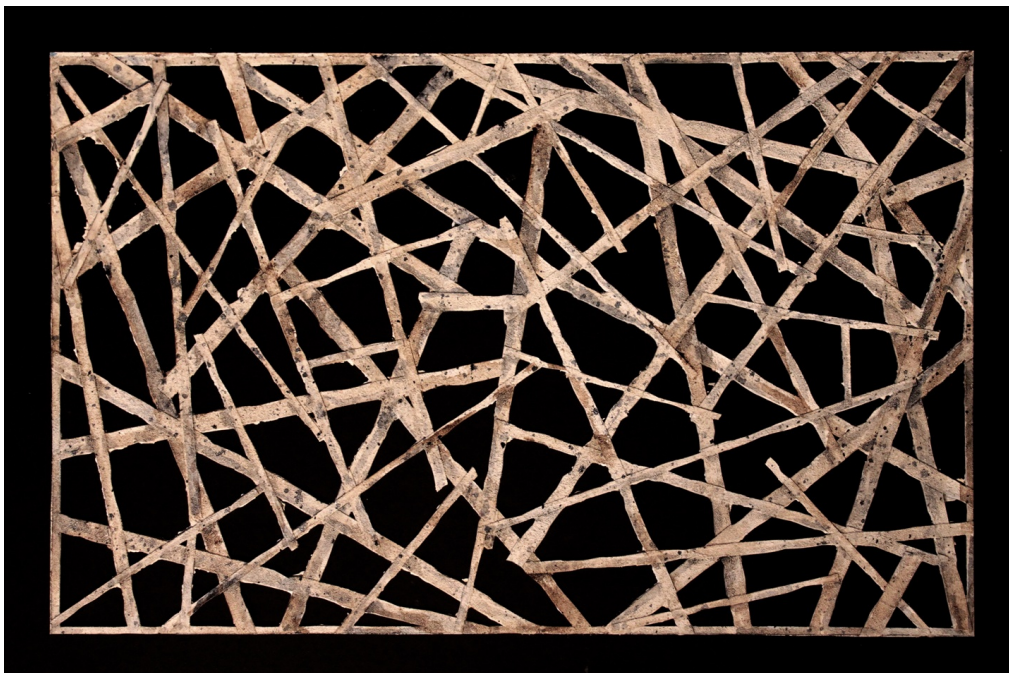
*The Syringa Tree*, for instance, demands a specific environment - the empty stage can be filled by the African drum. We have a perception of Africa that draws up the sunsets we've seen in photos, the plains and safari... Lizzie is a little girl for most of the play and time shifts back and forth toward the end so there's a longing, a gentleness of youth that can be accented with music. Saffron is also a powerhouse actress. In that sense I also know to back off and let her move the show not the sound.

Check out Sean's newest solo show, *Just Kids* at Working Group Theatre's Under Construction Solo Festival, April 23 – May 1.



## Thoughts on the Set Design, by Shawn Johnson

It seemed immediately clear to me that the set should make a real, solid reference to nature and should create an abstracted idea of space to support the play's treatment of the cycle of life and death. My first instinct was to consider the use of organic material. I thought of various ways to delineate space by creating structures out of diverse organic materials (wood, leaves, jute, hemp). In thinking more about structures that might successfully reference death as well as life, I finally settled on a large sculptural backdrop made out of wood. Carved and whittled into an abstract irregularity, the wood could reference living trees and sticks, dead and fallen limbs, and brittle bones. The sculpture could be painted in a way that might refer equally to sun-bleached bones or to driftwood, and reducing it to a static backdrop element while assembling the pieces into something like a nest or a mass blow down would reference both the movement of life and



the stasis of death.