



The Syringa Tree

by Pamela Gien

A Guide to the Play

by Mark Claxton

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How to Use This Guide

This study guide is intended for anyone who would like to enhance their appreciation and understanding of the Globe Theatre's production of *The Syringa Tree* by Pamela Gien. The guide contains background information about the play, but also explores the artistic vision and choices behind this particular production.

When deciding how best to make use of the guide, ask yourself this question: If you were to participate in a backstage tour, would you prefer to meet the actors, see the sets, and chat with the director before the show, or afterwards? That may inform your use of this guide, which is intended at least in part to take you 'behind the scenes' and can serve equally well as preparation for the show or as further exploration after you've already experienced it.

Important note: Some of this guide's content may give you information about the play's plot that you'd rather discover yourself while experiencing the show. If you'd rather avoid any potential spoilers, you might want to wait until seeing the play before reading any further.

Teachers who are preparing their students to experience *The Syringa Tree* can provide them with this guide's discussion questions ahead of time -- or simply allow them to experience the play and then use the questions or other sections of the guide to launch discussion in the classroom. Although it would be helpful for students to have a basic understanding of South Africa's apartheid policies in the latter half of the 20th century, this is not essential to understanding the central themes of *The Syringa Tree*.

I hope this guide is both helpful and enjoyable to read. I welcome your comments and suggestions at markclaxton@sasktel.net.

The Deep Roots of Memory

By all accounts, it was a simple workshop exercise in an acting class that led Pamela Gien to her career as an acclaimed playwright, published novelist, and screenwriter.

The South African expatriate was pursuing an acting career in the United States when she signed up for a class with acting coach/director Larry Moss. When the students were asked to share a childhood memory with their peers, Gien reached back to her upbringing in Johannesburg during the apartheid¹ years. Her story, and the way she told it, so moved Moss that he urged her to get it on paper as a theatre performance.

It was 1996, and the democratic elections that brought Nelson Mandela from a prison cell to the South African presidency were still relatively recent, giving Gien's story an added level of public recognition. She wrote and rewrote, workshopped and re-workshopped, and in 1999 presented *The Syringa Tree* as a one-woman play with A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) in Seattle.

Along with director Moss and producer Matt Salinger, Gien took the play to New York in 2000 for an off-Broadway run that lasted for two years and earned it the Obie Award for Best Play in 2001. By the time the production closed, actor Kate Blumberg had begun performing its New York shows while Gien starred in the London staging and also toured the play nationally.

Today, *The Syringa Tree* is also a novel written by Gien and published by Random House.

1 'Apartheid' means 'separateness' in Afrikaans, the language spoken by descendants of South Africa's original Dutch settlers. The word became the formal name for the South African government's enforced segregation of races. For most of the second half of the 20th century, blacks were not allowed to live in the same areas as whites, and 'coloureds' (those of mixed race) and 'Indians' were also forced to leave their homes for segregated inhabitations.

"It's not the story of apartheid"

Jillian Keiley, director of *The Syringa Tree*, wants to be very clear about one thing: this is a play with themes that go well beyond the politics of South Africa.

"It could be set in any place where oppression or injustice is built into the country," Keiley said during a break from a recent rehearsal. "It's not the story of apartheid, it's the story of how the purest of souls -- these beautiful children -- how they learn racism.

"It's a cautionary tale about how you teach your children, and what they learn."

In *The Syringa Tree*, Elizabeth Grace learns the harsh realities of racial segregation, hatred, and oppression while growing up in the suburbs of Johannesburg.

After being approached by Globe Theatre to direct *The Syringa Tree*, Keiley came to Regina to hold a day-long workshop with 18 young actors. As artistic director for Artistic Fraud in Newfoundland, she is passionate about developing local talent and hoped the workshop would unveil some potential choices for the challenging one-woman performance.

Though she raves about the calibre of talent in the room that day, Keiley was particularly struck by Amy Matysio's improvising and character development.

"There was something about Amy that was just so free," she recalled. "When you're playing a six-year-old, that's what they are -- they're not self-conscious, there's no self-analysis. Amy had that beautiful freedom to just do whatever."

At the halfway point in the rehearsal process, Keiley is thrilled with Matysio's work and pleased with the production's design elements.

"We've got a beautiful lighting plot and a nice set," she said. "Everything is very simple. The music (under the direction of Jonathan Munro) is just piano and drum, a really straight juxtaposition between European sophistication and the bass of the drum, the core of life in Africa.

"Those are two of the things that pull at Elizabeth all the time."

Q&A: Amy Matysio

Q: When and how did you begin preparing for this show?

A.M. I've been reading the text on and off for a year, making it a part of my consciousness. I've never read a script as much as I've read this script. There was a point when I was trying to read it every day. Now, as I'm doing lines and we're into rehearsals, I still try to read long sections of it every day. I've been working on the dialects since December.

Q: How do you go about developing 24 different characters? Where do you find the emotional and mental capacity for that?

A.M. We started with the dialects first. That helped a lot; each character had a voice, and that voice takes on a breath of its own, the breath takes on a body posture, which then takes on a walk, which then takes on a gestural quality. It's like building blocks. You also have to figure out what purpose every character has in the story. Why are they there?

If you really and truly see the person, and you have to, they climb into you and they speak. It's this crazy, trippy adventure, letting all these people have their time.

It's physically exhausting, it's mentally exhausting, and vocally, it's very exhausting. It feels like I'm training for a marathon, because this show doesn't stop. You can't really take a rest, you have to be firing on all cylinders at all times. You have to get your sleep, eat, drink water, and take all the potions you can take.

Q: What kinds of things struck you about this story and script when you first started to read it?

A.M. I was struck by the images of South Africa, how beautiful it sounds and feels, and the completely different lifestyles within the country at the time. That's fascinating. Moliseng and Elizabeth live in the same yard and live completely different lives. They're both just little girls, but one has to hide and the other gets to run freely all over. It's shocking.

The Tree or Not the Tree: Set and Costume Design

While the Syringa tree in Elizabeth Grace's backyard is a central presence, almost a silent character, in Pamela Gien's play, Globe audiences should not expect to share the theatre's space with its majestic trunk and branches.

Although director Jillian Keiley and costume/set designer Jessica Nickel initially considered constructing a tree on stage, they soon concluded that the Syringa tree's most important qualities could be well conveyed with a less literal approach.

Instead, the central element in Nickel's set design is the cracked, dry mud of the South African savannah, represented by painted fibreboard that has been cut into dozens of variously shaped pieces and reassembled like a puzzle on the stage.

The floor's dramatic spider-web patterns, clearly visible to every audience member in Globe's theatre-in-the-round, also recall the complex interweaving of a tree's branches, and could almost double as the vivid shadow of the tree overhead. Between the descriptions of the tree in the script and the presence of Elizabeth's backyard swing on stage, the Syringa tree will be very much present in audience members' imaginations.

Amy Matysio's costume represented another designer's challenge: with no opportunity for an off-stage change, what kind of apparel could facilitate the actor's transformations into 24 different characters?

Nickel began with a basic jumper design suitable for an active six-year-old (Elizabeth's age when the play begins), and then adapted it to follow Matysio's character shifts. Knee-length pant legs, rather than a dress, will help the actor with her male roles. Assorted buttons, pockets, straps, and a cardigan will provide her with tactile senses of character change and help her move into differing postures, stances, etc. In a play that uses no real props, such touches will help Matysio stay in the world she has developed in her imagination.

In fact, the play's rehearsal set was more elaborate than what will appear on stage: at the director's request, Nickel and the stage crew, led by stage manager Kim Bujaczek, furnished the rehearsal hall with a giant water bucket, a simulated sandbox, and plasticine figurines on a miniature set -- all used by Matysio to engage her senses and place herself in Elizabeth Grace's childhood world.

The Syringa Tree, Scene by Scene

The Graces' backyard, Johannesburg, 1963

Six-year-old **Elizabeth Grace** is playing on a swing that hangs from the Syringa tree in their yard. She is joined by a very pregnant **Salamina Mashlope**, the Graces' maid. During their conversation, Salamina reminds Elizabeth not to tell anyone about her baby, as the authorities would send it back to the townships to live with Salamina's elderly mother. Elizabeth upsets Salamina with her cavalier imitations of the Tokolosh, an evil spirit.

Elizabeth's room, 3:00 a.m.

Elizabeth is woken in the dark by her mother **Eugenie Grace**, who tells her Salamina is having her baby and wants her to be there for its arrival.

The servants' quarters, Salamina's room

With the help of Eugenie and **Dr. Isaac Grace**, Elizabeth's father, Salamina gives birth to a girl.

The Graces' backyard

Elizabeth and Salamina share in a celebration dance, naming the baby girl **Moliseng Ellesebett (Elizabeth) Mashlope**.

Late at night, Salamina and her baby hide from the police van patrolling the streets of the white suburb.

Elizabeth's room, night

Elizabeth tells us about her eight-year-old friend Loeska Hattingh, who lives next door and believes the nosy Queen should take all the blacks to England to live with her. Elizabeth is lured outside by the beating of a drum, and discovers the servants in front of a fire. She tries unsuccessfully to hide, and is invited to join them.

Dining room, early evening

Dinner is finished. Salamina and **Iris Kgobane**, the nanny for Elizabeth's new baby brother **John Grace**, are clearing the dishes. Eugenie reminds Iris of the importance of locking the kitchen door and taking the key with her.

Loeska's garden

Loeska and Elizabeth are playing. Loeska, daughter of an Afrikaans church minister, scolds Elizabeth for singing forbidden songs and the English national anthem.

Later, Elizabeth tells of surprise late-night visits from the police, who are searching for household members illegally living in the suburb.

The Graces' backyard

Eugenie tries in vain to coax Elizabeth down from the giant Syringa tree.

Later, Dr. Grace takes Elizabeth for a walk. He tells her of the trouble he encountered that day when he treated a black child in the same room as a white child.

The Graces' backyard

Salamina's daughter Moliseng, now three years old, has ruined the dress worn by Elizabeth's favourite doll. Initially angry and upset, Elizabeth is eventually mollified by Salamina. Elizabeth and Moliseng play a game of 'hide from the police.'

The Graces' living room

As their home is approached by **Dominee Hattingh**, Dutch Reformed minister and father of Loeska, Dr. Grace flees, using a fictitious emergency call as an excuse. Eugenie is left to face the minister, and urgently orders Elizabeth to clean up for the visit.

During the uncomfortable conversation that follows, Moliseng dances into the room. The Dominee asks whose child this is, and Eugenie tells him Moliseng is only visiting for the day.

Later that night, in her bed, Elizabeth overhears her parents arguing about the Dominee's visit. She also overhears the violent arrest of a black man outside.

The Grace kitchen

Pietros, a servant with the Grace family, unexpectedly and forcefully insists to Eugenie that she go back to her own country. Eugenie, shaken, sends Elizabeth to get her father on the phone.

The Graces' garden

Salamina is upset to learn from Elizabeth that the Hattinghs next door have twice seen Moliseng playing outside.

The drive-in

The Grace family watches *Polyanna* at the drive-in.

The Graces' backyard

Loeska has been forbidden by her father to play near the Graces' fence. Lonely, Elizabeth races off to pay a visit to **Mabalel**, the skeleton in her father's consulting room.

Dr. Grace's consulting room

Elizabeth is startled by her mother, who wants her to come bathe and eat. The two are interrupted by a distraught Salamina, who bears news from her cousin **Dubike**: Moliseng, who had been staying with Salamina's mother in Soweto, has disappeared.

The Grace kitchen

Dubike tells Eugenie that Moliseng had fallen ill and was in hospital when she disappeared. When Eugenie learns which hospital Moliseng's family had taken her to, she is frightened and upset and immediately makes arrangements to pay a visit to the hospital. Elizabeth is terrified by this; she knows it is illegal for her mother to visit the Baragwanath hospital.

The driveway

Peter Mombadi, the Grace family driver, reverses the car out of the garage. Eugenie is exasperated to find that Elizabeth has snuck into the back seat, but is in too much of a hurry to fight with her daughter. The three head for Baragwanath Hospital.

It is a terrifying journey through the streets of Johannesburg; Elizabeth has heard from Loeska about whites who have been attacked and murdered for wandering outside their prescribed living areas.

Baragwanath Hospital

With the help of **Matron Lanning**, Eugenie and Elizabeth search unsuccessfully for any sign of Moliseng.

The Grace home

Dr. Grace is enraged that Eugenie travelled through the townships late at night with their daughter.

The Graces' backyard

Elizabeth tells us of Salamina's grief over her vanished daughter -- and of a sudden telephone call from a colleague of Dr. Grace's, offering information about Moliseng.

The Graces' bedroom door

Dr. Grace tells his wife that there is an unidentified three-year-old child at a new blacks-only hospital. The two depart for the hospital. Elizabeth is distraught that her parents have left without her; she is terrified they may be without their passes. Meanwhile, Iris is frightened to find Elizabeth's bed empty late at night.

Outside

Elizabeth has fallen asleep on the outside kitchen steps, and is awoken by Iris just in time for her parents' return. With them is a very ill Moliseng. The household is overjoyed to welcome the little girl home, and the servants have a celebratory dance by the fire.

The living room

Elizabeth and Moliseng are playing. Dr. Grace is enjoying a rare Sunday afternoon at home when he receives a telephone call that stuns him into silence.

Elizabeth's bedroom

A frightened Elizabeth overhears her frantic parents looking for the car keys, and the gun. Later, they are in the car, making a hurried trip to the farm of Elizabeth's **Grandpa George**. Along the way, Elizabeth recalls happy moments spent visiting her grandparents at the farm.

The farm

Upon their arrival at the farm, Elizabeth learns the reason for the sudden and frantic trip to the mountains. Her grandfather has been murdered by a late-night invader of his home.

The Graces' backyard

Soon after Grandpa George's funeral, Salamina suddenly takes Moliseng and leaves the household. **Zephyr**, the Hattingh family gardener, explains to a distraught Elizabeth that Salamina was ashamed by the race-motivated murder of Grandpa George.

Eugenie's dressing room

Elizabeth plays in an old bridal veil and conjures the memory of Salamina, who had always promised to sing her wedding song.

University of Witwatersrand, 1976

Now 20 years old, Elizabeth is a university student while apartheid protests grow in intensity and violence. On the phone to her brother, Elizabeth says she has seen 14-year-old Moliseng Mashlope listed as a casualty of the riots in Soweto.

The Graces' backyard, 1963

A brief memory of Elizabeth and Moliseng playing together.

Johannesburg, 1976

Elizabeth and John, trying to reach Soweto.

Soweto

We see Moliseng shot to death as she leads a force of young protestors.

The Syringa tree

20-year-old Elizabeth has vowed to leave South Africa. She will not tell her parents about Moliseng's fate.

Jan Smuts Airport, Johannesburg

Elizabeth takes one last look at the South African sky before departing for America.

America, the present

Elizabeth receives a letter from her father, now retired and living in the Cape. He is overjoyed at the political and social reforms happening in South Africa, and he urges Elizabeth to return.

Pasadena

Elizabeth, now married and the mother to a baby boy, receives a phone call from her father. He has learned about Moliseng's death from John, and has located Salamina in Knysna. Again, he asks Elizabeth to come to South Africa and see Salamina. After agonizing about the prospect of seeing her country again, Elizabeth flies to South Africa with her husband, **Andrew**, and son, George.

Johannesburg

Elizabeth is reunited with her father at the Johannesburg airport. He reassures her that Eugenia, now in a home for the elderly, is well. Elizabeth and her brother travel to Knysna to find Salamina.

Knysna

At an old farmhouse in Knysna, **Mrs. Biggs** greets her visitors and calls out to Salamina to join them. Salamina and Elizabeth see each other for the first time in nearly 20 years. As John and baby George enter the house, Elizabeth follows Salamina to the farmyard. Elizabeth is overcome with emotion at the loss of Moliseng. Salamina urges her not to cry. "Moliseng she is with us forever, and ever Miss Lizzy," Salamina says. "Forever and ever."

Questions for Discussion

1. With all of the dramatic events that occur in this play, why do you think the playwright named it after the tree in Elizabeth's back yard? What importance does the Syringa tree hold in the story? What do you think it may represent?
2. *The Syringa Tree* was first performed by Pamela Gien as a one-woman play, but has occasionally been produced with a full cast of actors. How do you think your experience of the story would be different if the stage carried up to five people at a time, rather than one?
3. What did you think of Amy Matysio's work in portraying 24 different characters? Which of the characters did you find the most compelling or memorable?
4. South Africa's apartheid policies are a notorious example of government-sanctioned racism. But is racism an issue in our country today? Has it affected you, or your friendships, in any way?
5. While much of *The Syringa Tree* is fictional in its detail, it was based on Pamela Gien's childhood in South Africa and her memories of the sorrows and troubles of apartheid. If you were to write a play based on your childhood, what joyful or sorrowful memories might form the basis for your story?
6. When a play features relatively simple sets and props, the lighting and sound become particularly important in establishing mood and energy. What did you notice or what do you recall about the lighting and sound in *The Syringa Tree*?

For Further Exploration

Books

The Syringa Tree (novel) by Pamela Gien. Published in 2006 by Random House.

The Covenant by James Michener. This enormous novel, published in 1980, came under fire from some academics for oversimplifying South Africa's history. If you enjoy historical novels, though, and *The Syringa Tree* has piqued your interest in that nation's long history of racial strife, *The Covenant* is a fine read. It covers nearly 200 years of history as descendants of the original Dutch settlers wrestle with England and indigenous populations for political and religious power.

Online

<http://audio.theguardian.tv/sys-audio/Guardian/audio/2006/06/13/antoinette.mp3>

On June 16, 1976, black students in the Johannesburg township of Soweto organized a protest march that escalated into prolonged, bloody rioting when students were shot and killed by police. By the time the uprising had calmed, several dozen blacks and whites were dead (and some claim the death toll was in the hundreds). 12-year-old Hector Pieterse was one of the first to be shot, and this photograph of his dying moments became an iconic image of the Soweto riots. In the audio clip referenced above, Hector's sister Antoinette (pictured here alongside her brother) recalls a day that started out "like a normal day."

