

Coming of age - The Martha's Vineyard Times

7-9 minutes

Ready for some time travel? “Angela’s Mixtape,” on stage at the Martha’s Vineyard Playhouse, transports audiences back several decades to a moment in history with eerie echoes forward into the present. Themes of the fight against racism, economic inequality, and oppression are as alive now as they were then. The central theme, the painful and confusing quest for identity, is timeless.

The 2009 autobiographical play by actor, singer, composer, and writer Eisa Davis traces her growing-up years in 1970s Berkeley, Calif., youngest in a family of strong, feisty, opinionated, and unconventional women, all inspired by her activist aunt, Angela Davis.

This is not your usual coming-of-age drama, slogging through the years one after the tedious other. Instead, Eisa’s narrative, as realized by director Adrienne Williams, creates a brilliantly visual, musical, and emotional “mixtape,” spinning and swooping among the years, blending spoken lines with dance moves, music, and songs from soul to disco to protest anthems to tell the story.

First the present, now a flashback, now a fast-forward, then we

land back again at the play's present time and place — a comfy, simply furnished, hippy mama household in that West Coast college town during its peak as a hotbed of political protest.

Music, dancing, zippy dialogue, and poignant, biting one-line musings keep this vibrant 90-minute marathon moving.

Disoriented? Better not to even try to hold on. Scenes shift deftly, flowing into each other ingeniously with the addition of a prop, a line from a song, a few steps, a quick turn.

By the same magic, characters morph into new players just by donning a scarf, jacket, shades, raising their voices, changing body language.

But Eisa herself stays Eisa herself throughout her rocky journey from childhood to awakening. The problem? She has no idea who she is.

But along with the usual challenges of growing up — negotiating school, friends, boys, hormones, body image — young Eisa hauls extra baggage. Who was her father? What about her Aunt Angela? And how does her personal life fit with the charged chaos of revolution and protest that surrounds her?

From the minute they boogie onto the stage like a sparkling flash mob, this dynamic five-woman cast captures audience members and brings them along for the ride. Viewers may feel that they are not only watching Eisa's story, but are caught up in the intense momentum of her life with all its twists and turns, ups and downs.

Jules Latimer is simply remarkable as Eisa, brilliantly ageless, or every age. Shifting chronology with movements, facial expressions, and asides both hilarious and heartbreaking, she's

a youngster playing on the floor, eavesdropping on grown-up conversations, now a preteen discovering boys and her musical talent. Next she's a bright but awkward high schooler struggling to fit in but not sure where, then a jaunty college kid, Harvard grad, would-be actress, still grappling with uncertainty about her identity.

Curiously, we viewers know all along; we sense her inner strength, recognize her gifts, feel her anger and vulnerability. We want to tell her she is fine, special, not defined by those around her, that her music is important, that she can get acting jobs, that all will work out. But these are lessons she must learn herself, and it will take hard work.

As Mommy, April Armstrong is the quintessential overbooked woman, determined to do it all but making sacrifices along the way. She pays some attention to Eisa, though often on the run. It's never enough for the girl, who feels the emotional abandonment through her life.

"My mother doesn't notice me," Eisa complains, sensing her mother's distraction.

Mommy mixes maternal duties with her political fervor, her passion as a civil rights lawyer, and her own womanly wants and needs, without a drop of time or energy to spare.

The stolid, strong — if eccentric — family matriarch Grandma, played by Nora Cole, delights the audience with her mugging, lofty pronouncements and hippy ways. She may teach yoga, grow pot, sunbathe naked in the yard, but she has unswerving faith in God. She tells young Eisa to turn to the Lord, not awfully

useful advice among all the other messages, directives, and judgments bombarding her.

Sarin Monae West's Angela, for all her popular notoriety as a wild revolutionary, comes across as calm, collected, thoughtful, well-mannered. She seems more like a medieval anchoress than a fiery political prisoner. Standing apart from the action, she's a beacon of sanity and a safe refuge amid the tumult of protests, family dynamics, and confusion swirling around Eisa.

"When I'm sad I go to Angela's or play the piano," Eisa reflects. "Angela's house is full of women who care for me and help Angela. They don't treat me like a child at all."

She and Angela are like pals, sisters, mother and daughter. They both love purple, and mirror each other, tall and slender in tight leggings, flowing T shirts, short curly hair. Angela offers Eisa a puppy, teaches her to drive. But the famous Angela, the one on the posters whose name everyone recognizes, remains a mystery to her niece.

She may be in prison, but Angela is front and center, in conversations, memories, family photos, or "Wanted" posters, her face projected on a screen at center stage.

Erin Roche as Cess, Eisa's cousin, never fails to make her sassy presence known. She walks by singing to grab Eisa's attention, and gives her a riotous lesson on how to sing gospel. She is sharp and catty in the persona of Eisa's high school classmate, shrill when she demands over and over, "Are you mixed?"

Born Angela Eisa Davis, Eisa uses only her middle name to be an individual. It's a futile effort, as strangers discover who she is,

and her family won't let her forget.

Political protest drives this household that operates in crisis mode. Eisa is dragged to demonstrations, raises her fist for Black Power, waves placards, joins in chants. But really she would rather go to her music lessons. Questions about her father plague her: Who was he? All black or mixed-race? Alive or dead? Good or bad? Mommy will divulge nothing; Eisa can only imagine how his identity impacted her own.

Nor is she sure about Angela. Not until she finally reads about her storied relative does she begin to understand. And not until she feels strong enough to demand the truth about her father from Mommy can the pieces of her identity puzzle begin to mesh. Hard work, but she is determined.

“Angela’s Mixtape” is a wild ride in a time machine, a tough story told with love, humor, and wisdom. And for all its struggle and pain, it’s a great and uplifting night out with a group of unique and talented women.

Hearty applause for scenic designer Lisa Pegnato whose detailed decor quickly tells us where we are and when; for choreographer Toni Cohen who, with additional choreography by Jules Latimer, kept those bodies moving to the beat; and for the West Tisbury Congregational Church’s Bill Peek, who directed the spirited soundtrack.

“Angela’s Mixtape” runs Tuesdays to Saturdays through August 11 at the M.V. Playhouse. Visit mvplayhouse.org for more information.