

# PERFORMANCE

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she says. In "The Syringa Tree," the characters talk to each other and interact. They're men and women, black and white, ranging in age from 3 to 83. One character, Elizabeth, is portrayed at 6, 14, 20 and 36.

"It sounds confusing. It's not," Flannagan says. "(While watching,) people forget it's just one person on-stage."

"The Syringa Tree," written by Pamela Gien, is set in South Africa during apartheid. Flannagan describes it as a "beautiful, amazing journey through three generations of living in apartheid, before and after, and the human bond."

Flannagan, an actor from New York City, portrays this multitude at Naples' Sugden Community Theatre on Monday and Tuesday, May 7 and 8. The Naples-based Neighborhood Theatre Company produces the play. (Flannagan and her husband, New York director Steve Ditmeyer, are both founding members of the company.)

Flannagan's been involved with the play for three and a half years, performing it at the Periwinkle Playhouse and BIG Arts on Sanibel. When she performed it at the Naples Park Area Association Building three years ago, the run sold out. People put their name on a waiting list in hopes of obtaining a ticket. Recently, Flannagan enjoyed a five-week run in Fort Lauderdale with the Broward Center for the Performing Arts.

The Neighborhood Theatre Company is bringing it back to Southwest Florida because of the high demand for the show.

"We've sold out two separate runs of the show," Flannagan says. "Word of mouth is the best advertising we have. People will come to see it and then tell their friends not to miss it."

## If you go

**>>What:** "The Syringa Tree"  
**>>Where:** The Sugden Community Theatre, 701 5th Avenue South, Naples  
**>>When:** Monday and Tuesday, May 7 and 8  
**>>Cost:** \$35  
**>>Information:** Call (239) 263-7990

It's not uncommon for crowds to gather at the stage door after the show to talk with her. People tell her, "You have changed my life."

"Mostly, the women start crying (because they're so moved)," she says. "That says it all to me. That's what theater is about, making people feel, making people have a cathartic experience and come out of the other end of the play and feel a weight lifted from them."

Flannagan describes the play as "fun and horrific," but, she says, it ends on a hopeful note. "You're left with a sense of hope and understanding," she says.

Pamela Gien, a native of Johannesburg, South Africa, wrote "The Syringa Tree". The play, which began as an acting exercise, is based upon her family and experience. It tells the tale of two families, one black, one white, living in South Africa during apartheid. Gien performed it at Playhouse 91 in New York City for almost two years, breaking all box office records there, and The Village Voice gave it an Obie Award for Best Play of the Year. Gien recently published a novel based upon the same material.

"The Syringa Tree" uses a minimal set and has no costume changes, which in lesser hands would be a deadly recipe for a boring night at the theater.

But Flannagan, who's worked with actors such as Alec Baldwin, Judith Ivey and Tony Randall, is absolute magic on stage.

"No props, really no set, and no cos-

tume changes - it really is just a canvas for the audience to paint on through me," Flannagan says.

"It's a very individual experience when people come. Your take on the play, other than the main storyline, is a creation of your own, in your own mind. You dress the people and visualize the people. That makes the play that much more compelling."

She's asked people to describe the characters to her after a show, and the descriptions differ wildly.

Portraying dozens of characters while alone, on-stage, is a major acting challenge. But Flannagan is more than up to the task, dynamically changing her voice, her cadence, her stance, with each character.

She saw Gien perform the play in New York in 2000.

"I was stunned. I didn't know what to expect," Flannagan says. "In the first few minutes, I thought, 'Wow!'"

Her husband leaned over to her during the curtain call and said, "You can do this."

Ditmeyer wound up directing her in the role.

"Every time I come back to this play I find deeper elements of the characters," Flannagan says. "I grow each day as a being, as an artist, and what the audience comes in with, they come in with their experience and what has happened to them that day."

And it all combines to make a unique night at the theater.

"When I'm acting on stage, I feel the audience's empathy, compassion and humor," Flannagan says. "The audience is part of the cast in this play. Their energy feeds my energy. That's in any play, any audience. Even when they're quiet, I know they're with me. When I first started performing, I used to think quiet audiences were not following the play. Then I realized that they're the ones trying to get every word and everything out of it." ■

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<b>SAT</b>	May 5	7 to 10pm	Frank Torino, Mr. Las Vegas!!
<b>SUN</b>	May 6	7 to 10pm	Al Holland, Former member of the Platters!
<b>MON</b>	May 7	6 to 8 pm	Car Show!
<b>TUE</b>	May 8	7 to 10pm	Night with the Stars! With Frank Torino!
<b>WED</b>	May 9	7 to 10pm	Paradise Duo! Featuring Frank Torino & Kathy!



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