

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Etienne Sisters

Ché Walker with songs by Anoushka Lucas and additional songs by Sheila Atim

Theatre Royal, Stratford East

10 September–3 October 2015

“Family ain’t all it’s cracked up to be” sing the three women in Ché Walker’s new 90-minute play.

Sisters Tree and Ree’s mother has died. It’s no surprise—“she’d been dying for a while, piece by piece, breath by breath”—but it is quite a shock when estranged half-sister Bo turns up at the funeral. They haven’t seen her for five years and it is not an easy encounter.

Tree, who calls her a jellyfish, loathes her but Ree is talked into letting Bo stay with them. The play then presents the fluctuations in these sibling relationships as readjustment is ruptured by the results of Bo’s dodgy dealings with a dangerous drug world.

The writing is expressive and lively, often feeling like poetry and sometimes turning into song lyrics that continue the narrative. But it is largely narrative: often direct address to the audience, with very little action except for their sororal arguments. Even a dark, melodramatic moment is more described than enacted, though throughout grainy grey projections of participants in the story, striking lighting and atmospheric music create a dramatic engagement.

Although the song lyrics develop naturally from the other text and the settings are effective, they sometimes slow down the tempo. The piano score, splendidly played by Nikki Yeoh, adds much to the production but the emotional need to break into song was not always present. It might have been just as, if not more, effective to have just spoken against the accompaniment.

The style is often formal with characters coming forward to speak to the audience and embracing the pianist at their world piano, but when there is interaction it is naturalistic.

Nina Toussaint-White plays supermarket till attendant Tree, eldest of the sisters, who has learned to show a firm face to the world, hiding a hurt that has created her coldness. Jennifer Saayeng is sister Ree, of whom Tree is so protective, suggesting both the somewhat cowed character of someone who is treated as a child incapable of running her own life, while also showing her emerging confidence.

Black sheep Bo gets a sometimes rather frantic performance from Allyson Ava-Brown with just a hint sometimes that she could be a user. These are three powerful performances that hold the audience, so keeping interest in a play that is less a plot than a study in the emotional tides of their relationships.

There is fine writing here and Ché Walker, as director, provides a theatrical format that disguises the lack of dramatic action.

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)