

**PITCH LAKE PRODUCTIONS & BLACK THEATRE LIVE**

# **SHE CALLED ME MOTHER**



**2015 UK TOUR  
PRESS & AUDIENCE FEEDBACK**

# TOUR

Thurs 8 - Sun 11 October,  
**Stratford Circus** (World Premiere)

Wed 14 October, 8pm  
**The Trinity**

Thurs 15 - Fri 16 October, 8pm  
**The Lighthouse**

Sat 17 October, 7.30pm  
**Upstairs at the Western**

Tues 20 - Wed 21 October, Tues 7.30pm, Wed 1.30pm  
**Theatre Royal Margate**

Thurs 22 - Fri 23 October, 7.45pm  
**Key Theatre**

Tues 27 October  
**Bickerton Village Hall** with Cheshire Rural Touring Arts

Thurs 29 - Sat 31 October, Thurs to Sat 8pm, Sat 4pm, post show Q&A Fri  
**Unity Theatre**

Wed 4 November  
**Artaud Theatre**

Thurs 5 - Fri 6 November, 8pm  
**Derby Theatre**

Sat 7 November, 3 & 8pm  
**Belgrade Theatre**

Wed 11 - Thurs 12 November, 7.30pm,  
**Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds**

Fri 13 - Sat 14 November, 8pm  
**The Lowry Pier**

Wed 18 November, 8pm  
**The Witham**, supported by Highlights North Rural Touring

Fri 20 - Sat 21 November, 7.30pm  
**Queen's Hall Arts**

## ON TWITTER:

-  Still reeling from [@PitchLakeProd](#) sensational performance of [#shecalledmemother](#) w/ [@CathyElizaTyson](#) on sat night. Tremendous production!
-  So [#SheCalledMeMother](#) was terrific last night. Great job from all involved.
-  Cathy Tyson a triumph in [#SheCalledMeMother](#) [@TheatreRoyalBSE](#) Woke up this morning still thinking about it More from [@BlackTLive](#) please
-  [#shecalledmemother](#) [@BelgradeTheatre](#) [@ChereenBuckley](#) [@CathyElizaTyson](#) Powerfully performed & just so accurate & beautifully done [#MustWatch](#)
-  [#SheCalledMeMother](#) [@DerbyTheatre](#) refreshing, thought provoking with stunning performances from both. GO AND SEE IT ON TOUR.
-  Saw the truly excellent [#SheCalledMeMother](#) at [@Bruneluni](#) last night. Phenomenal production. Thanks [@cathytyson1965](#) [@MichelleInniss7](#)
-  [@CathyElizaTyson](#) your stunning emotional performance [@StratfordCircus](#) this evening had be on my feet. Outstanding. [#shecalledmemother](#)
-  Heartwarming story that stays with U long after you've seen it! Grt show & lovely storytelling [@CathyElizaTyson](#) [#SheCalledMeMother](#)
-  Thanks [@PitchLakeProd](#) [@CathyElizaTyson](#) for a stunning & powerful opening show of [#SheCalledMeMother](#) & a great Q&A w/ writer Michelle Inniss
-  Terrific one-act evening [@StratfordCircus](#) with [#TaraArts](#) [@CathyElizaTyson](#). See the tour. [#SheCalledMeMother](#)
-  Truly moving and real performance [@cathytyson1965](#) and a stupendous first play from [@MichelleInniss7](#) Go See [#shecalledmemother](#) [#hardhitting](#)

## AUDIENCE COMMENTS:

'I thought it was one of the best bits of theatre I've seen for a long while.'

'a brilliant, rewarding and engrossing 90 minutes and those of us present truly enjoyed and savoured the experience.'

'It was a wonderful performance and our audience were thoroughly engaged and positive about the experience.'

'Inspired, it was such a captivating performance.'

'We lived in Trinidad for 2 years and it brought back many memories of life we enjoyed there, and the challenged of moving from one culture to another.'

'Profoundly moved, uplifted and in awe of the performance. So brilliantly acted by both actors.'

'Attending this community event makes me feel part of the community and wider community of actors and directors working across the county.'

'Nostalgic...but I also recognise the deeper issues of moving between cultures and differences of generational attitudes because we have lived with our family both in Britain and in Trinidad.'

'A stunning performance! Thank you!'

'Beautifully written piece and great and sensitive acting'

'Excellent production; poignant story'

'Good show, as always. Brilliant. Made me cry.'

## REVIEW OVERVIEW

**EVERYTHING THEATRE** - <http://everything-theatre.co.uk/2015/10/she-called-me-mother-stratford-circus-arts-centre-review.html>

**THE LONDONIST** - <https://londonist.com/2015/10/she-called-me-mother>

**BARGAIN THEATRE** - <http://bargaintheatreland.com/she-called-me-mother-stratford-circus-london/>

**BRITISHTHEATRE.COM** - <http://britishtheatre.com/review-she-called-me-mother-stratford-circus-arts-theatre-4stars/>

**BRITISH THEATRE GUIDE** - <http://britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/she-called-me-m-stratford-circu-12134>

**EXEUNT** - <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/she-called-me-mother/>

**LONDON THEATRE1** - <https://www.londontheatre1.com/news/118377/she-called-me-mother-review/>

**PUBLIC REVIEWS** - <http://www.thereviewshub.com/she-called-me-mother-lowry-theatre-salford/>

**THE STAGE** - <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/she-called-me-mother-review-at-unity-theatre-liverpool-impressively-moving-debut/>

**THE GUARDIAN** - <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/13/she-called-me-mother-review-cathy-tyson-michelle-inniss>

**AFRIDIZIAK** - <http://afridiziak.com/theatrenews/reviews/october2015/she-salled-me-mother-by-michelle-inniss.html>

**CULTURE PULSE** - [http://issuu.com/culturepulse/docs/culturepulse\\_issue\\_34](http://issuu.com/culturepulse/docs/culturepulse_issue_34)

## EVERYTHING THEATRE – SARAH JEFFCOATE (4 STARS)

*'The phenomenal acting talent of this remarkable duo is inspiring. Michelle Inniss' ability to tell such a moving story as this is particularly impressive... this company is definitely one to watch.'*

Following the resounding success of their first mid-scale tour of *Macbeth*, Tara Arts and Black Theatre Live are back with Pitch Lake Productions' impressive new play, *She Called Me Mother*. Beginning their UK journey at Stratford Circus Arts Centre, the performance explores the subject of homelessness in an emotional and inspiring way. For a topic so despairing, this play is well and truly moving, and not at all what I was expecting.

Inspired by author, Michelle Inniss' encounters with a homeless woman in London Bridge Station, *She Called Me Mother* introduces us to the story of Evangeline Gardner. As the play opens, she sits on her borrowed chair, selling copies of a homeless magazine, waiting impatiently for her 'Black Swan' to visit, who reminds her so much of her daughter. 70 years old, and so far from her childhood home in Trinidad, she tells of her life: of her estranged daughter, Shirley, and her fraught relationship with her husband, and of all the events that have led her to where she is now. First and foremost, this is a play that really speaks to my humanity. We can all sympathise, but it feels as though homelessness has become just another part of life, and we're often guilty of hurrying past those sitting on the street without a second glance. *She Called Me Mother* does an incredible job of humanising the issue, reminding the audience that everyone has a story and everybody comes from somewhere; no one starts out homeless.

Considering the less-than-cheery content, I was wary that the play might come across as preachy and a little morose. Perhaps it would have done had it not been for the incredible two woman cast. BAFTA-nominated Cathy Tyson commands the audience's attention as Evangeline. Her warmth and ease on stage makes it impossible not to feel for her. Her hope of one day seeing her daughter again, combined with her matter-of-fact view on the lows in life are incredibly moving. Perhaps a little less lively, but equally poignant, Chereen Buckley has the audience hanging on her every word as she recounts Shirley's upsetting childhood stories. The script and story are impressive, but a lesser cast would not have done it justice. Juxtaposing the warmth of Evangeline and her Trinidadian dialect, which has such a comfort about it, the staging of the cold, built-up station was very well thought-out. Intermittent train announcements worked well to break up what could have been quite a monotonous piece. The fluorescent strip lights that occasionally illuminate the stage do a particularly good job of altering the mood, making you realise that some things have to be viewed in a harsh light, even though you may not like it.

The performance itself was brilliant, but unfortunately the sold-out performance meant that the audience was really crammed in. Despite being one of the first to arrive, I ended up with only half a seat, mercifully on the end of the row. Nevertheless, it was rather difficult to concentrate towards the end. As this is a touring play, this won't be an issue for every performance, but sadly for this space, 90 minutes with no interval is a little too much for my aching back to bear. Playing at Stratford Circus until 11th October, this is one to catch on tour if you can.

The phenomenal acting talent of this remarkable duo is inspiring. Michelle Inniss' ability to tell such a moving story as this is particularly impressive. This is Pitch Lake Productions' first small scale tour, and if it's anything to go by, this company is definitely one to watch.

## THE LONDONIST - LETTIE MCKIE (4 STARS)

*'told with humour, wit and wisdom'*

How does somebody become homeless? What does it mean to live for years in a country that isn't home? What happens when your home isn't safe any more?

These are some of the questions asked in Black Theatre Lives' new touring production *She Called Me Mother*, starring Cathy Tyson. Evangeline is a 70 year old homeless Afro-Caribbean woman who sits in London Bridge station selling a homeless magazine. Every day she hopes to bump into her estranged daughter, Shirley (Chereen Buckley). Tyson's performance is marvellous, giving voice to a character with a heartbreaking but all too familiar story to tell.

Living in her memories Evangeline slowly reveals herself to us, the writing (by Michelle Innes) conjuring up an image of Trinidad that will give those who've never been a rare insight of its everyday culture. Evangeline talks in the Trinidadian vernacular describing her childhood barefoot on the sand, her cooking in mouth-watering detail and eventually how she came to leave the tiny island for a bigger one, the UK. Throughout the play the tug of her home on her consciousness is clear to the audience and rendered more poignant as, every so often, announcements remind us of her cold place on a faceless London Bridge platform.

The play sensitively deals with some extremely hard and uncomfortable topics, challenging the audience to remember that homelessness, domestic violence and child abuse not only exist but are common. Evangeline's monologue is far from grim however; her story is told with humour, wit and wisdom.

The play, inspired by Innes's real life encounter with an Afro-Caribbean homeless woman, gives a marginalised person centre stage in the re-telling of her own life. Although their eventual chance reunion seems implausible we are a captive audience as Evangeline and her daughter talk for the first time in years. Will they be able to put their differences aside and find peace?

## BARGAIN THEATRE – ANDREA WHITE

*'an absolutely beautiful script. It's full of imagery; it's funny. It distils complex emotions into punchy monologues and it gradually builds two rich and realistic characters, who will remain in your mind after the play ends'*

Michelle Inniss, writer of *She Called Me Mother*, has put together an absolutely beautiful script. It's full of imagery; it's funny. It distils complex emotions into punchy monologues and it gradually builds two rich and realistic characters, who will remain in your mind after the play ends.

Inspired by conversations between Inniss and a homeless woman she met outside London Bridge station, *She Called Me Mother* tells the story of Trinidadian Evangeline (Cathy Tyson) and her estranged daughter Shirley (Chereen Buckley). Evangeline's wit and spirit instantly warms you to her. Her humorous commentary on the city commuters and vivid descriptions of her life in Trinidad are particularly endearing.

Evangeline's story is revealed gradually over the course of the play. From the start, there are hints of the harsh circumstances that lead her to the streets. These clues are subtle enough not to give the story away, but they lay a seed in the audience's mind. You are already unconsciously working out what happened – and already wishing it weren't true – before the whole truth is revealed. When Shirley appears, we already have an inkling of how Evangeline's abusive husband Rodney disfigured both women's lives. But Shirley tells us details that Evangeline has tried to suppress. The damage Rodney inflicted on Evangeline and Shirley – how he manipulated them, stifled their potential and made them think they couldn't escape – is made obvious without being explicitly spelt out. It is testament to Inniss's skilful writing that she manages to portray the character's complicated psychological trauma through well-chosen stories and clever turns of phrase.

Cathy Tyson and Chereen Buckley give intelligent performances that do justice to their characters' harrowing stories. Tyson moves seamlessly from dark humour to sadness to anger and back again. Her performance is entirely believable and very engaging. Buckley also pitches the emotion of her performance perfectly. She manages to convey both Shirley's fragility and astonishing bravery without making the character seem contradictory. Far from it, Buckley perfectly balances Shirley's emotional damage with her natural strength.

It is easy to become very invested in the characters and long for their reconciliation as much as they do. So, there's a lot riding on the last scene, where Evangeline and Shirley finally meet again. Fortunately, director Cara Nolan has put this scene together very well. It is finely balanced, mother and daughter inching towards each other, then slipping away again.

Sound designers Kerri Mclean and Harry Johnson also deserve credit for their effective sound score. As well as occasional announcements from London Bridge station, we also hear the sounds of bustling London or sunlit Trinidad, which nicely enhance the atmosphere.

The play is perhaps a bit too long and drags a little in the middle, but overall, *She Called Me Mother* is a great piece of new writing.

## BRITISHTHEATRE.COM – MATTHEW LUNN (4 STARS)

*'a thoughtful play, beautifully and compellingly performed'*

There is a great deal to admire about *She Called Me Mother*, a play which gives a voice to the homeless and victims of abuse. In the programme notes Michelle Inniss, the playwright, explains the inspiration for her protagonist, a 70 year old Trinidadian immigrant named Evangeline Gardner: "Evangeline's character was inspired by a homeless woman I spoke to over a period of a year from 2006-2007. She sold the homeless magazine, *The Big Issue*, in London Bridge station. Instead of calling her aunty, which is a mark of respect for an elder in the Afro-Caribbean community, I unwittingly called her "mother". Her eyes lit up and she smiled."

Inniss goes on to explain how her regular interactions with this woman caused her to question how she had lost her home – what had come before, and where were her loved ones now?

Evangeline (Cathy Tyson) lives a simple existence – every day she waits for a woman called Teresa, who reminds her of her estranged daughter, Shirley (Chereen Buckley). Teresa's daily kindnesses fill Evangeline with warmth, yet she is filled with frustration and regret. Pacing around the stage, she ruminates how Shirley's stubbornness should have warned her that she would leave, before softening as she remembers her own happy childhood in Trinidad. Memories unfurl and soon she is talking about her husband Rodney, who "liked a drink", and we begin to guess why Shirley left. When Shirley enters the stage, occupying a space separate from Evangeline's, her monologues elucidate how she was affected by her father's behaviour, and how her parents' sins are visited on her troubling relationship with her partner, Daniel.

Inniss does a tremendous job of utilising unseen characters, with rich and visceral dialogue that gifts the protagonists' memories remarkable clarity. Characters' hands and eyes are given particular focus. Shirley remarks on the disquieting safeness she felt at holding her father's hand, when she'd "seen what it could do", while Evangeline is brought to a moment of grandmotherly ecstasy when she holds Teresa's children's hands. Evangeline recalls that Shirley's eyes were "black and defiant", contrasting how Shirley speaks of her parents' eyes succumbing to faraway looks that belied their marital troubles.

The parallels between Daniel and Rodney are slightly overstated, and the inevitable final act encounter between Shirley and Evangeline was a little drawn out, but the play is otherwise impressively constructed. At 90 minutes, Inniss widely avoids lingering on particular memories for too long.

Instead, like Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, the fluctuating emotional tenor of recalled encounters sends the narrative in extraordinary directions. In this respect, Kerri Mclean's sound design is invaluable, with dispassionate announcements at London Bridge station contrasting the excited remembered movements of a Trinidadian forest. Peter Small's lighting is, in turn, simple and effective, often serving to highlight the ever changing distance between Inniss's characters. The final scene, in which the set is bathed with a heavenly glow, made a meaningful contribution to a pleasingly ambiguous ending.

Cathy Tyson delivers an affecting performance in the central role, bitter as the cud, but with a twinkle in her eye. There is great humour to her interpretation of Evangeline, and she often had the audience rocking with laughter – not least with the impeccably delivered sentiment that "My mother wouldn't fart on cotton for [Rodney's] mother to smell". Tyson is also unafraid to let Evangeline's flaws shine

through, shedding light on Shirley's feelings of betrayal through exhibitions of naivety and occasional self-absorption. Although Tyson's delivery was sometimes a little uncertain, she is a commanding stage presence, and treats Evangeline with dignity even in her least sympathetic moments.

Chereen Buckley is a tremendously likeable Shirley, and it is heartbreaking to hear upbeat descriptions of life after leaving home deteriorate with a depressing inevitability. Many of the revelations about Rodney's abuse come from her, and much of her dialogue is dedicated to exploring the fractured relationships she has with all the important people in her life, through no fault of her own. Consequently she is given far less room for emotional manoeuvre than Evangeline; the effect that domestic abuse has had on her is unrelentingly stark. Nevertheless, Buckley stands out for the subtle ways in which she explores Shirley's emerging empathy towards her mother's plight. The fact that Shirley's treatment at Daniel's hands brings her closer to Evangeline is treated as more than simply perverse; her world-weary demeanour is qualified by a growing sense that she must find some sort of peace with her past. As Evangeline notes, "It's funny, no matter how far you walk, the memories never leave you".

*She Called Me Mother* is a thoughtful play, beautifully written by Michelle Inniss and compellingly performed by Cathy Tyson and Chereen Buckley. The play's exploration of memory, especially when examining the development and deterioration of relationships, makes for a highly visceral experience, with an ending that is open to a number of intriguing interpretations.

## BRITISH THEATRE GUIDE – HOWARD LOXTON

*'Cathy Tyson gives her a vibrant personality that makes this performance compelling'*

Evangeline is an aging Trinidadian lady who sells *The Big Issue* at London Bridge Station, her belongings beside her in a shopping trolley. There is a lady she calls the Black Swan, now regular purchaser. When she first bought an issue she called her not *auntie*, the usual West Indian way of addressing elderly ladies, but *mother*. She gave her £3 and said keep the change, and a string of people afterwards did the same.

Now she often stops by as she passes through the station and Evangeline looks out for her. Not for the money but for her smile, "big and open, like the Trinidadian sun", for the way she treats Evangeline like a real person and because she reminds her of her own daughter.

Daughter Shirley left home: walked out and never came back. Just as Evangeline did, except she left it until her husband dropped dead (just in time to stop her from being his murderer). Michelle Inniss play tells us both parts of their family story.

At first it is just Evangeline, speaking directly to the audience with an openness she would never dream of using to strangers in real life. Daughter Shirley appears when she begins to think about her, though Evangeline says she "try not to tink about she too much, 'cause de pain dem thought bring it like a herd of buffalo runnin' wild in a field, an' I beneath dem foot."

Theirs is a moving history of domestic violence, unfulfilled dreams and child sex abuse: of two women both with the wrong man; but while devout Evangeline suffers what she thinks is the Lord's will, her daughter took action. A younger generation sees duty differently while her mother saw her marriage vows binding "til death do us part."

This Evangeline is no weakling; she has come through a tough life and Cathy Tyson gives her a vibrant personality that makes this performance compelling. There is no wig or heavy make-up to make her look older; she relies on performance, on the way that her face expresses pain and loneliness, to create her aging. The script and her voice catch the Trinidadian accent, favoured with a few vernacular phrases, but all is still completely comprehensible to a UK audience.

Amelia Jane Hankin's abstract tubular setting emphasises Evangeline's isolation and its screening layers allow her daughter to hover like a memory behind them until she turns up in real life. Peter Small's lighting adds extra awareness and location is effectively conjured up by station announcements that sound designer Kerri McLean makes sound absolutely authentic.

Chereen Buckley plays Shirley, past hurt still present despite her confidence, but there is a realistic toughness about the way writer Michelle Inniss and director Cara Nolan handle their meeting that prevents it from becoming sentimental.

*She Called Me Mother* is the second show to tour under the umbrella of the Black Theatre Live consortium of 8 regional theatres, led by Tara Arts (London), which is committed to effecting change for black, asian and ethnic minority (BAME) touring theatre. Pitch Lake Productions is a brand new company formed by Cathy Tyson, Cara Nolan and Michelle Inniss which is based in Nottingham; this is its first production.

## EXEUNT – VERITY HEALEY

*'[the] writing is rich with poetical imagery and Trinidadian dialect and showcases a talent for wit and comedy at the most tragic moments'*

"She called me mother" is both a greeting from a female stranger towards homeless Trinidadian Evangeline at London Bridge Rail Station and an unspoken accusation from Evangeline herself towards her long estranged daughter Shirley. The implied accusation and the meaning of what it means to be a mother underpins the whole of this poetically-charged play by Michelle Inniss as we are left wondering, when Evangeline finally finds the daughter who ran away from the family home on her 16th birthday, whether she ever wanted to have Shirley in the first place and if Shirley can possess enough compassion for her mother to forgive her for her past mistakes.

The familial battleground upon which the mother and daughter's fractured relationship is fought out is set against the backdrop of exported Trinidadian culture and religion. The island is almost a third character, the emphasis is on the emigres who left the West Indies and came to Britain for a better life, or who were recruited to help run our transport system, postal service and hospitals. Evangeline and husband Rodney failed to make their lives a success though and Rodney's rum-soaked disappointment and empty presence haunts the stage as much as he lives in Shirley's traumatised past. But if the "sins of the father" casts as long and as cold a shadow as the metal cage-like set by Amelia Jane Hankin – a reference perhaps to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – so does Evangeline's religious puritanism with its catholic drive. Her beliefs save but also damn her, at least in Shirley's eyes.

In my notes, I had written, rather absentmindedly, "Beware the Jane Eyre complex". Evangeline was sure she could change her husband Rodney from his erroneous ways – at least initially. Michelle Inniss' skill is to enable us to see that it is exactly that arrogant belief and zealous urge – coupled with the idea that one "must bear one's cross" – that allowed and convinced her to stay within such a miserable and disturbed marriage. The audience is allowed to see what Evangeline can't: that she hates Rodney. But for her to come to that realisation herself? She can't quite. Michelle Inniss also skilfully exploits the generational and evolutionary gap which pushes the two women away from each other and pulls them back together again. Shirley refuses to accept, perhaps even understand, her mother's passivity. But although she can access her inner anarchist much better than Evangeline, she makes almost the same mistakes as her mother, as if it is within her DNA.

As Evangeline, Cathy Tyson taps into a mad volcanic energy that lurks just beneath her restrained surface appearance. She is like a modern version of Jean Rhys' Jamaican Antoinette Cosway in the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her madness seeming not just to come from years spent as a homeless woman, but also from her skewed abusive marriage. In contrast, Chereen Buckley carries none of that cultural heritage or mythology. As Shirley, her surface character implies a different kind of madness, of the kind we are much more used to: silent suffering where "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (Thoreau). But as Buckley will show us, her adolescent years and past traumas are not buried that deeply. Whilst Michelle Inniss' writing is rich with poetical imagery and Trinidadian dialect and showcases a talent for wit and comedy at the most tragic moments (which had some of the audience splitting their sides with laughter) it feels as if Evangeline and Shirley's confrontations sometimes contain an absence of truth. They shock each other, but what's really at stake between these two does not seem to quite fulfil its potential onstage. The ending does allow us to see that they narrowly avoid returning to the inertia of the situations they have both come from, but we are left wondering how long for in Cara Nolan's intensely directed production.

## LONDON THEATRE1 – TERRY EASTHAM (5 STARS)

*...an absolutely superb story which cannot fail to move anyone lucky enough to see it...  
The combination of superb writing and truly amazing performances from two fantastically  
talented actresses make this an awesome show that will stay with me for a long time.'*

Something like 1 in 3 marriages these days end in divorce. It's a sad statistic but it goes to show that for some people, the marriage vows are not as permanent as they could be. However, for others, those vows, stated before God, are immutable and no matter what occurs, their marriage will remain whole – 'till death do we part'. This a theme which playwright Michelle Inniss explores superbly in *She Called Me Mother* currently playing at Stratford Circus.

In an arch under London Bridge station, Evangeline (Cathy Tyson) is selling the Big Issue. Evangeline is no stereotypical homeless person, she is an elegant lady. Her clothes may be tatty and dirty but there is a grace and style about them and her demeanour is one of welcoming happiness, savouring the sights and sounds around her, rather than a sullen resentment at the place where her life has taken her. The reason for this is made clear fairly quickly. One of the recent purchasers of her magazine, was a young lady about who, Evangeline says "*she smile was big and open, like the Trinidadian sun*" and who had called Evangeline 'mother'. This pleased Evangeline so much as it had been many, many years since her own daughter Shirley (Chereen Buckley) had called her that as, following a major row, she walked out of the family home forever.

Evangeline talks to the audience directly, explaining her life back home in Trinidad with her husband – a very traditional man who believed a woman's place was in the home and that home was his castle where his word was law. It was the husband that insisted the family move to England and the husband who decided it was time for Shirley to leave her mother's side and go to school, and it was the husband who felt that he could do whatever he wanted with his possessions, all of them. Through all of this Evangeline has stood by her wedding vows, even to the point of causing an estrangement between her and Shirley. Shirley herself has a story to tell and the two characters take it in turn to relay their own lives to the audience, the highs and the lows, until the fateful time when the ladies meet once more.

In *She Called Me Mother*, Michelle Innis has written an absolutely superb story which cannot fail to move anyone lucky enough to see it. The story itself is complex in its simplicity and it would be so easy for those watching to judge Evangeline and offer her advice on what she should do, but at the same time, you know it would be pointless. Evangeline has her belief in God combined with a moral code that she lives by and nobody is going to shake that out of her no matter how dark things get in her and her family's lives.

Designer Amelia Jane Hankin keeps the set simple, a scaffold box with lights hanging down, a chair in the middle and an old fashioned wheeled basket next to it. Evangeline's clothing hints at a former grandeur whilst Shirley is dressed in a simple and contemporary manner, everything is muted but correct.

Similarly, Director Cara Nolan does not move the actresses about too much, which considering Evangeline's age and occupation makes a lot of sense but also means that the audience can concentrate on the dialogue delivered by two absolutely outstanding actresses. I will be honest and

say I was slightly worried before I arrived as I had read that the play was being delivered in the Trinidadian vernacular and was afraid I would miss some of it. I needn't have worried as, even without the helpful dictionary in the programme, Cathy Tyson conveyed every word and emotion of the script beautifully.

I loved Evangeline from the first moment to the last and was amazed at how articulate and intelligent the character was – an example of my own unconscious bias at its worst I'm afraid – and Cathy was simply amazing at bringing her to life and making her such a believable person that I could hear members of the audience agreeing with some of her observations and home spun wisdom. Chereen Buckley was a perfect foil to Cathy. Starting gently in the background, Chereen told Shirley's story in a simple and highly effective way, talking through her life after leaving her parents, at times repeating and learning from her mother's life and when the two of them met up I for one was cheering inside at the thought of the two ladies being finally reconciled. However, the ending itself took me completely by surprise – even though with hindsight it made perfect sense – and left me a complete emotional wreck.

To summarise, *She Called Me Mother* was an absolutely brilliant show. The combination of superb writing and truly amazing performances from two fantastically talented actresses make this an awesome show that will stay with me for a long time.

## PUBLIC REVIEWS – IAIN SYKES (3 STARS)

*'Tyson's powerful emotional connection with the audience is palpable as she stalks the stage in this intimate setting'*

*She Called Me Mother*, Michelle Innis' new play for recently formed Pitch Lake Productions, brings the issues of homelessness and domestic violence sharply into focus. The play certainly has star quality with BAFTA and Golden Globe nominated Cathy Tyson joined by Chereen Buckley in what promises to be a powerful one-act two-hander and, up to a point, the play delivers its promise.

On a set of stark scaffolding and strip lights and with only her chair and wheeled shopping bag for company, Tyson is Evangeline, the elderly homeless lady selling her magazines in London Bridge Station who recalls her long lost daughter in her encounters with a regular customer, her "black swan" with the smile like the Trinidadian sun, a character based on a real-life encounter of the writer. Tyson's powerful emotional connection with the audience is palpable as she stalks the stage in this intimate setting, almost daring audience members to break eye contact with her while talking directly of her life and experiences in Evangeline's Trinidad and Tobago dialect.

It's a challenge for the younger Buckley as her daughter, Shirley, to match Tyson's power but, match it she does in her own scenes direct to the audience, recalling her own experiences as they unfold. Through great writing and acting her story seems more jolting as she presents a smiley facade even as you begin to realise what she's been through.

These scenes, the intimate one-on-ones with the audience are the highlight of the play and allow the people watching to really get inside the characters feelings. It could be because these scenes carry such an effect that the final section of the play, without that direct contact, although leading to a fittingly moving conclusion, feels somewhat laboured and lacking in the pace and attachment that director Cara Nolan has injected into the earlier parts. But this is a promising debut production both for Pitch Lake Productions and writer Innis, showing that they're both names to keep an eye on in the future.

## THE STAGE – NIGEL SMITH (3 STARS)

*'impeccable performances... impressively moving'*

Cathy Tyson last appeared on a Liverpool Stage in Bright Phoenix, as a homeless woman with her life in carrier bags. She returns with her own company, Pitch Lake Productions, again as a homeless woman, but here carrying the main narrative of this first play from the pen of her schoolfriend Michelle Inniss.

Inspired by conversations Inniss had with a Big Issue seller at a London railway station, the play opens up Evangeline's memory of her life's journey from Trinidad to the station platform, and reunites her with lost daughter Shirley (Chereen Buckley), who shares some dark memories with her mother.

There is much weighty material here, with both domestic and child abuse adding to a broader story addressing far more complex cultural issues, but the writing is always honest and direct and never becomes patronising.

Tyson and Buckley have heavy demands in solo dialogue, rarely in direct conversation, and both deliver impeccable performances. For Evangeline, Tyson has meticulously studied the Trinidadian dialect, and Buckley's Londoner Shirley is a strong foil to her when the two finally converse directly. But Buckley's character is by no means secondary, the pair having too many parallel life experiences for comfort.

Played out on a skeletal set of scaffold poles, rope and sand, with a lighting plot delineating the boundaries of memory and reality, Inniss' script explores challenging territory without ever preaching to her audience. A little more pace could have tightened up the approach to the closing pages but the overall effect is impressively moving.

## THE GUARDIAN – LYN GARDNER (3 STARS)

*'it has a big heart and the use of the Trinbago vernacular is richly effective'*

Evangeline, played by Cathy Tyson, was born in Trinidad and came to England with her young husband shortly after they were married. She still hankers after the hot sun and the smells and tastes of the land of her birth. When success eluded her husband, and he became ever more bitter and disappointed, she wanted to return. But his pride stopped them.

Now he's gone and Evangeline is reduced to sitting day after day at draughty London Bridge station selling copies of the Big Issue, a frail figure with a ramrod-straight back and a faded elegance. She survives on the kindness of strangers, and when a passing young woman calls her "mother" the memories of her own lost daughter, Shirley (Chereen Buckley), come flooding back. But a question surfaces in Michelle Inniss's play: was it the daughter who abandoned her mother or the mother who abandoned her daughter? And are the mistakes of the past always doomed to be repeated?

Tyson has had a long career working on TV, in films including *Mona Lisa*, and more recently with theatre-maker Chris Goode on shows including *Monkey Bars* and *Stand*. This show is the first with a new company, Pitch Lake, which Tyson has founded to address the lack of leading roles in British theatre for black and minority-ethnic mid-career actors, women in particular.

It certainly gives Tyson a meaty part. She succeeds in lending sympathy to Evangeline even as it gradually emerges that her devotion to the two men in her life – her husband and God – have had an adverse impact on the life of the daughter who walked out of the family home as a teenager when her mother refused to recognise the truth of what was happening to her.

This is a debut play and it often shows, particularly in the awkward plotting and the way that it can't quite confront Evangeline's culpability. But for all its flaws it has a big heart and the use of the Trinbago vernacular is richly effective, lending it poetry without a hint of prissiness.

Cara Nolan's production is a trifle stilted and hampered by an ugly design, but this is an evening that brings different and distinctive voices to the stage and Tyson and Buckley ensure that you always want to find out whether rapprochement is possible for these two damaged women

## AFRIDIZIAK – MICHAEL SCOTT-HARDING (3 STARS)

We first meet 'Evangeline Josephine Gardner' (Cathy Tyson) selling newspapers at London Bridge Station. She is an older black woman of advancing age, wandering focus, and – until very recently – no fixed abode.

How did she get here? What is her story? She seems happy enough to tell us. As she starts her first monologue, we get the impression of her having been down-and-out for some time. Despite – or maybe because of - her fragile mental-state, she seems somewhat accepting of her situation; as she continues talking, we begin to understand why.

We hear her tell tales of life with her mother back in Trinidad, of her husband ('Rodney') here in England, of her existence on the street, and – most importantly - of her love (turned to neglect and abandonment) for her long-lost daughter, 'Shirley' (Chereen Buckley).

It is this daughter that appears in the flesh after about 20 minutes and who tells her side of the story, first in monologue form then - as the stakes get higher – as a counterpoint to Evangeline's outpourings.

We hear how Shirley - having been abused by her father from the age of 13 -finally confides in her mother (Evangeline) the day before her 16th birthday. Unfortunately, her mother, having been beaten into submission for many years, doesn't – or cannot – believe her daughter. So starts a chain of events that includes Shirley leaving home, becoming embroiled in a similarly abusive relationship, and having 2 children; on Evangeline's side - it culminates in her literally walking away from her former life (and all its attendant memories) in favour of a life on the street.

It is story about 'shame', and about not having the vocabulary - emotional or otherwise - to let go of it. In the last scene, we get the longed-for meeting/reconciliation between them. Interestingly enough, by the time it arrives, most of the information has already been gleaned, making the expected emotional catharsis seem slightly muted.

Both ladies are good in contrasting roles. Miss Tyson does a lot of the 'heavy lifting'; her monologues are both denser and longer and - while she does a creditable job - the play comes alive when Ms Buckley interacts with her. This is partly due to the fact that 'Shirley', although emotionally ravaged, is – unlike 'Evangeline' – still quite sane (thus giving the audience a more relatable presence with whom to empathise).

The set and sound designs – evoking London Bridge Station - are deceptively simple, intriguing, and effective, while the lighting is similarly complimentary.

This is a story of surviving – and breaking free of – physical and sexual abuse. It is about the repeated abuse of females by men, and the stories that many women tell themselves – or indeed drown out – before they can break these cycles.

It is a play concerned with recognising the 'sins of the fathers', and the crosses of the mothers in order to avoid further suffering (of children and adults alike).

It is story about 'shame', and about not having the vocabulary - emotional or otherwise - to let go of it. It is a story worth telling and – for the most part - it is told well.

## *She Called Me Mother*

A Review  
By Lena Pamphille

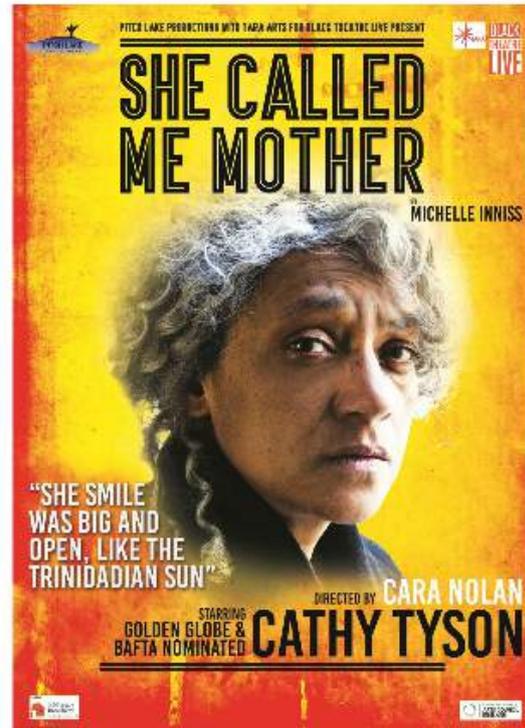
What defines the character of our existence? Is it the end of faith? Permission to laugh? Murder or the power in the thought of it? Is it a healing process? I'm certain that these were some of the questions that the audience and I were left to ponder on after the thought provoking performance by Cathy Tyson.

'*She Called Me Mother*' is about the heartache, reconciliation, and healing. A subject and place, where, though many are aware of most don't care to tread. This is especially so within the ethnic Caribbean Diaspora. The belief in God, God alone

will take care of it above all 'ah tell yuh, leave it tuh him'. About how hoping for a rare occurrence to bring absolution. Believing that the universe will grant our requests in itself is a phenomenon.

Looking at the vicissitudes of how and what we pay attention to? Is the mother totally immersed in self without compassion for the other, and the daughter vice versa? '*She Called Me Mother*' was full of metaphors, unexpected humour and profound emotional truths. Who left whom to wait at the bridge of life, for the transition to the spirit world?

Well captured is the Caribbean vernacular, Tyson was magnificent in the character of the first person giving primacy to the concept that things are not real until observed. More so is the gaze that would unlock the prison of loneliness, hate and deprivation. The child in the adult – child-



adolescence-adult and sand play which are rather warm, visual and therapeutic.

The beneficent gaze that, the daughter (Shirley) yearns for, and demands that her mother looks at her. Again, how do we measure validation? – **herstory** describes it as opaque, that black box of cause and effect and the mysterious pause in trying to determine which event produced what effect.

There are several archetypes depicted in *She called Me Mother* including the theory of the black swan is the focal theme explaining what may seem to leave the many questions unanswered in reference to certain kinds of rare and unpredictable events and human tendencies to find simplistic explanations for these events retrospectively. This is exactly how the piece unfolds. The healing absolution sought from the highly improbable yet believable outcome.

For the mother, fear becomes curiosity, complex become simple, chaos is

unfolding and the secret is revealed. And the expectation that everything would return to normal.

Repeatedly punctuated by ‘anyhow or let’s not talk about that’ least we uncover what’s cooking in the pot, a metaphor meaning that the story continues but saying we won’t go there as yet creates a sweet suspense; The notion of coming of age an expected restoration to the time before a separation and its transitions from loss of innocence to old age. The protagonist then becomes the daughter who blames the mother for the cause of her struggles and strengths.

The redeeming power of a mother’s gaze could contain the transgenerational contagion that can create a lot of healing. For mother and daughter is the idea that we are separate but equal – or culturally conditioned. The Caribbean intrinsically has a moral system based on Victorian values and the now generation follow no model but have the courage that their parents did not possess. The third generation didn’t adopt that same model of punishment and sacrifice, therefore everything gets exposed. The rules of our societies repress the unconscious and complexes develop producing the societal shadow and stigma and talking out and seeking help not just from the great Architect, but from others nearby.

Social themes such as the bliss of domesticity masking the issues and secrecy of domestic violence and abuse among Caribbean families are hard to swallow. However the audience is put in the position perhaps to reflect on how these may have impacted on their lives or that of someone they know. At some point you find yourself hoping for a favourable outcome through the uneasiness of the subject matter being addressed.

*She called Me Mother* triggers our thoughts on the prison we set up for

ourselves and others; of kindness and compassion and the question of whose reflection can we see in the mirror.

The cast in some invites the audience to be the analysts following **herstory** and picking out the archetypes. As well as holding that space for the protagonist, we journey through in understanding the contents of that little bag that we carry with us. What a burden it becomes.

The cultural code by which human survive influences on the surface, behaviour, music, food, and attitudes. We leave behind imprints, memories, pain, beliefs about life, marriage and death.

The audience in the role of analysts are caught in empathy and stirring of varying emotions – shame, guilt, reparations, helplessness. The quality of the pain for want of a better term is as much physical as it is mental, there is a parallel in causing anguish, but at whom is it directed.

Overall, *She called Me Mother* highlights the complexities of the unconscious and the stigma of mental illness thereby appealing to our connection with others.

#### *She called Me Mother*

At selected theatre houses across the country until 21<sup>st</sup> November 2015

For further information on theatre near you visit: [www.blacktheatrelive.co.uk](http://www.blacktheatrelive.co.uk) or [www.pitchlakeproductions.com](http://www.pitchlakeproductions.com)