

Hard work is in her DNA

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Theater Review

1 In "Informed Consent", a thoughtful and engrossing play by Deborah Zoe Laufer, a research scientist specializing in genetic diseases finds herself embroiled in controversy when her fierce dedication to her work, and her deeply personal reasons for pursuing it, lead her into murky ethical waters.

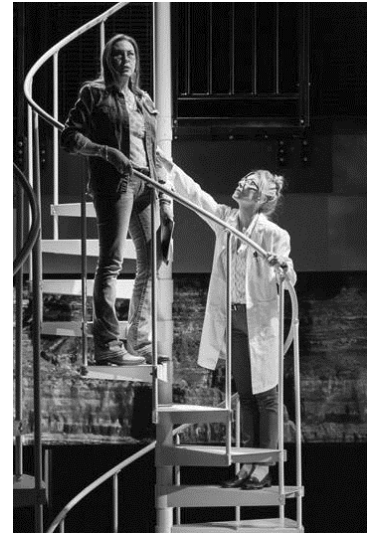
2 Jillian, played with take-no-prisoners intensity by Tina Benko, is a genetic anthropologist whom we first meet in a rare moment of repose. She's writing a letter to Natalie, her young daughter. Trying to cast what she has to say in child-friendly terms, she begins on a storybook note: "Once upon a time ... There was a mother. Who had a monster sleeping inside her."

3 Realizing that this is perhaps a little too scary, she discards the idea and, at the urging of voices inside her head, tries a softer approach. "There was a mother who loved her little girl so much," she writes, "that she would do anything to save her." An ominous voice from the chorus chimes in, "No matter who got hurt."

4 The play, which opened on Tuesday at the Duke on 42nd Street theater, a co-production by Primary Stages and Ensemble Studio Theater, then moves back in time, to Jillian's years at university in Arizona. Here she preaches (directly to us, whom she jokingly calls her "cousins") for the wonders of genetic science with the fervency of an evangelical preacher. "Now that we can trace our genome, we're finally able to read the greatest story ever told," she says with excited awe, "the history of our species, written in our cells. All of the things we see as 'race' are about migratory patterns," she adds. "Race is a 'myth'".

5 Jillian's enthusiasm, and her obsessive dedication to her work, earn her the professional equivalent of a lottery win: Ken (Jesse J. Perez), a social anthropologist, enlists her aid in trying to help a Native American tribe in the Grand Canyon that has displayed alarming levels of obesity-related diabetes.

6 The tribe has only 670 living members, so the matter is of some urgency, and the tribe members' isolation from the world makes them an ideally uncorrupted gene pool, which thrills Jillian. (The play was inspired by real events.)



- 7 During this conversation, we also learn that Jillian hopes to ultimately specialize in Alzheimer's disease research. The reason is personal: Her mother died in her 30s with early-onset Alzheimer's. Jillian knows that she has probably inherited the gene mutation that caused it, and may have passed it along to Natalie.
- 8 "Informed Consent," directed by Liesl Tommy ("Appropriate") at a lightning-quick pace — a reflection of Jillian's race against mortality — unfolds the story of Jillian's eventually contentious interaction with the tribe and its representative, Arella (played with moving gravity by Delanna Studi), as well as with Ken and the university's dean (forceful Myra Lucretia Taylor). The director and excellent cast smoothly handle the play's complex structure, with narration and choral commentary slipped into dramatized scenes.
- 9 The first step in the study, obtaining blood samples, proves a battle because the tribe's members believe their blood is sacred. Jillian persuades Arella — her translator and the only tribe member who speaks English — to intervene and convince as many members as possible to give up their blood, which she duly does.
- 10 And here's where Jillian's dedication to finding the key to the epidemic of obesity (beyond dietary matters) becomes corrupted by her belief that the study could lead to other genetic discoveries. Without giving too much away, I can say that her interest in exploiting the data for all its potential uses runs into conflict with Arella's — and Ken's — understanding that she was authorized to use it only for the diabetes study.
- 11 Staged on a handsome set by Wilson Chin that wittily uses a quartet of staircases in the same general shape as DNA spirals, "Informed Consent" has some speechy moments. But it raises provocative questions about the potential conflicts between scientific discovery and religious beliefs.
- 12 Advances in science, Jillian firmly believes, are sometimes controversial. "They think we single-mindedly do experiments, know what we'll find, and then we get the answer," she says. "But real science is in the mistakes."
- 13 "Informed Consent" is a reminder that some mistakes must be paid for.

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