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# Family ties

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BY JIM CARNES



Nathalie Autumn Bennett (right) swells with emotion in the role of Eva Rutland.

## When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story

Wed 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm.  
Through 4/28; \$17-\$40; Sacramento Theatre Company, 1419 H Street, (916) 443-6722, [sactheatre.org](http://sactheatre.org).

**Eva Rutland was a remarkable woman. A published author and well-situated member of the “black elite” upper middle class of Atlanta, she left that comfortable life in the segregated South to move with her husband Bill and their four children to Sacramento and the promises of the Golden State.**

What her family faced here was—in some ways—worse than what they had fled. At least in the South you knew what to expect and what was expected of you. You didn’t in the nominally integrated California of the 1950s, and that took some accommodation.

When Bill, a serviceman who took a position as a civilian administrator at McClellan Air Force Base, wanted to buy a home for his family, he was refused because of his color. Eva, finding a white friend willing to assist, found a way to get a piece of land where the family integrated the then-all-white South Land Park area by building a four-bedroom, three-bath home. Despite difficulties and disappointments, neither she nor Bill was going to retreat. You stay and fight, always fighting for fairness, freedom and a better life for the family.

Eva Rutland wrote *When We Were Colored: A Mother's Story* to document that resilient life. Her daughter Ginger, a remarkable woman in

her own right (a broadcast journalist who served for 25 years on The Sacramento Bee editorial board) has turned her mother’s story into a loving tribute and a fascinating bit of Sacramento history. Shifting in time and place from 1950s Sacramento to the 1940s in the South, the story is enhanced by family photos projected onto the back of the stage to illustrate some key events. They add a journalistic integrity to the story, at the same time illustrating the family’s life journey.

Director Stephen Eich, who worked with Ginger Rutland for a year-and-a-half to ready the play for production, shows a fondness for Eva’s spirit as well as an appreciation for the opportunities to present a piece of theater that is neither acrid nor acrimonious but is comforting and heartening.

An excellent cast portrays Eva and the Rutlands through several decades. Michael J. Asberry delivers a strong performance as Bill—funny, firm and strong-willed but smart enough to bend to the (stronger) will of his wife. Nathalie Autumn Bennett both physically and emotionally inhabits the role of Eva, convincing whether as a young wife and mother or aged and blind, waiting to be reunited with her love. (The real Bill died in 2005 and Eva died in 2012.) Brooklynn Solomon plays Ginger Rutland, the engaging narrator and memory-wrangler of the piece, while Abisola Forrester and Lauryn Taylor-Piazza share the role of “Little Girl,” which includes portraying granddaughter Eva. Elizabeth Ann Springett and Steven Ross Thomas play several roles throughout the play.

**Despite difficulties and disappointments, neither Eva nor Bill was going to retreat.**