

Guthrie's 'Native Gardens' is a 'Carol Burnett' sketch with a message

Dominic Papatola, July 23, 2017

Peter Ustinov once said that comedy is simply a funny way of being serious. I think maybe playwright Karen Zacarias might have had that in mind when she penned "Native Gardens."

The new comedy on stage at the Guthrie Theater is not a structurally complex piece of work: Tania and Pablo Del Valle move into a trendy Georgetown neighborhood, and are warmly welcomed by their next-door neighbors, Frank and Ginny Butley. The new folks have purchased a fixer-upper, including a back yard that's seen better days, which sits next to the old guard's immaculately cultivated flower garden. Further conversation and investigation reveals a philosophical disagreement over gardening techniques, and a practical dispute over the location of the property line.

If you're thinking this sounds like an old-school farce, you're not far off. Here are the contemporary wrinkles: The Del Valles, are young, Democrat and Latino. The Butleys, are old, Republican and white. And so the micro-dispute about fence-lines and horticultural techniques becomes a proxy for a story about bridging other differences.

Zacarias is a facile writer who can highlight and discuss issues of racial and generational discord without letting them hijack the piffle of a plot. As the two husbands are arguing about whether Frank's non-native plants are "immigrants" or "colonists," for example, Frank accuses Pablo of "botanical xenophobia."

On scenic designer Joseph Tilford's lovely set on the Guthrie's McGuire Proscenium stage (you can practically smell the geraniums), director Blake Robison strikes a nifty balance between serious cultural discourse and "Carol Burnett Show" goofiness. As Frank and Ginny, Steve Hendrickson and Sally Wingert come off as genuinely kind neighbors, who also are genuinely patronizing and have an acute sense of entitlement.

Playing Tania and Pablo, Jacqueline Correa and Dan Domingues convey youthful enthusiasm, energetic ambition and sense of moral certitude that matches that of their neighbors (when her husband accuses her of being judgmental, Tania shoots back: "Me? I'm not judgmental. Just informed.>").

The laughs flow freely — this is one of the funniest shows to hit the Guthrie stage in the last few seasons — but while you're laughing, you can't help but think: All the characters in "Native Gardens" think of themselves as intelligent, rational people who want to do the right thing. But everyone's idea of what's reasonable is blinkered by their self-interests, their sense of identity and their



Sally Wingert and Steve Hendrickson
(photo by Dan Norman)

inability to hold their tongue at a critical moment. What separates the Del Valles and the Butleys from most of the participants in American political or social conflict these days is that they keep trying...however awkwardly, however imperfectly, even after conflict has become ridiculous.

Zacarias' happily-ever-ending resolution is fueled by a convenient event of parenthood and handily skips over the difficult conversation that finally resolved the backyard quarrel. But that dramaturgical quibble is beside the point: I'm not saying that "Native Gardens" is a play that can save us from our current ugly morass of civil discourse and inability to talk about race and other difficult issues. I am saying it's a step in the right direction.