

## Guthrie's 'Native Gardens' is the best stage comedy of the summer

Rohan Preston, July 26, 2017

There's a moment in "Native Gardens," Karen Zacarías' smart comedy about a culture clash between neighbors in Washington, D.C., when a long-established white couple get legal advice with shocking implications. Their best defense in a property dispute with their new Latino neighbors is to argue that they have squatters' rights.

The thought stops the upper-crust Butleys in their genteel tracks. Semiretired bureaucrat Frank (Steve Hendrickson), who cultivates a European-style garden as a de-stressor, and his defense-contractor wife, Virginia (Sally Wingert), sniff and screw up their faces as they look at the unkempt yard of Tania and Pablo Del Valle (Jacqueline Correa and Dan Domingues).

It's one of the funny twists in "Native Gardens," a 90-minute comedy that's getting a delightful Guthrie Theater production by director Blake Robison. He commissioned the play from Zacarías — a popular Mexican-American playwright whose work has not previously been produced in the Twin Cities — and directed the 2016 premiere at the Cincinnati Playhouse.

Although this one-act tackles weighty historical issues with a broad, sitcom-style approach that owes more to "I Love Lucy" than "Hamilton," the creative team has seeded it with so many jokes and insights that it's easily this summer's comedy winner.

On the surface, "Gardens" is about a passion shared by the play's two families on a weekend when the world is pressing in on them. The Butleys' yard is about to be judged by the gardening club. And the Del Valles, who prefer native plants, are hurriedly



Steve Hendrickson, Jacqueline Correa, Dan Domingues and Sally Wingert (photo by Dan Norman)

getting their yard ready for a barbecue for colleagues from Pablo's law firm.

But on a deeper level, Zacarías addresses stereotypes and environmentalism, and the notion of who belongs in the United States. The Del Valles are constantly mistaken for Mexicans, even though he's from Chile and she's from a family that's been in New Mexico since it was part of Mexico (the border crossed her family, not vice versa).

"Gardens" has a superb cast, anchored by Twin Cities stalwarts Wingert and Hendrickson. She imbues her pantsuit-ed doyenne with all the righteousness and sweetness you'd expect of a privileged woman genuinely unaware of her ignorance. Hendrickson gives Frank a similar likability, and textbook-sharp timing.

New York imports Correa and Domingues are good matches for the Guthrie veterans. Correa is assertive and empathetic, showing us the balance Tania strikes between firmness and respect for her elders.

Domingues also is confident and appropriately tone-deaf in a timely show that takes a witty, fresh look at neighbors struggling to live harmoniously and respectfully with each other.