



Native Gardens

Arthur Dorman, July 28, 2017

We never see the native garden described in botanical detail by Tania Del Valle, a very pregnant PhD candidate, in *Native Gardens* Karen Zacarias' of-the-moment comedy of manners that has taken root on the McGuire Proscenium Stage at the Guthrie. Tania and her husband Pablo, an ambitious attorney, have just purchased a badly neglected home in a gracious historic Washington, D.C. neighborhood. Calling it a "fixer-upper," they intend to restore it to mint condition like next door neighbors Frank and Virginia Butley's home. But Tania is most excited about turning the ugly, overgrown backyard into a garden, with flowers and shrubs that are native to the region, to attract and sustain native insects and support native birds, with the broad, healthy oak that spreads over the yard as its centerpiece. It will be in total harmony with the natural ecology of the Potomac valley.

Tania's dream garden is a contrast to the Butleys' formal English garden, groomed with precision, abloom in flowers that are not native to the region, but thrive beautifully thanks to Frank's loving care and application of plant food and pesticides. Frank and Virginia have lived in their home for decades and are thrilled to have a nice young family living next to them. And they feel totally okay about having Mexicans living next door—though, Tania points out, her family has long roots in the U.S., having lived for centuries in New Mexico, while Pablo is from a wealthy Chilean family. As for a native garden, the Butleys can't see the beauty of a garden composed of plants they consider to be weeds, and they insist that the messy old oak tree, forever dropping leaves and acorns on their yards, needs to be cut down.

Okay, the new neighbors have different backgrounds and tastes, but it looks like they'll get along fine. Then Pablo is cornered into inviting his entire law firm to their home for dinner this coming weekend.



Steve Hendrickson, Sally Wingert, Jacqueline Correa and Dan Domingues

With their house in no shape for entertaining Pablo's new bosses, Tania suggests having the party in their yard. That gives her a week to call in landscapers and install her native garden. They also will replace an ugly, broken chain link fence, put up by the former owner, with a handsome wood fence. That is one change Frank and Virginia wholeheartedly support. In fact, Frank suspects that the gnarled fence looming behind his garden is the reason he has always lost the neighborhood garden club award to his arch rival. His joy turns to grief when a surveyor plotting the new fence reveals that the Del Valle's deeded property extends two feet past the old chain link fence—right into the middle of Frank's beloved garden. Frank and Virginia are aghast. They had no idea! Or did they?

From this springs forth a battle of wills between the Del Valles and the Butleys that spirals beyond all reason. These four decent human beings, who all consider themselves good people trying to be good neighbors, cannot reach a compromise, for each is certain he or she is right. Their disagreement becomes a springboard for moral high-horsing and threats, legal and physical. Zacarias strikes a vein of comic gold as the two couples lose all perspective and the fence-line debate becomes a battle over all kinds of political and social choices.

There is a problem with all of this, namely that the situation is as artificial as the flowers in the stunning garden set designed by Joseph Tilford. First of all, what kind of sap lets himself be pushed into inviting the entire office to the wreck of a house he just moved into, with his wife working on the defense of her PhD dissertation, just weeks away from having a baby? Even if we believe Pablo would do this (he claims he felt it was a "test"), would strong-willed Tania go along? And if we give them both a pass and accept this situation, could these four very intelligent, well-meaning people, all of whom highly value being good neighbors, not come up with a civil solution? Of course they could have, but then we would have been deprived of Ms. Zacarías' barbed wit, and Blake Robinson's sprightly direction of an ace cast. So roll past the disbelief, and on with the fun, say I.

Sally Wingert as Virginia Butley and Steve Hendrickson as Frank Butley are both perfect, and perfectly matched. Wingert's Virginia is a tough as nails gal who has learned to inhabit the upscale life but not lost the crass edge of her working class roots. When she learns that Pablo is the only Hispanic in his law firm, she gasps, "Oh, are you the token?" before telling him "don't let them call you that, it's very degrading." In Wingert's hands, lines like that are scaldingly funny. Hendrickson's Frank is a man-child who unofficially has ceded head of house duties to his wife, while investing himself in his garden like a kid obsessed with video games. His depiction of Frank's barely contained emotional breakdown over the fence line's threat to his garden is both hilarious and touching.

Jacqueline Correa plays Tania as smart, idealistic and good-hearted, yet tough when her principals are challenged. She delivers the comic edge in her character and is very believable portraying the physical aspect of near-term pregnancy. Dan Domingues brings out Pablo's focus on making partner and their house's property value over neighborly relations, yet like Frank, he too seems to be masking a boy within the ambitious man, as when he admits to Frank and Virginia that he likes their



formal garden, though sheepishly looks over his shoulder to make sure Tania is out of earshot.

Joseph Tilford has designed a gorgeous set, featuring the rear façade of two identical urban homes, one in peak condition, the other looking ready for demolition; one with a perfectly geometric, color coordinated garden, the other with a yard of weeds sprouting out randomly among bare patches of ground. Xavier Pierce's lighting design moves us from day to night as time passes, leading up to the deadline for installing the new fence, (though in one scene, the dialogue tells us it is Friday afternoon, but the dim lighting suggests the sun has nearly set). Kara Harmon's costumes capture each character's essence, from Virginia's stylish woman of a certain age to Tania's overalls torn at the knee, from Frank's pastel plaids and chinos to Pablo's sharply tailored legal-eagle suits.

Karen Zacarías is among the most prolific of Latina playwrights, and *Native Gardens* makes me eager to see more of her work. It is not a deeply profound play, as the core conflict depends upon a far-fetched premise and the unlikely failure on the part of these characters. But given that those are the game rules, *Native Gardens* is very, very funny, and keenly insightful into the foolishness that fuels so many of the social and political disagreements that have become a mainstay of public discourse. Blake Robinson has given it a polished and completely engaging production, and the excellent cast hit all the laugh buttons.