

‘Native Gardens’ plucks at thorny issue

Renaissance production examines suburban life

By JULIE McHALE - TimeOut Theater Critic

Oct. 25, 2018



Norman Moses, Linda Stephens, Andrew Joseph Perez and Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez in a scene from the Renaissance Theatreworks' production of "Native Gardens."

Photo by Ross E. Zentner

MILWAUKEE - A new young couple with a baby on the way just bought a fixer-upper in an established older neighborhood in Washington, D.C. He is an ambitious young lawyer of Chilean descent who was hired by a prestigious law firm, and she is from New Mexico and is presently finishing her dissertation. The Butleys, an older couple who live next door, greet them cordially but cautiously.

Will they fit in, will they measure up to the unwritten standards set by the long-time residents?

Frank Butley is a meticulous gardener. His yard is beautifully coifed, always ready for the next best garden contest. His wife, Virginia, is a successful engineer, who has fought her way to success in a primarily male-dominated world. They are both semi-retired and eager to see the property next door occupied by respectable owners, not shoddy renters, which has been the case for some time.

Things start to get a little dicey when Tania reveals that she is a "natural" gardener, devoted to encouraging

native plants that nurture the environment. She also notices that their yard is smaller than their neighbors', so Pablo decides to have a survey done. In his research, he discovers that the cyclone fence that presently separates their properties is not built on the true lot line, and thus, the new fence, which he wants to build, would invade Frank's garden.

Now their true colors begin to emerge - their prejudices, their values, their style of negotiation, their sense of privilege and territorial instincts. It is not pretty, but it gets quite funny, at least on the surface.

How and why do we set boundaries? Or as Robert Frost stated so memorably in his poem, "Fences Make Good Neighbors," do they or don't they? Is there such a thing as "adverse possession," where a person can cultivate some land that he thinks he owns and when discovering that he doesn't, he must vacate it? All these ideas come into play.

The four actors do this interesting script justice. Norman Moses and Linda Stephens play the older couple with a mix of culture (and savagery when pushed), and Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez and Andrew Joseph Perez play the younger couple as two young, hardworking, educated people who have fought to get where they are and want all that they think they deserve. Tania and Virginia seem a bit more flexible than their husbands, but they all seem capable of a degree of ruthlessness when required.

The set design by Madelyn Yee nicely reflects the contrast between the yards. The 80-minute play rushes by, keeping us engaged, laughing and thinking all the way.

Well-directed by Marti Gobel, "Native Gardens" has a ton of issues tucked away in its nooks and crannies and gardens. The ending seems a bit pat, the issues perhaps too easily resolved by the birth of Tania and Pablo's child, when suddenly all is forgiven, set straight and peaceful. If only all disputes were that quickly swept away, but it's a nice thought.

AT A GLANCE

"Native Gardens"

The comic-drama by Karen Zacharias runs at Renaissance Theatreworks in the Studio Theatre in the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway, Milwaukee. Call 414-291-7800 or visit www.r-t-w.com.