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"Native Gardens" will play on Renaissance's stage through Nov. 11. (PHOTO: Ross Zentner)

Renaissance's "Native Gardens" is a foul-smelling war of the roses

By Gwen Rice, Special to OnMilwaukee
Photography: Ross Zentner

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A few years ago, I was teaching an arts outreach class in Milwaukee about combatting racism through theater and the subject of racial slurs came up. We talked about the casual way people from previous generations sometimes throw around words that are, by contemporary standards, obviously offensive. One of the students – a Hispanic eighth grader – just smiled and said, "Grandpas say the funniest things." I remember being struck by how easily he shrugged it off because, according to him, white people over 60 just doesn't know any better.

In Renaissance Theaterworks' current production of "Native Gardens," Pablo Del Valle, a millennial Chilean lawyer, reacts much the same way after sitting down with his gray-haired Caucasian neighbors, Frank and Virginia Butley, to talk about removing a ratty old chain link fence that separates their backyards in a tony Washington D.C. neighborhood.

Taking a pull of his beer on the porch of his fixer-upper and looking wistfully at the adjacent, beautifully manicured English garden, Pablo indulges them saying, "The Butleys are awesome. I love them." His Latinx wife Tania, a PhD candidate from New Mexico and a proponent of eco-friendly native gardening, is less forgiving. "It's like a live 'Dick Van Dyke Show' ... right next door," Tania laments.

So begins the feud between neighbors that dominates the show. In the process of removing the bent and rusted relic dividing the yards, a remnant of an undesirable former resident, Pablo and Tania (the terrific Andrew Joseph Perez and Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez) discover a discrepancy between the legal property line and the placement of the fence. It seems the Butleys (the well-matched Linda Stephens and Norman Moses) have expanded their almost award-winning flower beds beyond the edge of their yard, a full two feet into the Del Valles' lot.

Through a variety of circumstances that force the issue – an upcoming neighborhood landscaping contest, a backyard barbecue for Pablo's law firm that could greatly enhance his chances of making partner – this property dispute has to be settled in less than a week, ratcheting up the stress, pettiness and animosity on both sides.

And before you know it, the combatants are throwing acorns at each other, pouring beverages on their adversaries' lawns, ripping out hydrangea bushes and threatening each other with garden implements, including a chainsaw.

When "Native Gardens" playwright Karen Zacarias created these two couples, she purposefully built in some interesting middle ground. Over the course of many conversations that start out genial and end up contentious, each character tries to lead with what brings them together instead of what's forcing them apart. Frank and Tania both love getting their hands dirty and coaxing beautiful plants from the earth.

But their definition of beautiful is quite different. Frank prefers Azaleas and geraniums covered in pesticide. Tania is an advocate for plants native to the Mid-Atlantic that attract bees and butterflies. Virginia points out that she and Pablo are both the "token" professional in their fields; they have to work twice as hard for recognition. He's a minority at a law firm run by old white guys, and she is a pioneering female engineer at Lockheed Martin.

Pablo admits to Frank that he thinks the manicured, colorful garden is beautiful. Eight months pregnant, Tania talks to Virginia about the challenges and joys of motherhood.

Ideally these conversations would complicate, and perhaps temper, the couples' animosity over the property line and the fence. They don't.

The audience's alliances don't shift as we learn more about these individuals, who are separated by race, age, politics, worldview and occasionally even language, because, from the very first scene, Virginia and Frank are presented as reprehensible human beings. At one point, Virginia hurls the insult "entitled" at her new neighbors, but the Butleys are poster children for that term, up to and including xenophobia, white fragility, sexism, cronyism, embarrassing ignorance and intolerance of other cultures, and a modern belief in manifest destiny.

The Butleys even find ways to manipulate and mangle a squatters' rights statute to make their case for keeping the disputed land. Comparing Pablo to Freddie Prinze in the '70s TV show "Chico and the Man" in the play's first scene is pretty offensive, but when Virginia likens the De Valles to Hitler invading her ancestors' Polish homeland, it's all over. Their petulant whining, their imagined victimhood and their insistence that they are good people is nauseating.

Under Marti Gobel's direction, "Native Gardens" is a 90-minute example of white people behaving badly. As Frank, Norman Moses is easily wounded and mopey, clutching his pesticide sprayer as a prized possession that he refuses to relinquish without a fight. Or, more accurately, without his steely wife fighting for him. As Virginia, Linda Stephens mixes the iron-clad logic of an engineer with the ferocity of a bulldog that's itching for a fight. Her air of certainty and her ability to work the system in her own favor make her terrifying. Stephens's serves-'em-right, snotty satisfaction with defiling her neighbors' birdbath makes her heartless.

By contrast, Andrew Joseph Perez and Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez both smile and bite their tongues through most of the story. They play their roles as people who are accustomed to getting harassed and shortchanged, in spite of the validity of their arguments and their notable personal accomplishments. Their anger comes from a real place, and although Tania is accused several times of being irrational due to her pregnancy, their reactions are restrained by any measure.

Ironically, the set, designed by Madelyn Yee, doesn't do the play any favors. The highly contested strip of flower garden at the center of the stage is beautifully arrayed, but visually it's hard to square Frank's complaint about the Del Valles new fence line ruining his backyard when so much of it is empty green space. With lots and lots of room to transplant, why are we still arguing about this?

Also, like "The Odd Couple" played out in real estate, the audience understands clearly before the play begins that one house belongs to wealthy, neat and orderly people while the other, filled with ramshackle lawn ornaments and dying plants, has clearly been neglected. Fine. But the red painted trim on the well-maintained home of Republicans and the blue trim around every window and doorway of the liberal Democrats who have just infiltrated the neighborhood is a little on the nose.

So, what starts out as domestic drama that touches on a myriad of current political issues quickly abandons them devolves into farce. (A lot of descriptions of "Native Gardens" refer to it as a sitcom, which is not a compliment.) All of the characters are meant to look ridiculous as they throw dirt and greenery at each other – and they do. But there's no question about who's right; there's only wondering how it will all finally be resolved.

Unfortunately, the buttoned up ending skips over that part of the story completely.

More Information...

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