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Class, Privilege and Comedy in Renaissance Theaterworks' 'Native Gardens'

BY ANNE SIEGEL OCT. 23, 2018 4:02 P.M.

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Backyard gardening becomes a metaphor for life's injustices in Renaissance Theaterworks' *Native Gardens*, which opened last weekend in the Broadway Theatre Center's intimate Studio Theatre. This excellent production, written by Karen Zacarías and directed by Marti Gobel, probes the cultural and age differences between two couples who suddenly become neighbors.

The older couple, who have lived in the same house for decades, consists of Frank (Norman Moses) and Virginia (Linda Stephens). At first, they express their delight at the prospect of newcomers who will tackle the fixer-upper next door. They come bearing welcoming gifts of wine and chocolate for the new neighbors, which includes Pablo Del Valle, a rising, Chilean-born attorney (Andrew Joseph Perez) and his very pregnant wife, Tania (Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez).

The couple's backyards (beautifully rendered by set

designer Madelyn Yee) visually reinforce the “dividing line” between them. Frank has tended his garden with care (and pesticides) for many years. He is proud of the fact that it looks like a photograph from a gardening catalogue, with rows of colorful flowers bordered by a manicured lawn. In the center of their backyard is a painted wrought-iron patio set, which rests perfectly on the circular brick pavement below. On the other side of an ugly, metal fence dividing the two yards sits an overgrown mess, dominated by an unkempt-looking, mature tree.

Frank and Virginia demonstrate a WASPy preference for their neat and tidy niche. They stare in disbelief when Tania preaches the ecological preferences for a “native garden” consisting of indigenous plants. “You mean you’re going to plant weeds?” bellows Frank.

The comedy begins subtly and then goes somewhat over-the-top when a land survey reveals that Frank and Virginia cultivated some adjoining property that it turns out they do not own. The newcomers plan to remove the unsightly metal fence and replace it with an attractive wooden one on the “proper” property line. This unleashes a type of “border war” between the two couples. Before a consensus is reached, Tania is on her hands and knees pulling out some of Frank’s beloved flowers. Meanwhile, Virginia is ready to attack the unsightly tree with a chainsaw. All traces of civility go out the window.

It’s little wonder that *Native Gardens* is among the top plays being produced at regional theaters across the country. The play’s comedy keeps the tone relatively light, while the plot examines some very serious issues

of racism, sexism, ageism and cultural privilege.

Through Nov. 11 in the Broadway Theatre Center's Studio Theatre, 158 N. Broadway. For tickets, visit r-t-w.com or call 414-291-7800.

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