

# Renaissance Theaterworks' 'Native Gardens' Will Make You Laugh and Think

BY JEAN-GABRIEL FERNANDEZ OCT. 16, 2018 4:32 P.M.

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I have been given a sneak peek of a rehearsal of *Native Gardens*, the new play by Renaissance Theaterworks which will be playing in Milwaukee from Oct. 19 through Nov. 11, and I believe I can make an accurate prediction: Every



person who sees that show will leave the theater with a bright smile on their face. *Native Gardens* is a comedy depicting a botanical kerfuffle between two households over a 2-foot wide stretch of land and a beautiful flower bed.

When the young and liberal Del Valle couple buys the home next to the Butley residence, two worlds clash. Pablo Del Valle (Andrew Joseph Perez) is Chilean, and his pregnant wife, Tania (Kelsey Elyse Rodriguez), is completing her PhD. On the other side of the ugly chain-link fence, their neighbors, Frank (Norman Moses) and Virginia Butley (Linda Stephens), are white, conservative and very proud of their beautiful English garden.

The two families have to face their differences when they discover that Frank's prized flower bed is actually on the Del Valles' property, which sends the Del Valles and Butleys into a spiraling conflict, exposing both couples' notions of racism, sexism, class and privilege. The result is an hour and a half of hilarity. "The approach I am taking directing this is not that of the farce, sitcom or slapstick comedy. We are going for real situations that become humorously absurd," director Marti Gobel says.

The script, written by award-winning playwright Karen Zacarías, is wonderfully served by the actors. Gobel claims she has "a room full of rock star actors," and one can only agree after seeing the phenomenal performance the four of them offer. **Perez plays anger brilliantly**, while Stephens and Moses make us feel empathy for this elderly couple as decades of hard work are torn away from them. The audience is engrossed

from the start, and when the show ends, only one thought remains: We want more.

For this first show of the season, Renaissance Theaterworks made a safe choice. *Native Gardens* is among the 10 most-produced plays of the upcoming theatre season according to *American Theater* magazine, which is fully deserved.

## **‘Native Gardens’ is Smarter Than You Expect**

*Native Gardens* is one of the all-too-rare plays that openly challenges prejudice and stereotypes. The humor is used wisely, as to make thoughtful discussion about very serious subjects more palatable.

Tania Del Valle proudly contradicts the Butleys’ belief that she’s Mexican, and Virginia Butley speaks honestly of the sexism she faced despite being a white defense contractor. Even Pablo, who used to be very privileged in Chile, has to face the fact he is now a minority in a country that doesn’t treat people like him kindly.

Karen Zacarías’ script shines most when it comes to its references to history. The Butleys have seized land that does not belong to them and claim ownership of it as they tended to the garden. The rightful owners, the Del Valles, have to choose between sharing their land or reclaiming what was taken from them. The horticultural feud between the two families mirrors the colonization of the New World, when European colonists thought that developing the soil made them the true owners of it.

The script masterfully depicts situations where no one is blameless. The Butleys worked the garden in earnest, thinking the land belonged to them. The Del Valles also judge their neighbors harshly based on preconceived ideas and fall prey to violent behaviors. The play shows mentalities that, despite all of them being fair, keep clashing and lead to disagreements, dehumanization and, eventually, war.

## **‘She Blinded Me With Science’**

*Native Gardens* will kick-off of Renaissance Theaterworks’ upcoming season, “She Blinded Me with Science,” which will focus on women in that field. “In *Native Gardens*, both women are scientists. Virginia is an engineer, and Tania is getting her PhD in anthropology,” explains artistic director Suzan Fete.

The next show is *Photograph 51* (Jan. 18-Feb. 10), the story of physicist Rosalind Franklin, who was integral in finding the image of the DNA molecule. The play depicts the events leading to James Watson and Francis Crick getting a Nobel prize for the discovery of the structure of DNA after taking Franklin’s work without her permission.

The last play of the season is *Annie Jump and the Library of Heaven* (Mar. 29- Apr. 21), the story of 13-year-old science genius Annie, who becomes the librarian of Heaven with the help of a human-shaped supercomputer. The show will emphasize the discovery of one’s place in the universe and utilize animated segments.

“The sciences are mostly propagated by men. We

thought it was a great opportunity to showcase the roles that women have played that have helped the world,” Fete states in justification of this season’s theme. “I’m hoping that it could help young women get interested in science. I think it is hard to see yourself in a place where there are no role models, but if you see people doing things, it is much easier to imagine you could do it too.”

*Native Gardens runs Oct. 19-Nov. 11 at the Broadway Theatre Center’s Studio Theater, 158 N. Broadway. For tickets, call 414-291-7800 or visit [r-t-w.com](http://r-t-w.com).*

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