

Buffalo Theatre Ensemble

Presents

Native Gardens

By Karen Zacarías



Directed by Steve Scott

A comedy about neighbors crossing boundaries and mending fences

Buffalo Theatre Ensemble sincerely thanks the library for research support, for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

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Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis

Pablo, a high-powered lawyer, and his very pregnant wife, doctoral candidate Tania, have purchased their first home, which is next door to community stalwarts Virginia and Frank. Soon a disagreement over a long-standing fence line derails Pablo and Tania's plans for the American Dream with an all-out war of taste, class, privilege, and entitlement. The hilarious results guarantee no one comes out smelling like a rose in this smash-hit comedy.

Time and Place

Georgetown, Washington D.C. The back of two houses. Two back gardens. A disheveled wire fence with ivy divides them. One garden is beautiful: lush grass, very symmetrical garden beds, and the flowers lining the fence. The other is unkempt: dying hydrangeas, crabgrass, a large oak tree, leaves, and acorns.

Time: September, 2016

Characters

Tania Del Valle - Early thirties; smart, likable, positive, passionate, highly-energized, pregnant PhD candidate and gardener

Pablo Del Valle - Early thirties; smart, likable, ambitious, savvy young attorney

Virginia Butley - Sixty to mid-seventies; smart, likable, assertive, direct, no-nonsense engineer

Frank Butley - Sixty to mid-seventies; smart, likable, excitable, caring, detail-oriented federal employee and gardener

The play also uses four ensemble actors to play the roles of the **Surveyor**, **Landscapers**, and **Building Examiner**. There are short theatrical vignettes between scenes that can help transform the garden. These workers are the witnesses and the energetic transformers of both the play and the situation.

Note: Contains adult themes and language

***Native Gardens* Director's Note**

Is there anyone alive who hasn't had a beef with their neighbor? The blaring soundtrack from the apartment upstairs, the unleashed dog who finds your flower bed particularly enticing, the campaign sign for a candidate you hate, the next-door "home improvement" which leaves your formerly sunny back porch in perpetual eclipse - such annoyances can soon become major battles, bringing the Hatfield/McCoy feud to your own backyard.

For many years such incidents have become grist for the comic mill, in movies, TV shows and plays - but playwright Karen Zacarias goes farther. *Native Gardens* takes one such feud and amplifies it into a devastatingly comic portrait of American life in the 21st century, where generational and cultural values can turn a minor skirmish into a civil war. Embracing the adage that "all politics are local," Zacarias uses the clashes of two couples in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. to examine the conflicts that now plague us as a society - and suggests pathways to mutual understanding that can honor personal differences while quelling the divisive battles that threaten neighborhoods... or countries. In the end, her play is an often hilarious, sometimes sobering look at our society and our world today - and where we can go from here.



Cast, Designers, and Directors meet for the first Rehearsal of *Native Gardens* at Buffalo Theatre Ensemble (Photo by Rex Howard Photography)

About the Author: Karen Zacarías

Source: "Bio." *Karen Zacarias*, www.karenzacarias.com/bio/



Karen Zacarías award-winning plays include the sold-out/extended comedy *The Book Club Play*, the sold-out world premiere drama *Just Like Us* (adapted from the book by Helen Thorpe) at Denver Theater Center, the Steinberg–citation award play *Legacy of Light*, the Francesca Primus Award winning play *Mariela in the Desert*, the Helen Hayes Award winning play *The Sins of Sir Juana*, the adaptation of Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Karen also has a piece in the Arena Stage premiere of *Our War*. Her TYA musicals with composer Debbie Wicks la Puma include *Jane of the Jungle*, *Einstein is a Dummy*, *Looking for Roberto Clemente*, *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans*, *Ferdinand the Bull*, and *Frida Libre*. Her musical *Chasing George Washington* premiered at The Kennedy Center for Performing Arts and went on a National Tour. Her script was then adapted into a book by Scholastic with a foreword by First Lady Michelle Obama.

Karen is currently working on the adaptation of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, a drama for Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and a Brazilian themed Oliver Twist musical: *Oliverio: A Brazilian Twist on Dickens* for the Kennedy Center. Her libretto of *The Sun also Rises* for the Washington Ballet received accolades in the New York Times and she is currently writing the libretto for *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* with Washington Ballet artistic Director Septime Webre. She is proud to be currently commissioned to write new plays for Arena Stage, Cincinnati Playhouse, Ford’s Theater, Adventure Theater, and First Stage.

Her plays have been produced at The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, Arena Stage, The Goodman Theater, Round House Theater, The Denver Center, Alliance Theater, Imagination Stage, GALA Hispanic Theater, Berkshire Theater Festival, South Coast Rep, La Jolla Playhouse, Cleveland Playhouse, San Jose Repertory Theater, GEVA Theater, Horizon’s Theater, People’s Light and Theater, Walnut Street Theater, Arden Theater, Milagro Theater, Teatro Vista, Aurora Theater, and many more.

Her awards include: New Voices Award, 2010 Steinberg Citation-Best New Play, Paul Aneillo Award, National Francesca Primus Prize, New Voices Award, National Latino Play Award, Finalist Susan Blackburn, Helen Hayes for Outstanding New Play.

Karen is the first playwright-in-residence at Arena Stage in Washington, DC and has taught playwriting at Georgetown University. She is the founder of Young Playwrights’ Theater, an award-winning theater company that teaches playwriting in local public schools in Washington, DC. YPT won the 2010 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award from the White House as one of the most innovative arts programs in the nation. The YPT curriculum is currently being used in public schools in DC, VA, MD, New Orleans, Detroit, and Texas and is published on Amazon as “Write to Dream”.

Karen is represented by the Graham Agency and published by Dramatic Publishing. Karen is fluent in English and Spanish and highly proficient in Danish and French. She has BA with distinction from Stanford University and a Masters in Creative Writing from Boston University. Born in Mexico, Karen now lives in Washington D.C. with her husband and three children.

Articles for your Consideration

Planting Seeds of Dissent and Hope:

An Interview with “Native Gardens” Playwright Karen Zacarías

BY KELUNDRASMITH

Source: Smith, Kelundra. *Portland Center Stage*, www.pcs.org/features/planting-seeds-of-dissent-and-hope-an-interview-with-native-gardens-playwright-karen-zacar%C3%ADAs.

Playwright Karen Zacarías was under a tight deadline to deliver on a new play commission, and though ideas fluttered through her mind, nothing quite stuck. Then, while she was at a dinner party, friends suggested that she write a play about a dispute they were having with their neighbor. After other party attendees started sharing their stories of neighborly nuisances, Zacarías realized that most conflicts in the world could be boiled down to differences over property, taste, class, and culture. This planted the seeds for her comedy Native Gardens, which finds two couples, one white and one Latinx, at odds over property lines and best practices in gardening.

You’ve written a few plays that deal with the foibles of suburban life. For example, *The Book Club Play* pokes fun at suburban academic types. Where does that come from for you?

Well here, I was very interested in having my Latinx characters be characters that you don’t see a lot onstage. You don’t usually get to have a Ph.D. candidate or a lawyer who’s Latinx. For me, *Native Gardens* is always about, in a warm-hearted sense, undermining expectations — so the engineer in the play is a woman. We’ve seen this dynamic before, but there are different ways to approach it, so as the audience is laughing, they’re also being challenged.

In this comedy, these neighbors take their stakes — winning a gardening competition and making partner at a law firm — so seriously. But neither seems to have regard for how they’re impacting the natural life around them or each other’s lives.

People are constantly making judgments, and sometimes they don’t go on the generous side — they’re assuming the worst of someone. The play ended up becoming a symbol of what’s going on in our country, a way to be able to talk about important topics like entitlement, white privilege, and the border through the lens of horticulture and make it funny. It’s been a really interesting sociological experiment to see what this play does to audiences across the country. Most communities can relate to what’s going on no matter what side of the fence they’re on.

You write in the play that the difference between a weed and a flower is judgment. What is America’s weed and flower to you?

The idea that immigrants, who are the bedrock of this country, become the scapegoat for every single problem going on. This country goes through phases like that, like with the Irish, the Germans, and the Italians, but you’d think we would learn. This country’s ability to reinvent itself and diversity are what makes it beautiful. It’s a country founded on ideas, and the idea that we are made up of many tribes and colors of people is what makes us beautiful.

At the time of this interview, the government is shut down over a wall at the Mexican border, but you wrote this play before many people saw this coming. Did you imagine the play would be this relevant?

As a Mexican immigrant in this country, I can tell you that the anti-Mexican sentiment that President Trump has used as the bedrock of his policy was already there before the winds started shifting. That it would literally start to become a conversation about a wall — or a fence — I just happened to choose a symbol that became the symbol for what we’re all talking about right now. The roots existed long before the election, and I think that’s why people can identify with it. I thought it was really important that all four people have redeeming values, so that you want them to resolve it. I was much more interested in exploring hope.

What do you want audiences to take away from the experience of seeing this show?

You go in, and you’re judging each couple and changing your mind about who’s right, but at the end of the play, the person you’re judging is yourself. My hope is that people will take a moment to ponder what it will take for them to be a better neighbor. I want simple things out of my plays. You can still laugh, have fun, and talk about hard things in a way where nobody’s off the hook.

Kelundra Smith is an arts journalist based in Atlanta, whose mission is to connect people to cultural experiences and each other.



Costume Design Plot for Frank Butley played by BTE Ensemble Member and Business Manager Bryan Burke
Costume Design by Kim Morris

“Native Gardens”: Building the (Botanical) Wall

BY MAGGIE GILROY

Source: Gilroy, Maggie. “‘Native Gardens’: Building the (Botanical) Wall.” *AMERICAN THEATRE*, www.americantheatre.org/2019/04/08/native-gardens-building-the-botanical-wall/.

This Spring, Karen Zacarías’s popular play is going up at three different theaters, and raises a prescient dialogue about border disputes and neighborly conduct.



From left, Paul DeBoy, Anne-Marie Cusson, and Monica Rae Summers Gonzalez with the Gardeners in “Native Gardens” at Syracuse Stage. (Photo by Michael Davis.)

Minutes after hearing *Native Gardens* read aloud by her cast for the first time, director Melissa Crespo wanted to talk about neighbors. “I’m one of those people who likes to know who I’m living near,” she said to the cast following the table read.

It was Jan. 22, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. Day and 32 days into the nation’s longest-ever government shutdown, which would last 3 more days. Some 800,000 federal employees were without a paycheck for much the same reason Crespo and her cast sat around a table in Syracuse, N.Y.: a border dispute between neighbors.

“Walls are very much in our lives right now—they’re constantly being talked about,” Crespo said after the reading in the Syracuse Stage rehearsal room while Lulu, her rescued Basset Hound mix, sat on her lap. The Brooklyn-based director is at the helm of a three-way co-production of *Native Gardens*, which first ran at Syracuse Stage Feb. 13-March 3, would move on to the Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, New York March 26-April 21, and will wrap its run on Portland Center Stage’s U.S. Bank Main Stage May 18-June 16.

Along with Crespo, the four lead actors—Anne-Marie Cusson, Paul DeBoy, Erick González, and Monica Rae Summers Gonzalez—are traveling with the production to all three locations. The silent Latinx gardener roles are cast locally in each city (in Syracuse they were played by Baker Adames, Luis A. Figuerosa Rosado, Aaron J. Mavins, Isabel Rodriguez, and Devante Vanderpool).

Native Gardens has been wildly popular among regional theatres, sliding into the eighth slot of the *American Theatre's* Top 10 Most Produced Plays of the 2018-19 season, with a dozen productions at TCG member theatres. Penned by one of the 10 female writers on that list, it helped earn Zacarías the fifth spot on another of *AT's* lists, the Top 20 Most-Produced Playwrights of 2018-19. Both lists were the most diverse they've ever been, with Zacarías one of 6 playwrights of color and 11 women on the playwrights' list.

Native Gardens also marks a breakthrough for the 45-year-old Syracuse Stage: It's the theatre's first creative team entirely composed of women of color. This includes Zacarías, who was born in Mexico and lives with her family in Washington, D.C. "It's an overdue milestone for our theatre," said Robert Hupp, now in his third season as Syracuse's artistic director. Hupp said the theatre did not set out to assemble a team solely of women of color—it just happened. "We did set out intentionally to assemble an outstanding team of inspiring designers," he said.

That team includes, along with Crespo, scenic designer Shoko Kambara, costume designer Lux Haac, lighting designer Dawn Chiang, and sound designer Elisheba Ittoop. "I personally love working on all-female teams," Crespo enthused. "I don't know why, but the communication's easier for some reason. We all come to each other with greater respect and understanding and collaboration."

Native Gardens is a 90-minute one-act (split into two acts for this production) that follows two sets of couples who live beside each other in a lush, historic D.C. neighborhood. Frank and Virginia Butley are an elderly white couple whose son has aged and moved out of the house they've lived in for decades. Frank spends most of his free time perfecting his manicured garden, a pastime he hopes will relieve his chronic stress and win him an award from the Potomac Horticultural Society.

New next door are Tania and Pablo Del Valle, a Latinx couple in their early 30s. They're expecting their first child and have big plans for their fixer-upper, including a "native garden" made of plants indigenous to the environment. The idea is the brainchild of Tania, a Ph.D. candidate in the thick of identity experiments for her doctoral dissertation in anthropology. As she explains in the play, "I am interested in origins, and when we claim them and when we stop." Pablo is a lawyer with dreams of making partner at his new firm—an ambition that gives him the idea of inviting his entire 60-person firm to their not-yet-fixed-up fixer upper.

That's where the fence comes in.

With Frank and Virginia's blessing, Tania and Pablo plan to replace the run-down chain-link fence that separates the two yards with "the kind of stately wood fence a law firm would appreciate," as Pablo puts it. But after examining the plan for their yard, the Del Valles discover they're entitled to more space than currently demarcated—two feet, to be precise. But moving the fence to claim those two feet promises to ruin Frank's garden just days before his competition, while keeping it where it is robs the Del Valles of their rightful property.

The ensuing fight over the fence's true location is riddled with racism, ageism, microaggressions, and questions of who can (and should) claim ownership of land. Some lines read like they're ripped from the headlines (and they are).

Declares Tania to Frank and Virginia: "I'm building my fence to keep you out!"

Adds Pablo, "And you're going to pay for it."



The creative team of "Native Gardens." Back, from left: Dawn Chiang, Melissa Crespo, and Elisheba Ittoop. Front, from left: Shoko Kambara, Lux Haac.

The seed for *Native Gardens* was planted at a dinner party. Zacarías was looking for ideas for a play she was writing for Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and a friend told her, "kind of jokingly, 'Oh, you should write about me, I'm in a fight with my neighbors,'" Zacarías recalled. As the friend described the fight, other party guests chimed in with their own tales of neighborhood squabbles. The stories were both "absurd" and "really stressful," she said.

While the stories were told with laughter, they stuck with the playwright. "All of those fights are so primal and poetic and absurd in some ways," Zacarías said. "But the consequences were really real and emotionally upsetting. And I kept thinking, Wow, it's almost like every single battle between nations or tribes, etc., boils down to this fight about property and culture, in a sense."

The play also gave Zacarías a platform for creating Latinx characters who are seldom seen onstage. "I was over the moon about the fact that I got to play a smart, passionate Latina who was very educated and I didn't have to put an accent on for," said Summers Gonzalez, who plays Tania.

It also could hardly be better timed. Though Zacarías wrote the play long before Donald Trump even began talking about building a wall, obviously, she said, “There’s been something in the atmosphere for much longer that made this comedy about gardening and planting and building a fence have a much deeper resonance.”

Since the play premiered at Cincinnatti Playhouse in January 2016, Zacarías has peppered the script with details that deepened its connection to current events, particularly as Trump’s wall entered the national conversation and the piece grew and moved on to larger productions. (That’s where the “you’ll pay for it” line came from.) The text is now in its final, ready-to-publish form.

Native Gardens drew Hupp’s attention in January 2018 as he programmed the next season. The play addressed “issues that our season wasn’t confronting that I wanted us to talk about,” he said. No one involved knew that the president’s demand for a wall would effectively shut down the government by year’s end. But of course, as in real life, a wall is not just a wall; it’s also a metaphor for fear of the unknown, for cultural differences, and for the toxicity of divisions. Though unlike in real life, the play is actually intentionally funny.



Erick González, and Monica Rae Summers Gonzalez. (Photo by Michael Davis)

Months before the cast was assembled, in August 2018, Syracuse Stage brought the *Native Gardens* design team together. The theatre organized a design conference, providing two days of meetings for each designer to share their vision of the play.

“It’s such an important part of the process, where we get to just be in a room together and dream up the show and then start putting the logistics on it,” Elisheba Ittoop said.

It was then that Crespo discovered that in addition to doing sound design, Ittoop composes music, and asked her to craft music for the scenic transitions. Many of the transitions contain short vignettes in which the neighbors quietly stir the pot—such as throwing acorns from one yard to the other—or the Latinx gardeners bring in some plants, take others out, or bring in supplies to build the wood fence. Ittoop tends to compose original music for shows she works on to help defray the costs of pre-recorded music. It also gives her the flexibility to cut or manipulate the music in any way needed.

“I do care about artists getting fairly compensated for their music,” she said. “I’m less and less interested in putting up music that’s not paid for, that we haven’t gotten the rights for. And I’m more interested in creating, crafting something that’s specifically for our show.”

Crespo and Ittoop worked together to translate each character musically. For the aging Butleys, they chose an elegant and classical sound. Ittoop described this music to the theatre’s marketing team as “a little bit of a raised eyebrow,” drawing inspiration from Mark Mothersbaugh’s score for *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

For the young, vibrant Del Valles, Ittoop steered clear of the obvious choice of using Latin music to characterize a Latinx couple. “That’s not really interesting to me, and I think that also goes in to stereotypes really quickly,” she said. Instead, Ittoop focused on the feeling of disruption that comes along with the Del Valles’ presence. A marching band, she and Crespo determined, would evoke this mood, citing the way the CW television show “Jane the Virgin” uses a marching band for many of its musical transitions. Ittoop also drew inspiration from the theme of NBC’s “Parks and Recreation.”

Hints for Shoko Kambara’s scenic design appear to be embedded in the text: Tania and Pablo refer to their “patched grass,” a gnome, and a majestic oak tree, among other items, giving Kambara a vision of how their yard should appear. “It’s like reading a murder mystery where you have to collect the clues,” Kambara said.

After researching neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., Kambara settled on row houses for each couple. The Butleys’ home was modern and renovated, complete with a back deck, while the Del Valles’ appeared to have not seen attention in years. Kambara created two houses very similar in design, as though the Del Valle house is what the Butleys’ would look like prior to renovation. “Probably, in that neighborhood, they’re all the same, and then everyone adds their little flavor to it,” Kambara said. While much of the material for the Butleys’ house could be found online, the Del Valles’ had to be custom-made to appear old and run-down.

And then there’s Frank’s garden. While Crespo and Kambara researched many of the flowers mentioned in the play, finding the silk form of all the flowers for Frank’s garden was too costly, so they focused more on the color palette than the actual type of flower. “I tried to keep the larger flower beds in a tighter color palette, so it wasn’t too distracting,” Kambara said. “I didn’t want it to look like a birthday cake, like confetti.”

A special custom mixture of fake dirt was concocted by the props department to avoid the bugs and mud that real dirt would bring. A dry mixture of coconut fiber substrate, dark ground cork, buckwheat hulls, and light ground cork, it was mixed together and combined with corn starch, soap, and water. “I actually garden myself, so when I tested it I was like, ‘This is what my hands look like when I dig in my garden,’” prop supervisor Mary Houston explained.

At each performance, flowers get yanked and portions of the garden are torn up. So Kambara designated specific flowers—complete with fake roots and dirt—that could be pulled out. Actors were instructed which parts of the garden they could destroy, and which had to remain intact. “Part of the trick is to make Frank’s yard so tightly designed that even a little shift in it will [cause disruption],” Kambara said.

She was also tasked with creating a set that could not only travel but fit inside a few different theatres. “It’s designed for three spaces, and we slightly shift the downstage area in each venue,” Kambara said. “But it’s almost the same.”

A significant element of Kambara’s scenery was the towering oak tree, requiring close collaboration with lighting designer Dawn Chiang to ensure the foliage didn’t get in the way of the lighting instruments. After working with Syracuse Stage’s technical director Randall Steffen, Kambara and Chiang were able to get the leaves high enough to allow for light to seep through.

Chiang’s lighting bounces between daytime, nighttime, and short vignettes performed during transitions. And it varies slightly with each theatre, due to differences in equipment. Chiang and Ittoop are the only members of the design team who are going to each theatre to help ready the show. “Because [lighting instruments are] so unique to every venue that you go to, I have to go because I have to reposition everything and re-cue everything,” Chiang said. Crespo will also travel to Rochester and Portland to direct each city’s new batch of gardeners.

Color played an integral role in how costumer designer Lux Haac helped tell the play’s story. “The thing that was important to Melissa and I when we started this was just really making sure that these were real people and that they came across as very genuine, and that that came through in the costumes,” Haac said.

Not unlike their theme music, the refined lifestyle of the Butleys was also reflected through color. “The Butleys’ garden is much more traditional, which led to their costumes being more conservative,” Haac explained.

Haac’s inspiration also came from the characters’ relationships to their gardens. For Tania, she used a vibrant, vivid color palette that reflected Tania’s high energy and the new life she’s starting with Pablo. “She is dressing for the garden she aspires to have,” Haac said. She dressed the Butleys in a more subdued palette that contrasted with their colorful garden.

Despite all the pronounced conflicts among these characters, reflected in the show’s design, Crespo stressed to the whole team the importance of conveying that the characters all like each other and take every action with good intentions. This is key during the couples’ first meeting, where, “in the wrong hands, the beginning of the play can really go south very quickly,” Crespo said.

Summers Gonzalez admits that, in the early stages of rehearsal, she was working too hard to communicate that Tania did not agree with the Butleys. Instead of instilling Tania with nuance, she came across as somewhat of a know-it-all. She knew she needed to make an adjustment to align with Crespo’s vision and the intent of the play.

“All of these characters are good human beings,” Summers Gonzalez said. “You can be a really great person and not necessarily agree with how someone lives their life, but that doesn’t mean that you need to make that apparent.”

This is evident in the character descriptions that Zacarías provides in the beginning of the script, which begin the same way for every character: “Smart, likeable.” There are no easy villains here.

“All of these characters, they want to do the best they can and no one wants to offend the other,” Gonzalez said. “Everyone wants to get along.” And unlike in real life, both parties are willing to work together and compromise to reach a happy ending.

***Native Gardens* met its budgeted sales goal for its Syracuse run by Feb. 13**, the first day of previews and two days before the play officially opened at the 499-seat Archbold Theatre. “That is a relatively unheard-of statistic for us, for a play to achieve its full goal before opening night,” Hupp said. To him, the box office numbers indicate “a desire to confront these issues.”

This desire was reflected in the play’s reviews, which were overwhelmingly positive. In a review for the city’s local news site, Syracuse.com, Linda Lowen called the comedy “an upbeat workout of the funny bone, releasing the sort of toxins we’d all be better off without.” It was not lost on Lowen that it was a work from a design team entirely of women of color. “What happens onstage isn’t the only political statement being made by *Native Gardens*,” she wrote.

Native Gardens’s official opening on Feb. 15 landed on the day Trump declared a national emergency to access the funds he says he needs to build his wall. “It felt very eerie,” Crespo said of the play’s timing with current events. At the same time, as she listened to audiences laugh and react around her, she realized, “It’s good that the play is there for people to have an outlet to talk about it.”

But it wasn’t just laughter that stuck with Summers Gonzalez. After one performance, she recalled, a Latina audience member began to cry while speaking to her. “She was like, ‘You don’t know how much it means to see someone like me onstage,’” Gonzalez recalled. To which she responded: “I’m right there with you.”

Maggie Gilroy, a former intern of this magazine, is a news reporter for *The Press & Sun-Bulletin* in Binghamton, N.Y. In 2015 she interned for Syracuse Stage’s dramaturgy dept.

Native Gardens is written by Karen Zacarías. It first ran at Syracuse Stage Feb. 13-March 3, and is running Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, New York March 26-April 21, and Portland Center Stage May 18-June 16. It is directed by Melissa Crespo, with scenic design by Shoko Kambara, costume design by Lux Haac, lighting design by Dawn Chiang, and sound design/original music by Elisheba Ittoop.

The Comedy of Conflict: How *Native Gardens* Uses Humor to Spark Discussion

Comedy has long been a tool for exploring serious issues, and *Native Gardens* by Karen Zacarías is a masterclass in using laughter to navigate complex themes. On the surface, the play centers on a simple neighborhood dispute over a property line and a garden. However, beneath the humor lies a thoughtful exploration of privilege, cultural identity, and generational divides, all delivered with a sharp comedic edge that keeps audiences both entertained and engaged.

The genius of Zacarías' writing is her ability to make us laugh while also prompting us to think deeply. The play's humor stems from the exaggerated, and highly relatable, reactions of its characters. Frank and Virginia, the older, established couple, are set in their ways and fiercely protective of their meticulously maintained garden. Meanwhile, their new neighbors, Pablo and Tania, bring fresh energy and progressive ideas, including a preference for a native garden that reflects environmental sustainability and cultural pride.

The comedic tension escalates as these two worlds collide, and what starts as a polite disagreement spirals into an all-out war of words, shovels, and garden hoses. The absurdity of the situation, the characters' passionate investment in their respective gardens, invites laughter, but it also serves as a mirror for the audience. We recognize ourselves in their stubbornness, assumptions, and desire to "win" at all costs.

Zacarías uses humor to disarm us, allowing us to confront uncomfortable truths without feeling defensive. The play asks big questions: How do we navigate cultural differences? What unspoken privileges shape our interactions? Can we find common ground despite our differences? These questions land with more impact because they are delivered through moments of genuine hilarity rather than heavy-handed lectures.

The comedy also provides balance. The play's deeper themes never feel overwhelming because they are offset by lighthearted, laugh-out-loud moments. This careful balance ensures that *Native Gardens* is both entertaining and thought-provoking, leaving audiences with plenty to discuss long after the curtain falls.

In a world that can often feel divided, *Native Gardens* reminds us that laughter has the power to bring us closer together. By finding humor in conflict, Zacarías creates a space where audiences can reflect on their own biases and boundaries, all while enjoying a truly delightful theatrical experience.

So, get ready to laugh, think, and maybe even see your neighbors in a new light. *Native Gardens* is a comedy with roots that run deep, and it promises to leave you entertained and inspired!

Mending Wall

BY ROBERT FROST

Source: Frost, Robert, and Edward Connery Lathem. *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems*. Henry Holt, 1969.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance

- What do you know about the playwright Karen Zacarias and her body of work? How might her background influence the themes in the play?
- What are your first impressions of the title *Native Gardens*? How might the idea of a garden symbolize larger themes or conflicts?
- What does the term “neighbor” mean to you? What qualities make for a good or challenging neighbor?
- What is your perspective on property boundaries and shared spaces? How might these issues create tension in relationships?
- What do you think about the role of landscaping, gardening, or environmental concerns in modern life? How might these relate to the play’s themes?
- How might humor be used to explore serious topics like prejudice, privilege, or conflict resolution?
- What does it mean to “belong” to a community? How might questions of belonging and identity appear in the play?
- How do you feel about the idea of compromise in conflicts? Do you think it’s always possible to find common ground?

Things to Watch for in Performance

- Was there any casting that you thought was especially appropriate or inappropriate? Why?
- Was there a good, motivated relationship between the set and the action of the play?
- Were there levels on the stage for variety? If so, did they heighten the story?
- How does the color scheme and costume design heighten the show?
- There are a ton of props used in this play. Do these props help further the plot or character development? How?
- How do the actors convert the humor and tension in the characters’ interactions? Are there specific gestures, tones, or expressions that make a moment particularly funny or dramatic?
- How does the sound design help heighten the story?
- What moments in the play use silence or pauses to emphasize conflict or emotion? How do those moments impact your understanding of the story?

Things to Think About After the Performance

- What do you think the core value and then the theme is of this play?
- How did the production’s staging and set design contribute to the overall atmosphere?
- What moral questions were raised, and how do you feel about their implications?
- How do the relationships between the characters change throughout the show?
- How effective was the pacing of the story? Did it keep you engaged throughout?
- What lessons about community, compromise, and identity did you take away from the play? How do these themes relate to your own life or community?
- What do you think the gardens ultimately symbolize in the play? How do they reflect larger social or personal issues?
- How did the play’s ending leave you feeling? Do you think it offered hope, closure, or something else?

Other Analysis Tools


- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, what happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is “about”? In a nutshell, how does the playwright drive their point(s) home?
- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for this work?

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately 90 minutes without an intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, January 30 at 6:45pm in MAC 140 preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, February 7 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast, and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

 There will be an ASL Performance on Thursday, February 20. ASL Interpreters will be located near the stage for patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing, seated in an area of the theater that gives the best sight lines to follow the interpretation and the action on stage. To access received seating in view of the interpreters for a signed performance, call the Box Office at 630.942.4000 or 630.858.9692 (TDD).

Please join us!



Set model of *Native Gardens* at Buffalo Theatre Ensemble
- Scenic Design by Mara Ishihara Zinky