

NCRT's 'Native Gardens' grows comedy amidst cultural chaos



BY BETI WEBB TRAUTH
For the Times-Standard

I was first introduced to (and immediately fell in love with) the wonderful, witty work of award-winning Latina playwright Karen Zacarias when I saw her outrageously broad and sinfully entertaining theatrical send-up of popular LatinX telenovelas, "Destiny of Desire," during the 2018 season of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Although her wicked sense of humor ran gleefully rampant as her broadly drawn, comedic characters vividly represented those who have always fascinated TV audiences throughout Mexico and Latin America, her innate affection and pride in her culture was also apparent.

As an unusually perceptive writer, she obviously has the gift of having fun "with," but not really making "fun of," the personas she

creates to populate a play. Because, in spite of the fact that their individual differences drive them apart, they can eventually come together in spite of misinformed "beliefs" about each other.

Actually, what I just described about Zacarias's OSF play that made it so intriguing and entertaining, is exactly the same reason that another of her critically acclaimed shows, "Native Gardens" (which just opened at North Coast Repertory Theatre in Eureka), is equally insightful, delightful and wildly entertaining.

But in this case, the ever-increasing interpersonal friction — which escalates into previously unexpressed prejudices — is based on even more complex cultural and social issues because they're between two different cultures, not just inside the LatinX community.

These conflicts arise in the side-by-side backyards of an old-school, up-scale, con-

servative (definitely Republican) neighborhood situated near Washington, D.C. It occurs when the settled lives of middle-aged, retired federal employee (and avid gardener) Frank Butley (Scott 'Q' Marcus) and his no-nonsense, still-working engineer wife, Virginia (Denise Ryles), are unexpectedly impacted by the arrival of their new next door neighbors.

These initially welcomed newcomers are an ambitious, upwardly mobile young Chilean lawyer named Pablo Del Valle (Victor D. Parra) and his extremely pregnant, American-born Latina wife, Tania (Amy Beltran). He's working hard to make partner in an otherwise-Caucasian, top law firm and Tania is a doctoral student furthering her education while their baby is on the way.

Separated by several feet of a chain link fence (covered with strands of Frank's favorite English ivy), the co-existing sides of the couples' otherwise shared backyard, are as unlike as the people it divides. The Butleys' features a meticulously manicured English Garden — Frank's pride and joy that he has entered (to no avail) every year in the neighborhood's annual prize lawn competition.

On the other hand, the house that the young Del Valles have just purchased and moved into, is an obvious fixer-upper, with its neglected backyard definitely in dire need of culturally taught, native gardener Tania's tender, loving care.

The towering old oak tree that shades that

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Pictured in NCRT's "Native Gardens" are, from left, Scott 'Q' Marcus, Denise Ryles, Amy Beltran and Victor D. Parra.

yard is her joy — and the Butleys' nemesis.

They strongly suggest that the tree is a nuisance that should be cut down because of its unwanted acorns intruding on their side and invading Frank's pristine rows of elegant flowers. Needless to say, Tania disagrees with that "neighborly" suggestion, and also with his unsolicited opinion that the native plants that she plans on planting in their garden are "weeds."

All of this simmering "horticultural warfare" comes to a boil after Pablo has made the mistake of inviting members of his law firm to a "backyard party" on the upcoming weekend (to impress them with his social potential as a future partner).

Of course, in no way is his half of the yard ready for such an event.

In any case, Pablo finds out an important fact after looking at the fine print in their

home's deed that the existing fence (he's decided to replace with a new wooden one) had been built several feet over into the Butleys' side of the property line.

That means that Frank's beloved flowerbed is actually on Del Valle land, and subsequently — in following, heated discussions — it appears that it must be uprooted so that a new fence can be built. Soon, verbal insults start flying back and forth between the now feuding families.

They each eventually touch on every unspoken, taboo subject concerning both "sides" — unleashing all-out negative, social, racial and ethnic attitudes, as well as sexism, ageism, cultural privilege and "lack of taste." And, none of them seems aware of their own lapses in dealing "rationally" with all of the above.

However, since these controversial subjects are approached with such outrageously funny, over-the-top, ironic humor and slapstick physical mayhem, including acorn throwing and hose squirting fights, the playwright's intention is crystal clear: making audiences understand that laughter is always the best way to illuminate, and ultimately overcome, prejudice.

NCRT's terrific, ensemble is perfectly cast in the roles they so entertainingly inhabit. The always solid and entertaining Ryles and her equally adept scene partner, Marcus, co-anchor the production with astute portrayals and deft, comedic timing. Interestingly enough Marcus says this is his very first "comedy" role. You won't believe it, because he's so effortlessly funny in every nuanced move he makes as the frustrated Frank — who waves his garden's insect sprayer around like Don Quixote's lance tilting at annoying windmills.

And, balancing Marcus and Ryles nicely with increasingly confident and believable performances are Parra and Beltran. They both have charm to burn in their ever-evolving roles, and by the final curtain they completely own the people they've been creating.

In addition to the four leading roles, there are actually two more cast members — Jacob Holper and Michael Enis — with cameo roles as "Landscapers." Although they never say a word throughout the show, they're a hoot as they dead-pan come and go in the midst of the comedic chaos.

The silent duo perform such key, plot tasks as tearing down the existing chain link fence, pulling up Frank's unfortunately planted flower garden, right before it can be judged for the coveted prize and dragging in lumber to build the new-and-improved wood fence.

But, the question that remains is whether

separating their backyards with a bigger and better fence is going to make these couples "better neighbors." Well, in spite of everything they don't agree on, there's still an outside chance they can finally reach out to each other with respect, friendship and mutual understanding.

But before that happens, the audience has the opportunity to enjoy one of the most amazingly beautiful and detailed scenic designs ever constructed on the NCRT stage. Designed by Diana Lynn, it's absolutely gorgeous and realistic — from the yards and

gardens and big tree to the back steps and entrances into the two houses.

In fact, everything looks so real that the audience actually gasped on opening night when all of the "careful" destruction of the fence and flowers began. It had all become so personal. Now that's what I call creating reality. Wonderful! The intricate construction was done by Brian Butler, Holper and Calder Johnson over "several hundred hours." It was worth it!

And, director Michelle Purnell deserves bouquets for overseeing the production's

success on every artistic level. Along with her actors, this further includes Johnson's excellent lighting, sound and properties (with Lynn) designs and the character-perfect costumes designed by Isabella Ceja, constructed by Megan Hughes. The stage manager is Kira Gallaway, assisted by Holper, and the stagehand is Enis.

"Native Gardens" is NCRT's second production presented during the three-year commitment to their LaVoz Project to produce one play annually written by a LatinX playwright. It's their pleasure and honor to do

so, to promote this cultural representation in our community.

So, don't miss "Native Gardens" as it continues its insightful, hilarious run at NCRT on Fridays and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m. and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. through Feb. 10.

Tickets are \$18 general and \$16 for students and seniors. They can be purchased in advance by calling 707-442-6278 or online at www.ncrt.net. The theater is located at 300 Fifth St., Eureka, and tickets can also be purchased at the door 30 minutes before curtain.