

Dorset Theatre Festival, Dorset, VT

Native Gardens by Karen Zacarías. Directed by Tatyana-Marie Carlo.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.



Sallu Wingert, Maribe; Martinez; Photo: Joey Moro

“You can’t appease greed.”

A good comedy is hard to find these days. This was the second one I saw in just a week. Unfortunately, there were so many errors in the Dorset Theatre production the effect of the show, which deals with ongoing social problems - a series of them - was weakened and the total effect was slightly less than satisfying. For instance, a tree on the set is constantly referred to as a very healthy oak, but the tree on-stage was NOT an oak and its yellowed, frond-like leaves were not even remotely oak or healthy. Every time the tree is referred to, and my companion counted eight of them, a normal audience reaction was to look at the tree. It was very distracting being so peculiarly un-oak-like. Things like that can ruin a show.

Karen Zacarías’s script is both poignant and funny. The play has a lot to say about neighbors, prejudice, legal turmoils, gardening, and other push-button issues. The Dorset6 Theatre Festival presentation brings it to life with ease and with talent. Maribel Marinez as the very pregnant new neighbor Tania Del Valle is wonderful. Orlando Javier Hernandez as her husband Pablo is almost her equal. His portrayal of a Chilean lawyer cannot be faulted, but he is almost too serious and dramatic for this comedy, and this throws the balance off the laughs.

The long-term neighbors, Frank and Virginia Butley are played by Tom Aulino and Sally Wingert. They make a delightful pair. Defending their garden and their property line was handled perfectly and as tensions grew so did these two characters. The combination of social and legal actions among the foursome both drove the plot and developed the people in conflict. Everyone

wants to be a good neighbor, and though all agree to compromise, tensions on all issues drive them nearly to homicide. The mixture of verbal comedy and physical tragedy made this an intriguing exercise in relationship theater.



Olando Javier Hernandez, Maribel Martinez, Tom Aulino, Sally Wingert; Photo: Joey Moro

It is unfortunate that director Tatyana-Marie Carlo didn't pay a bit more attention to the physical production of her Company debut play. The show approaches perfection in the performances and she has clearly worked well with her cast in developing character and interplay. What is missing is her director's eye on the things that take away the reality of the play. The set, designed by Rodrigo Escalante is good looking (except for that tree) although the two houses don't physically seem to be in the area of Washington DC described by the Butleys. Amanda Downing Carney's costumes were fine except they weren't necessarily right for the upper-class folks who inhabit the play. Carolina Ortiz Herrera provided fine lighting.

If you can, as I mostly did, ignore the physical and occasionally verbal gaffes this is an amiable comedy, just right for summer theater with an excellent cast and load of laughs. See it/

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Native Gardens plays at the Dorset Theatre Festival, 104 Chenet Road, Dotsry, VT through July 21. For information and tickets go to dirsettheatrefestival.org or call (802) 867-2223 ext. 101.