



GUTHRIE
THEATER

McGuire Proscenium Stage / July 15 - Aug 20, 2017

Native

Gardens

by KAREN ZACARÍAS
directed by BLAKE ROBISON

PLAY GUIDE

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The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.

Guthrie Theater Play Guide

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Synopsis

Pablo and Tania Del Valle are a young Latino couple who have recently relocated to an affluent Washington, D.C, neighborhood. Pablo is a rising attorney, and his very pregnant wife Tania is preparing to defend her doctoral dissertation. Their next-door neighbors, Virginia and Frank Butley, are welcoming but nervous about changes to their community. After the Del Valles reveal their plan to update their dilapidated house and yard, the Butleys eagerly offer their approval. Tania and Frank bond swiftly over their mutual love of gardening, though their styles are vastly different, with Frank preferring the traditional English garden and Tania advocating for native, local plants.

When Pablo, pressured to impress the partners at his new law firm, accidentally “volunteers” to host an office barbeque one weekend, the Del Valles work quickly to get their yard in shape. During the process of replacing their fence, they discover that their property line actually falls two feet into the middle of Frank’s prized garden. With both the barbeque and the neighborhood horticulture competition fast approaching, the couples have little time to settle the dispute before the fence must be installed. What begins as a property debate soon spirals into a comedic border dispute, exposing both couples’ notions of race, taste, class and privilege.

In *Native Gardens*, playwright Karen Zacarias successfully weaves pertinent societal issues into fast-paced, humorous dialogue. And, she’s managed to create four sympathetic characters: “Everybody has a heart. Nobody is trying to be mean. They’re all good Americans, just four different kinds of Americans.”



The cast of *Native Gardens*

(from left) Steve Hendrickson, Sally Wingert, Dan Domingues and Jacqueline Correa

Characters

Tania Del Valle

29, a passionate, highly energized, very pregnant Ph.D. candidate and amateur gardener.

Pablo Del Valle

31, Tania’s husband and an ambitious, savvy young attorney.

Virginia Butley

60s, an assertive, direct, no-nonsense engineer.

Frank Butley

60s, Virginia’s husband and an excitable, caring, detail-oriented federal employee and competitive gardener.



About the Playwright: Karen Zacarías

Karen Zacarías was recently hailed by *American Theatre Magazine* as one of the most produced playwrights in the USA. Her plays include *Destiny of Desire*, *Into the Beautiful North*, *Just Like Us*, *Mariela in the Desert*, *The Sins of Sor Juana*, *The Book Club Play*, *Legacy of Light* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*. She also collaborated on the libretto for the ballets *Sleepy Hollow* and *Hemingway: The Sun Also Rises* for the Washington Ballet at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. Her plays have been produced at The Kennedy Center, The Goodman Theater, South Coast Rep, Cincinnati Playhouse, RoundHouse Theater, GALA Hispanic Theater, Denver Theater Center, Dallas Theater Center and many more. Karen is a core founder of the Latinx Theater Commons, a national network that strives to update the American narrative to include

Latinx stories. She is also the founder of Young Playwrights' Theater, an award-winning theater company that teaches playwriting in public schools in Washington, D.C.

“Writing is a choice. Even when I feel I’m going to burst if I don’t write, it is still a choice. Playwriting is the oddest of choices, because “success” is so ethereal and impossible. But as an extroverted writer, theatre was the one place where I could interact with the world and still write. So although a play may take forever (or never) to be produced, I get to interact and take pleasure in that world. I realize that the more I write, the less I live. But, oddly enough, the more I live, the more I can write. Since childhood, I have seen people become bitter because they have made big sacrifices and given everything to their art; and art (or any profession, no matter how passionate) will never give you everything back. I have tried to be really patient and realistic with our odd profession. I fight the “giving-up” demons by putting creative emphasis in a lot of other facets in my life — my family, my students and teaching, my grant writing, my bad cooking. Consequently, I am embarrassingly un-prolific, but,

strangely enough, I have had the satisfaction of seeing every one of my plays publicly staged in one way or another.”

Interview with Karen Zacarías, *American Theatre Magazine*, January, 2006.

“The greatest challenge facing me is the idea of not only staying true to your voice, but realizing when your voice starts to change as you grow older and new experiences emerge. I read a play that I wrote 10 years ago and I think, “Who is that?” Others read this play now and sometimes someone will say, “Oh, this is not what I expected from you, and yet I’m really happy that you did it.” I think allowing for this unpredictability and also allowing for the fact that we are not just one story, that there is not just one voice within us, is critical. Writing a play is like raising a child. Each play is really different and they may have different motivations and different aspirations. So, for me, there is the challenge as a writer of not whipping your children and, by avoiding that, allowing them to grow.”

Karen Zacarias interviewed by Mark Bly, “Where do we go from here? Four playwrights anticipate the seismic shifts of the new century” *American Theatre Magazine*, April 2007.



A Place at the Party

Guthrie Literary Intern Emily Gustafson caught up with *Native Gardens* playwright Karen Zacarías during rehearsal to talk laughter, writing and crazy neighbors.

EMILY GUSTAFSON: Can you tell me a little about your inspiration for *Native Gardens*? Was there a specific moment or idea that prompted the play?

KAREN ZACARÍAS: I was at a dinner party where someone brought up an altercation that had happened with a neighbor, and other people started bringing up their neighbor stories, and what struck me about them was both the passion and absurdity around these stories, that they got very big very quickly, and contentious, and how everyone regretted that it had gotten like that. Living next to somebody who you're in a fight with is exhausting.

EG: And it gives you a different idea of who they are.

KZ: Exactly. So many of our battles are about land and culture and getting vested in our anger, and so I thought it would be interesting to attack that comically, hopefully in a way that lowers everyone's defenses and allows us to examine it in an accessible way.

EG: When I was first reading the script, I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is so relevant to so many charged issues today like land rights and border walls and separation from people who are different from us." But the play made me laugh out loud just sitting in my cubicle reading it to myself. How do you see comedy as an effective vehicle for discussing and teasing out these really charged issues?

KZ: Well, I think comedy is disarming. I mean literally. You let down your armor so you can laugh. And if you laugh, you're taking things in. I want people who

disagree to watch this play and be able to laugh at themselves.

EG: I've loved being in the rehearsal room with you and witnessing the collaboration around your play. Is it always so collaborative at the beginning of your rehearsal process?

KZ: Yes, yes. I've had the fortune of working with [Director Blake Robison] on a number of my plays, and he's a dear friend and collaborator and understands my voice. And I'm fortunate to work with a number of different directors and dramaturgs and actors who help me become a better writer. Having a dramaturg like the Guthrie's Jo Holcomb, who has known my work since ... well, she read my first play when I was 23, so she understands the trajectory of my voice. Not every process is like that. But this is a new play.

EG: How much has your script actually changed from when it debuted at Cincinnati Playhouse last January to now?

KZ: Well, you know, structurally, not at all. It's in the nuance of certain lines and how hard we want to hit certain topics and how much we want to refer to what's going on in the news today. We've done a delicate dance of going back and forth, and we're in the process of figuring that out in a way that illuminates these issues and pulls people in. What we don't want to do is to shut anyone out, have anyone stop listening. Right? That's the idea - that everybody feels that they have a place at this garden party.

EG: What kind of discussions are you hoping that people will have either in talkbacks or in their cars after seeing *Native Gardens*?


KZ: What I like about this play is I think both couples are really good people, and they mean well. They're not out to do harm, and I think that's really important. Their tempers or manners get the worst of them at a moment, but none of them are irredeemable. The idea that people can heal and forgive is interesting. That's much more interesting to me, both as an artist and as a human being, than the idea of being intractable. And a fence and plants is a really fun, concrete way to explore that. It's also been in a sense a tool for being able to start different kinds of difficult conversations about class, about race, about taste and about ways of coming around for social justice and civility.

EG: Do you have any crazy neighbor stories yourself?

KZ: I think everybody has a crazy neighbor story. You can go online and check this, but a lot of them take place in Florida.

[laughter]

EG: That's hilarious.

KZ: I mean, there's something about land and neighbor and where you live and where you rest your head at night - there's something poetic and primal that comes out from that. And so I'm not making fun of it, but by examining it and putting a little bit of light on it hopefully it gives us a moment to pause and to find another way to build a bridge. 



In order to bring Scenic Designer Joseph Tilford's set to life, the Guthrie's scene and props shops did some impressive landscaping of their own, right here in the building. While our carpenters were constructing two similarly-sized yet distinct townhouses, the paint shop was creating the stage floor foundation for vastly different yards - one pristine, the other in a state of mild disarray. Our talented props artisans added the finishing touches, building prize-worthy trees and flora.

Native Gardens model and set designs by scenic designer Joseph Tilford

The Guthrie's Props Artisans: Building *Native Gardens*



PHOTOS: ELIZABETH DEACON

(Clockwise from top left) The *Native Gardens* set moves onto the McGuire Proscenium; Props Artisan Nick Golfis in full tree-building mode; Master Props Artisan Seán McArdle at work in our onsite shop.

Mending Wall

Robert Frost (1874 – 1963)

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.'

From *The Poetry of Robert Frost* by Robert Frost, edited by Edward Connery Lathem, 1916.