

In the razor-sharp 'Native Gardens' white privilege fuels a ridiculous neighbor dispute

Jay Gabler, July 26, 2017

For the Guthrie's new production of the 2016 play, scenic designer Joseph Tilford has filled the McGuire Proscenium Stage with a detailed model of two historic houses, packed in close proximity in Washington, D.C. Tilford and his team had some precise specifications to work with, because the script is full of specific references to the houses' exteriors: a subject of increasingly heated debate between the Butleys and their new neighbors, the Del Valles.

Frank (Steve Hendrickson) and Virginia (Sally Wingert) Butley are white baby boomers who have lived in their house for decades, cultivating an immaculately groomed European-style garden—you could cut yourself on the corner of Frank's hedges. Moving into what used to be a neglected student rental, young Latinx couple Tania (Jacqueline Correa) and Pablo (Dan Domingues) Del Valle have aspirations to turn their yard into a native garden, with flowers indigenous to the Mid-Atlantic region. In other words, the kind of plants Frank regards as weeds. At first, everything seems to go swimmingly. The Butleys embrace the Del Valles' proposal to replace an ancient chain-link fence with a stately new wood model—but the older couple are taken aback when a survey reveals that the long-forgotten property line runs right through Frank's flower bed. With a high-stakes weekend coming up for both couples (Pablo is hosting a party for his coworkers, while Frank's garden is being judged for a competition), tensions flare over the 2-foot discrepancy.



Steve Hendrickson, Jacqueline Correa, Dan Domingues and Sally Wingert (photo by Dan Norman)

Blake Robison, who commissioned and directed the world premiere in Cincinnati, heads the Guthrie production as well. He keeps the tone broad, and the domestic nature of the dispute gives the play a distinctly sitcom feel. This comedy, though, has a lot of bite, which Zacarias and Robison introduce without ever letting the show's momentum slack.

The plot's central conflict becomes a ripe case study in white privilege. Faced with the fact that they've long assumed ownership of something that's not actually theirs, the Butleys take a defensive stance. In the play's most excruciatingly timely lines, the older couple argue that they're the victims of discrimination. Deciding that their wealthy, white status is being held against them, Virginia declares, "That's classicism and racism!"

What this show demands of its actors, rather than subtlety, is crack comic timing and generous collaboration. All four leads come through, with the result that the production remains engaging and entertaining amid all the slings and arrows. It's a summer show you'll find substantive and resonant, no matter which side of the fence you're on.