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THE PLAY

Tania and **Pablo** are living the American Dream.

Tania is on the brink of both giving birth and obtaining her PhD in anthropology. Pablo is working toward making partner at a prestigious D.C. law firm. The couple has just bought a house in Northwest D.C. It's a fixer-upper with an overgrown yard, but they are excited to tackle the project and make it a home.

Their new neighbors are **Frank** and **Virginia**, an older white couple who have deep roots in the neighborhood and D.C. Over the years, Frank has carefully tended a prize-worthy (he hopes!) garden.

True, the couples have different backgrounds and taste in landscaping, but that doesn't mean they can't be good neighbors.

Their introduction goes well. They share a glass of wine and agree wholeheartedly that an ugly chain-link fence between their properties needs to come down.

Then, things become anything but neighborly. It's an all-out border dispute and, along with questions of race and privilege, the hammers and garden hoses are coming out.

But good fences make good neighbors ... right?



NATIVE GARDENS

BY **KAREN ZACARIÁS** | DIRECTED BY **BLAKE ROBISON**
A CO-PRODUCTION WITH **GUTHRIE THEATER**
KREEGER THEATER | SEPTEMBER 15 – OCTOBER 22, 2017

“What is that American saying:
Good fences make good friends?”

— Pablo, *Native Gardens*

Native Gardens is generously sponsored by **Beth Newburger Schwartz**.

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MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



KAREN ZACARÍAS

“I always think of writing as an exploration, not a forgone conclusion – and it isn’t until after the piece is ‘done’ that I discover the various themes that have been nagging at my core.”

Born in Mexico, Karen Zacarías is an award-winning playwright who lives in Washington, D.C., and has her plays performed throughout the country. She is one of the most produced Latinx playwrights in the United States.

Her experience in the arts started early. At age six, she spent her allowance on a plastic typewriter. At the holidays, she and her cousins would invent and put on shows. This childhood love grew into a study and a career with Zacarías obtaining degrees from Stanford University and Boston University.

Today, her plays include *Destiny of Desire*, *The Sins of Sor Juana*, *Mariela in the Desert*, *The Book Club Play*, *Legacy of Light* and adaptations of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Just Like Us*. She is well-known for her Theater for Young Audiences musicals, including *Einstein is a Dummy*, *Looking for Roberto Clemente* and *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans*.

Zacarías was the first playwright-in-residence for Arena Stage’s American Voices New Play Institute. She is also the founder of Young Playwrights’ Theater (YPT), which teaches playwrighting in D.C. public schools.

SOCIAL ISSUES TAKE CENTER STAGE

America in 2017 is crackling with emotion and political division. Land rights, race, privilege, fear of the stranger: these issues are in the headlines and in the backyards of the *Native Gardens*’ characters.

The seed of the play was planted at a dinner party, when friends of Karen Zacarías were sharing stories of situations with neighbors that had started small then escalated, sometimes absurdly. Zacarías realized this common occurrence was an opportunity to explore something bigger.

“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,” Zacarías said in an interview with Emily Gustafson at Guthrie Theater.

“I think comedy is disarming,” she continued. “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.”

Since its premiere in 2016, the play has changed somewhat to reflect current debate. It’s been a balancing act for Zacarías and the play’s **creative team**.

“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.”

Zacarías strives to make both sides of the fence likeable and sympathetic.

“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 ... 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 ... to start different kinds of difficult conversations about class, about race, about taste and about ways of coming around for social justice and civility.”

creative team — the people who collaborate to produce a play, including the director, designers, playwright and researchers

Arena Stage has produced three of Zacarías’ other plays, including the telenovela comedy *Destiny of Desire*, which also grappled with social issues, including immigration, guns and Latinx rights in America.



ACTIVITY

Art is often inspired by headline news. Using a reputable news source, look at the headlines both on the homepage and farther into the site. Which of these social issues would make a thought-provoking play? What story would you tell to illuminate your chosen issues?



Photo of Elia Saldaña, Esperanza America, and Nicholas Rodriguez in *Destiny of Desire* by Tony Powell.

NATIVE V. EXOTIC PLANTS

FRANK: You mean, weeds? You are planting weeds, on purpose?

TANIA: A lot of plants we think of as weeds are actually native plants and they have a purpose.

Tania and Frank want very different gardens for different reasons.

Many American flower gardeners, like Frank, plant formal gardens bursting with color, tightly packed with the plants readily available in greenhouses. Many of these plants are exotic, meaning they are not native to the United States. Flowers like tulips, peonies, dahlias, daylilies and even many daisies are originally from Europe, Asia and Africa. Some of these plants were brought to the Americas long ago, and have become standard flowers in gardens.

Frank's garden is for beauty and pleasure — “a canvas on which to plant.” Removing his oak tree provided him with more sun and garden space and protected his home from falling branches. Frank is meticulous about weeding and uses pesticides to keep bugs from eating his flowers.

For Tania, planting a native garden is an opportunity to build an ecosystem in her backyard. She mentions researching the subject, citing an actual interview with Doug Tallamy, an entomologist and proponent of native gardening.

Tallamy says that only 5% of the United States is naturally pristine (unaffected by humans). Therefore, to preserve our country's biodiversity, humans need to use some of their space to cultivate plants native to their region.

It's a food web. Native bugs have evolved to only eat and process native plants. These bugs, in turn, are food for birds and so on.

Preservation of native plants is important to the survival of species. The population of monarch butterflies is rapidly decreasing, in part, because their caterpillars' only food source — milkweed — is disappearing. Other plants are not viable food sources because they are toxic to the caterpillars.

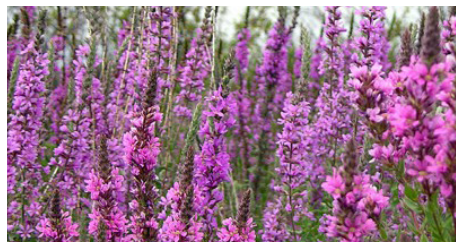
Some exotic plants, like English ivy and kudzu, are destructive and invasive, escaping from gardens and spreading into nature. There, they choke out other plants, wrapping around trees or taking over space meant for native grasses. An invasive species called “cheatgrass” in the American Southwest is more flammable than native grasses.

Not all exotic plants are invasive or dangerous. They may not contribute to the ecosystem, but they don't harm it. However, gardeners need to consider the needs of these plants. For example, non-native plants in drought-plagued California demand more water.

Tania's garden may not be popular in her neighborhood. Some people see native gardens as a collection of weeds. They think their natural look is unkempt. The bugs her garden attracts may make their way into their gardens.

Is there a way for these two gardeners to find common ground?

MAKING A TRADE



Sometimes a native plant, like gayfeather (top), can be substituted for similar non-native plant, like loosestrife (bottom).

MID-ATLANTIC NATIVE PLANTS



Carolina Silverbell



Virginia Creeper

EXOTIC PLANTS



Tulip



Daylily

INVASIVE PLANTS



Invasive plants like porcelainberry (top) spread prolifically. The National Park Service volunteers in D.C. fight to reclaim trees and structures (bottom). Photos by Kay Rogers.



Tania suggests that Frank listen to a report on NPR about native plants. Listen to the report *Bringing Nature Home* by Doug Tallamy.
<http://tinyurl.com/nprgardens>

GLOSSARY

ADVERSE POSSESSION: a law under which a trespasser can obtain legal possession of someone else's land — free of charge — by treating the property as their own. The trespasser's use of the property has to meet certain standards (ex. length of use, paying taxes, etc.)

CODE: a set of laws and regulations. Building codes are often concerned with safety standards. If someone wants to build a fence, garage or addition to their property they must obtain a permit and make sure it meets the legal standards.

EPIGRAPH: a quotation or motto at the beginning of a work of literature that sets forth the theme. *Native Gardens'* epigraph is "The difference between a flower and a weed... is a judgment" (*author unknown*).

HORTICULTURE: the science or art of cultivating plants.

INVASIVE: tending to spread, often aggressively.

LOCKHEED: short for Lockheed Martin. For 20 years Virginia was the only female engineer in her division at this prestigious defense contractor.

SQUATTER'S RIGHTS: a common term for "adverse possession," but it evokes negative images.

SURVEY: to determine the boundaries, area or elevation of land.



Explore the scope of D.C.'s building regulations at <https://dcra.dc.gov/>

MAKING PARTNER

This garden party isn't just a garden party. Pablo needs to impress his boss because he is trying to make partner at his law firm. A partner is a co-owner of the firm. According to the American Bar Association, this process can take around 10 years. In addition to working long hours and bringing in lucrative clients, ambitious lawyers need to seize every opportunity to build relationships and impress their colleagues and supervisors, especially early on.

Pablo pictures adding his name to the firm: "Smith, Krause, Wilson and Del Valle." Partnership is coveted, and Pablo, as a Chilean-American lawyer, would be part of a slim minority nationally. A 2015 *Washington Post* article stated, "Although blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans now constitute about a third of the population and a fifth of law school graduates, they make up fewer than 7 percent of law firm partners."



Photo of Jacqueline Correa and Dan Domingues by Dan Norman for Guthrie Theater.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What does it mean to be a good neighbor?

2

What is the impact of exploring social issues through comedy?

3

How can we best discuss important issues when we disagree?

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

"Bringing Nature Home" *NPR*
<http://tinyurl.com/nprgardens>

"Fires and Invasive Grass Threaten the American West" *NPR*
<http://tinyurl.com/invasivewest>

"How to Become a Law Firm Partner" American Bar Association
<http://tinyurl.com/partnersteps>

"The law is the least diverse profession in the nation. And lawyers aren't doing enough to change that." *The Washington Post*
<http://tinyurl.com/wpdiversity>

Wex (Free Legal Dictionary)
Cornell University
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex>

"Why Do People Not Grow Native Plants?" *The Granada Native Garden Newsletter*
<http://tinyurl.com/alivegarden>



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Thank you to Guthrie Theater for the text of the Karen Zacarias interview.

Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.