

ASBURY & PARK PRESS

World premiere 'Hurricane Diane' on stage in Red Bank



Becca Blackwell (left) and Kate Wetherhead in "Hurricane Diane."
(Photo: COURTESY OF T. Charles Erickson)

TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT

The Romans called him Bacchus, but to the ancient Greeks he's Dionysus — the kind of game-changer who blows into town like a hurricane, and the god of (among other things) wine, grapes, joy, fertility, cult-like religious fervor, and that special form of "ritual madness" known as Theater.

When he wrote “The Bacchae” way back around 400 B.C., the classical dramatist Euripides gave us a Dionysus that was a vengeful agent of destruction; obsessed with personal slights and driven by a need to be worshipped. While such a figure might be considered far-fetched in 2017, a celebrated playwright named Madeleine George has given us a slyly skewed, seductively comic take on the ancient deity — and she’s bringing it to the stage of Red Bank’s Two River Theater, by way of Monmouth County’s suburban streetscape.

The world-premiere engagement represents the first official project for George in her capacity as Playwright in Residence at Two River, and in “Hurricane Diane” the Pulitzer Prize nominee — for “The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence” — summons a modern Dionysus who is a she rather than a he. Or maybe even “they,” the preferred gender pronoun of lead player Becca Blackwell, the trans actor whose other endeavors include a solo show called “They, Themselves and Schmeer.”

As Dionysus/Diane, Blackwell arrives Earthside in the form of a “lesbian separatist permaculture gardener from Vermont”; one whose mission (to “usher in a new era of Dionysian worship in the dying days of the American empire, as the planet warms and the oceans rise”) runs right through a certain cul-de-sac in a slightly other-dimensional version of Red Bank.

As the play progresses, the neighborhood women (Mia Barron, Nikiya Mathis, Danielle Skraastad, Kate Wetherhead) become 21st-century surrogates of the Greek god’s female acolytes, as their backyard environment is transformed into “a wild wonderland of paw-paw trees and chokeberry bushes.”

Becca Blackwell as Diane in “Hurricane Diane” at Two River Theater in Red Bank.



(Photo: COURTESY OF T. Charles Erickson)

The playwright, whose previous premiere at Two River — the 2011 comedy “Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England” — was set in “an imaginary version” of her college town,

relishes the opportunity to create something over which the Red Bank audience could have “total ownership,” having found that audience “curious, adventurous, hungry for interaction ... That’s like catnip to a playwright!”

Attracted to the legendary figure of Dionysus as an agent for “unleashing what’s under the conscious mind,” the Brooklyn-based writer and educator has managed to combine that fascination with a very real concern for the truly game-changing chaos represented by climate change (and the lingering legacy of a hurricane named Sandy), in a way that “also offers people a chance to interrogate their own feelings about these climatic shifts.”



Nikiya Mathis as Renee in Hurricane Diane at Two River Theater. (Photo: Charles Erickson Photography)

Rest assured, it is a comedy, and one with “a lot of moving parts,” as suggested by the presence of acclaimed choreographer Sonya Tayeh, a two-time Emmy nominee for “So You Think You Can Dance.” Also a part of the show is the folk-music duo The Bengsons, whose many credits also include soundtrack exposure on that popular TV dance competition.

Obie winner Leigh Silverman, who directed “No Place To Go” for Two River back in 2012 (and whose Broadway credits include a Tony nomination for the 2014 musical “Violet”), oversees the company of surreal housewives, and a gardener with one decidedly ambitious agenda.

“It’s a humbling hobby...one where you’re in control, and yet not,” observes George of the profession she chose for her lead character. “You have to work with what you have, which to me is a good metaphor at this turning moment in human history.”

HURRICANE DIANE

WHEN: Previews through Jan. 26; opens Jan. 27, through Feb. 12

WHERE: Two River Theater,
21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

TICKETS: \$20 to \$70

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org