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Theater review: 'Hurricane Diane' at Two River

TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT Jan. 30, 2017



Mia Barron in “Hurricane Diane” at Red Bank’s Two River Theater. (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

It’s a piece of work whose central character is a throwback from another century; invested with vast new powers, and driven by a desire to bring chaos upon the established order, as well as by an obsessive need for being worshipped and adored.

When she developed “Hurricane Diane” for Two River Theater in her new role as the Red Bank company’s Playwright in Residence, Madeleine George probably was not thinking about anything more comedically current than the seemingly imminent climate change apocalypse. If anything, the Pulitzer-nominated writer was setting her sights on the long-ago past — about 400 B.C. in fact, when the ancient dramatist Euripides placed the Greek deity Dionysus at center stage for his tragedy “The Bacchae.”



Becca Blackwell in “Hurricane Diane.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Now in its world premiere engagement at Two River, “Diane” deposits the god of wine, grapes, theater, fertility, religious fervor and ritual madness into the middle of a sterile suburban kitchen, in the guise of a “lesbian separatist permaculture gardener from Vermont” with a mission to remake the Earth in her image, one paw-paw tree planting at a time.

It’s a decidedly loose rip on Euripides, with a generally more amiable version of that classical play’s vengeful, spiteful Dionysus — played here by the mustachioed trans actor Becca Blackwell as a powerfully persuasive seducer in plaid shirt and cargo shorts. Informing the audience of her intentions — nothing short of transforming this imperiled planet into a lushly overgrown altar of uninhibited, primeval worship — the cosmic comeback-kid chooses to launch her ambitious undertaking from a certain cul-de-sac in a place called Red Bank.

Well, maybe not Red Bank per se — the play’s producers have walked back the specific setting since the 2016 announcement of the project, with any hyper-local references confined to reminiscences of superstorm Sandy’s lingering legacy, as well as multiple mentions of a real life (but now sadly defunct) Italian market.



Danielle Skraastad in a scene from “Hurricane Diane.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

That said, there exist definite degrees of Jersey attitude among the grown-up “girls” who populate this upscale dead end — “Real Housewives”-style supermom and weather obsessive Pam (Danielle Skraastad), frustrated magazine editor Renee (Nikiya Mathis), somewhat ditzy abandoned spouse Beth (Kate Wetherhead), and the notably named pharma-company professional Sandy (Mia Barron).

It’s Sandy who first invites the enigmatic Dionysus/Diane into her home with a plea to “bring my fantasies to life” — something about a “special but typical” landscaping layout with “curb appeal” and a wrought iron accent bench — and an unwillingness to compromise that presents the biggest challenge to the truck-driving stranger from another time and place. As for the other denizens of this husband-less environment, Diane finds them worthy projects of potential conquest and ultimate conversion into her “Bacchae” acolytes — although even an eons-old god is bound to butt up against elemental forces that roil and swirl beyond her influence.



Nikiya Mathis in a scene from “Hurricane Diane.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Returning to Two River Theater following a five year absence, the Tony-nominated director Leigh Silverman wrangles some controlled comic performances from her quintet of players, keeping things rooted among the fast-growing thickets of George’s larger-than-life scenario. Despite the sociopolitical undercurrents, there’s a distinct lack of preachiness to the play’s accelerated climate-change apocalypse — if anything, you’re likely to come away from it having learned some useful information about permaculture gardening and species like bladderwort, foxglove and milkvetch.

There comes a point in the proceedings, however, when the mystical overpowers the mundane, and the rituals of suburban living — lawn mowing, spinning class, storm preparedness drills — give way to ceremonies infinitely more primal. Minus one of the company’s signature spectacular sets (the 90-minute play is performed without intermission inside the building’s black-box space), the transition into the fantastic and the furious is conveyed through some ace work by lighting designer Jen Schriever and sound pro Bray Poor — as well as through an interlude choreographed by Emmy nominee Sonya Tayeh, and a surprising original song composed by the folk duo The Bengsons.



Becca Blackwell (left) and Kate Wetherhead in “Hurricane Diane.” (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Ultimately, “Hurricane Diane” is a untamed and quirky ensemble exercise that balances its countertop seductions, disastrous visions and structural rough spots with overall good humor, which might have come in handy when studying Euripides back in school.

HURRICANE DIANE

WHEN: Through Feb. 12

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

TICKETS: \$20 to \$70

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