

# Talkin' BROADWAY

## *Hurricane Diane*

Two River Theater

Review by Cameron Kelsall

Euripides' *Bacchae* is not commonly produced today, but when it is, the central role of Dionysus is frequently cast as a virile young man—perfect for whipping a group of impressionable women into sexual frenzy. This kind of casting decision makes it easy to forget that the Greek god of wine, theater, and religious ecstasy is frequently described as feminine or androgynous. The brilliant Madeleine George (*The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence*) plays with this hybridity in *Hurricane Diane*, currently receiving its world premiere at Two River Theater, in which Dionysus



**Becca Blackwell and Kate Wetherhead**

*Photo by T. Charles Erickson*

is reborn as a gender-nonconforming permaculture gardener dead set on turning the women of a Red Bank, New Jersey, cul-de-sac into her latest group of maenads.

If the term "permaculture" stopped you dead in your tracks, don't worry. This radical approach to horticulture—in which gardens are transformed into self-sustaining ecosystems—is inventively and hilariously explained throughout the play. We first learn about it when Dionysus—now Diane (Becca Blackwell)—pitches Sandy (Mia Barron), one of the cul-de-sac's wealthy matrons, on the joys of pawpaw trees and bladderwort. Sandy's tastes run more toward HGTV, and she dismisses Diane with a cultivated coolness. This early encounter sets Sandy up as Diane's main foil, the Pentheus of the play.

The other women of the cul-de-sac fall more easily under Diane's spell. They include Renee (Nikiya Mathis), an editor with HGTV magazine, who was herself a radical lesbian gardener

before settling into the straight life; Pam (Danielle Skraastad), a stereotypical Italian American with a foul mouth and a strong desire to turn her suburban patch into a verdant Mediterranean meadow; and Beth (Kate Wetherhead), the youngest of the group, whose husband has recently left her. One by one, they turn their gardens—and their bodies—over to Diane. Sandy remains the only holdout, growing more frustrated by the day as her neighborhood is taken over.

George smartly allows most of the play's ninety intermissionless minutes to function as a standard suburban comedy, with sharper edges creeping just below the surface (think "Desperate Housewives," back when it was still watchable). She has a keen ear for witty dialogue and an understanding of these suburban women, whose outward concerns don't seem to extend beyond their curbs, that is neither condescending nor patronizing. The fact that they are all so well drawn makes Diane's disruptive presence all the more jarring, just as Dionysus brought chaos to Thebes in the source material.

The last quarter of the play—in which George doubles down on her Greek influences—is the riskiest, and in a way, the least successful. George is prodigious in her appropriation of the style and thoughtful in her attempt to modernize it—we learn that Sandy is a more formidable foe for Diane than we might have expected. (The character's name is no accident.)

Director Leigh Silverman and choreographer Sonya Tayeh create a modern bacchanal that feels profound one moment and silly the next. And while the supremely talented Barron gives everything she's got in her confrontational scene with Blackwell's now-rabid Diane, it's hard to feel that her ascent to godlike status is somewhat unsupported by the text, occurring too abruptly. The play's final scene is not as moving or cathartic as it could be.

Despite these reservations, I find it hard to quibble with Silverman's briskly staged production, or with the excellent work of this cohesive ensemble. Nearly all of the action takes place on Rachel Hauck's well-appointed kitchen set, which serves to show how these disparate women have tried to homogenize their lives in an attempt to fit in. As Diane puts them in her thrall, we understand that her mission does not necessarily center around changing these women;; rather, she wants them to understand who they really are. Wetherhead is particularly charming as Diane's earliest convert; from the moment we meet her, we can tell by the flutter in her voice and her loose-limbed manner that a spell has been cast.

Although Diane is portrayed as a female in the text, Blackwell identifies as trans and uses gender neutral pronouns. They radiate a dually masculine and feminine energy that is ideal for a demigod who exists between genders. This duality is especially welcome in the prolonged early scene with Barron's Sandy, who becomes uncomfortable when she realizes that Diane is hitting on her. There were moments, especially in the play's final scenes, when I wished they would approach Diane's true nature with a bit more reckless abandon, but overall, it is a smart and daring performance.

Many regional theaters shy away from producing interesting and risky new works, so I applaud Two River Theater for putting its weight behind *Hurricane Diane*. It's not perfect, but it is exactly the kind of work that nonprofit companies should be cultivating. And the investment

appears to be paying off—many of the remaining performances (which continue through February 12) are already sold out.

*Hurricane Diane* continues at Two River Theater's Marian Huber Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, NJ, through Sunday, February 12, 2017. Tickets (\$20-70) can be purchased online at [www.tworivertheater.org](http://www.tworivertheater.org) or by calling 732-345-1400