

The Star-Ledger

'Hurricane Diane' review: A biting satire of N.J. suburban life



Mia Barron stars in the world premiere play "Hurricane Diane" at Two River Theater in Red Bank (Photo by T Charles Erickson)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media The Star-Ledger on February 03, 2017

All is not right in one upscale New Jersey cul-de-sac: a storm is brewing; marriages are crumbling; and the god of wine, sex and revelry is in town eager to conscript a few followers. These are the conditions that underlie the ambitious world-premiere play "Hurricane Diane," by Madeleine George -- a 2014 Pulitzer finalist for "The (curious case of) Watson Intelligence" -- now running at Red Bank's Two River Theater. Full of quick, funny wit, the play is a comedy with designs on high-minded social critique.

Its success in the latter endeavor is spotty -- the play's late portions run a bit off the rails -- but "Hurricane Diane" remains a droll treat and a smart mockery of suburban stasis.

The play opens as Diane (Becca Blackwell), "a lesbian separatist permaculture gardener from Vermont," announces her true identity of Dionysus to the audience, telling us that the time is ripe to come out of seclusion and gather a train of acolytes. She has deemed New Jersey the spot of prime pickings (the play was a commission by Two River, and George, a playwright in residence at the theater, capitalizes on plenty of opportunities for inside jokes with her Garden State audience).

But Diane's quest will prove more difficult than presumed, as her first target, Sandy Fleischer (Mia Barron), shows little eagerness to abandon the comfortable suburban mold. Undaunted, Diane

intensifies her efforts in targeting Sandy's friends around the cul-de-sac: Renee (Nikiya Mathis), Pam (Danielle Skraastad, regularly hilarious as the Jersiest of these Jersey women), and Beth (Kate Wetherhead).

Her friends are more easily won over than Sandy. But Diane knows she has to get Sandy to achieve achieve a proper cult.

The play is most fun when examining the slow, reluctant departure of these women from their hardline suburban principles. Rachel Hauck's perfectly minimalist set fills Two River's black box space with only a kitchen marble countertop and sink, adorned with a few stools and wine racks (we've all been in this house: the kitchen is about 400 square feet, and no doubt surrounded by 3,000 gaudy more).

The only marker of when the play moves from one kitchen to the next is the lady of the house's dish towel of choice. Identical floorplans and neatly manicured backyards suit these women just fine, and so Diane must pull out all the stops to lure them into her natural habitat of paw-paw trees and hedonism. In their resistance, George finds space aplenty to mock suburban ideals.

Obie-winner and Broadway veteran Leigh Silverman directs with an inventive eye for using the space's minimalism, and original music from the folk/rock duo The Bengsons underscores the ritualism into which the play progresses. Ultimately the play looks quite different at its conclusion than it did ninety minutes earlier, in part because of the natural world imposing itself on the constructed, but mostly because of the spiritual journeys of George's four women.

Such drastic changes inevitably seem abrupt in a short play, and "Hurricane Diane" doesn't avoid this pitfall. But the questions that the play's conclusion asks about human's relationship with nature and its forces resonate.

Hurricane Diane

Two River Theater 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank **Tickets:** available online (<http://www.tworivertheater.org/>). Running through February 12

*Patrick Maley may be reached at **patrickjmaley@gmail.com**. Find him on Twitter **@PatrickJMaley**. Find **NJ.com/Entertainment on Facebook**.*