

# THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

## THE GREEK GOD IN THE CUL DE SAC



Madeleine George, Two River Theater's first playwright in residence, brings her play "Hurricane Diane" to the theater Jan. 14 to Feb. 12.

By Mary Ann Bourbeau

RED BANK – There's a storm blowing into town this week and its name is Diane. "Hurricane Diane" will be presented at the Two River Theater from Jan. 14 to Feb. 12. It was written by Madeleine George, a Pulitzer Prize-finalist who is also the theater's first playwright in residence. In the show, the Greek god Dionysus takes form as Diane, a lesbian permaculture gardener from Vermont. Diane is on a mission to gather followers and restore the Earth to its natural state, and begins her mission in a Monmouth County cul-de-sac with the women who live there.

"The play is set in a version of Red Bank," she said. "It's my gift to the community." The story is adapted from *The Bacchae*, an ancient Greek tragedy written by Euripides. "In my version of the *Bacchae*, the god who comes to town is a permaculture gardener," said George. "I've been interested in gardens for a while. After Hurricane Sandy, I started to think about our relationship with the earth and the responsibility we take for it. I thought about how we respond to catastrophes and how we come together after them. I used an ancient Greek story to explore this idea."

Despite being based on a Greek tragedy, “Hurricane Diane” is a comedy.

“There’s a tremendous amount of silly, but it ultimately asks questions about our relationship to the planet and how we take care of it and each other.”

The cast of “Hurricane Diane” includes Mia Barron, Becca Blackwell, Nikiya Mathis, Danielle Skraastad and Kate Wetherhead. It is directed by two-time Obie Award-winner and Tony nominee Leigh Silverman with choreography by Sonya Tayeh, who received two Emmy nominations for the television show, “So You Think You Can Dance.” The show also includes an original song by the indie-folk duo the Bengsons.

George was raised in western Massachusetts and now lives in Brooklyn. She is the author of “Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England,” a show that premiered at Two River Theater in 2011. After that show was so well received, George was commissioned to write a new play for the theater and she wrote “Hurricane Diane,” inspired by her time in Red Bank.

As part of her residency, she will help generate new ideas for connecting the theater with the community, as she did so well with her post-play discussions with the audience during the run of “Seven Homeless Mammoths.”

“In my experience, the reasons real people give for coming or not coming to see plays are always more idiosyncratic and refreshing than the reasons playwrights imagine drive audience behavior,” she said.

George hopes the audience is filled with people who are interested in the literary dimensions of the play as well as people who like the dumb jokes and sex comedy aspect of it.

“Cul de sacs have always been super fascinating to me,” she said. “There’s something very cozy about a neighborhood like that. I’m interested in the nature of our relationships with our neighbors. You might never leave the block together, but those are the people who are there for you in an emergency.”

She decided in her play to portray the god as the female “Diane” instead of the male “Dionysus.” “Dionysus is a fascinating character,” she said. “He’s a male, but he’s often pictured with long, flowing curls and described as pretty or beautiful.”

George began writing plays as a high school student.

“I was a slightly weird kid,” she said. “Most people are not that nerdy.”

She earned a bachelor’s degree at Cornell University and a Master’s at New York University. She teaches at Bard College in New York and was a Pulitzer Prize-finalist for her play, “The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence.” A member of New Dramatists since 2010, she is the recipient of a Whiting Award, the Princess Grace Playwriting Fellowship and two MacDowell Fellowships. She will now spend three years as the Mellon Playwright in Residence at Two River Theater, thanks to a grant from the National Playwright Residency Program.

“Madeleine is a remarkable theater artist,” said John Dias, artistic director of Two River Theater. “There’s a particular combination of intellectual and theatrical adventurousness that is a hallmark of her work. I can’t wait to see what she brings to Two River as our first playwright in residence.”

Tickets are \$40 to \$70. For more information, visit [www.tworivertheater.org](http://www.tworivertheater.org). Arts and entertainment writer Mary Ann Bourbeau can be reached at [mbourbeau@tworivertimes.com](mailto:mbourbeau@tworivertimes.com).