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In two comedies, a playwright sides with our better selves

By [Don Aucoin](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 8, 2019, 8:38 p.m.



Becca A. Lewis and Rachel Cognata in “The Book Club Play.” Photo: Stratton McCrady

It's relatively unusual for two plays by a writer not named Shakespeare to be simultaneously running at two different Boston-area theaters. But after seeing "The Book Club Play" and "Native Gardens," a pair of snappy, crowd-pleasing comedies by Karen Zacarias, I get it.

"The Book Club Play," which focuses on the upheaval within a book club when they open up their meetings to a documentary filmmaker, is the stronger of the pair, featuring a topflight ensemble directed by Shana Gozansky at Boston Playwrights' Theatre.

"Native Gardens," directed by Kelly Galvin at Gloucester Stage Company, is more topical and politically pointed, with a young Latino couple and an older white couple squaring off in a dispute over the location of a fence — you might even call it a border wall — between their respective properties.

Facile though they sometimes are, with endings that feel too pat by half, there is still much to savor in the way these intelligent, fast-moving comedies draw from contemporary social currents. The underlying premise of both plays is that people and by extension societies are capable of change, that interactions with their fellow citizens can prod or inspire them to become (to borrow and bend an aspirational refrain by one character in "The Book Club Play") the best version of themselves.

That's a message with a surefire audience appeal, whether or not you believe it to be generally true in the real world. Zacarias has populated the worlds of "Native Gardens" and "The Book Club Play" with a gallery of recognizable-if-exaggerated characters who come to an acute self-knowledge when they are forced by events to look at themselves through the lenses of strangers, friends, and spouses. Essentially, they find themselves on the receiving end of that double-edged gift Robert Burns wrote about in the 18th century, of being able to "to see ourself as others see us!"

Born in Mexico, Zacarias studied playwriting at Boston University in the mid-1990s while earning a master's degree in creative writing. She later became playwright in residence at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and was a founder of the Latinx Theatre Commons and Young Playwrights Theater.

She has a palpable affection for her characters — indeed, perhaps too palpable. That affection keeps either of these plays from cutting deep enough to unsettle audiences in useful ways. (Her script for "Native Gardens," which premiered in January 2016 in Cincinnati, describes each of the main four characters as "smart, likeable," which takes even-handedness a bit too far.)

They are Tania (a vividly expressive Alaina Fragoso), a pregnant PhD candidate who favors an approach to gardening that makes a home for indigenous plants; her husband, Pablo (Eduardo Ruiz), an attorney; Virginia (Leigh Strimbeck), an engineer; and her husband, Frank (Patrick Shea), a federal employee who obsessively tends his garden, using heavy amounts of pesticide.

After Tania and Pablo have moved into the fixer-upper next door to the older couple, they cordially discuss with Frank and Virginia their plan to build a wooden fence along their boundary between the two properties, to replace the bedraggled chain-link fence that is currently

there. Frank and Virginia are all for it. Frank is eagerly preparing to show his garden as part of a horticultural society contest, and Pablo and Tania are scrambling to put together a barbecue for Pablo's law firm.

But then the younger couple discovers that, according to a surveyor's plans, their property actually extends 2 feet deeper into their neighbor's yard. They have essentially been deprived of a total of 80 square feet. Pablo and Tania inform Frank and Virginia that they want to build the fence on the correct property line, which will wreak havoc with Frank's garden.

From that moment, the battle is on, and it's a lively one. Zacarías shows an impressively light touch in juggling the play's dueling plot imperatives as well as its analogies to issues of immigration and ethnic identity and white entitlement. But you can see the denouement coming from a mile away, and when it arrives it feels like too easy a resolution to the questions that have been churning through "Native Gardens."

While of less moment, "The Book Club Play" is made of sturdier stuff. The leader of the titular book club — and don't you forget it — is a tightly wound newspaper columnist named Ana. It is she who decides it would be a grand idea to have a renowned filmmaker record their conversations nonstop. Ana is played by Becca A. Lewis with the skill at incisive portraiture that invariably characterizes the work of this wonderful actress, who here is following up her unforgettable performance last spring in Apollinaire Theatre Company's production of David Greig's "The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart."

The other members of the book club — all but one in their 30s, all of them given nuanced shadings at Boston Playwrights' Theatre by Gozansky's skilled cast — are: Ana's outwardly charismatic but inwardly doubt-riddled husband, Rob (Sean Patrick Gibbons, excellent); the bow-tied, buttoned-down William (Greg Maraio), an old friend of Rob and Ana who briefly dated the latter years ago; 20-something Lily (Rachel Cognata), the youngest member of the group (and the only African-American), who prefers to read books on her phone or tablet; Alex (Anthony Goes), a newcomer who has surprising views on what is worth reading, considering he's a professor of comparative literature; and shy, withdrawn Jennifer (Meredith Gosselin). The inimitable Brooks Reeves also shows up, delivering a series of hilarious interstitial cameos as a Wal-Mart greeter and a Secret Service agent, among other persons.

It is Jennifer who gestures toward the camera near the start of the play and asks: "Won't having that bug-eyed thing looking at us change things?" Um, yes, it will. Before long, tensions are flaring up within the book club, revelations are bursting forth, and long-suppressed secrets are spilling out. This is not a new dramatic framework, obviously, and clichés of personality and event crop up periodically in "The Book Club Play"; in particular, the contours of one character's sexual awakening feel dated.

But the interactions remain punchily engaging, and that same energy drives the play's debates on issues like the relative merits of "serious" literature and popular literature — in essence, which of them tell truer stories.

Truth in storytelling eventually becomes a deeply personal issue for all of them. Ultimately, the biggest threat to the unity of the book club turns out not to come from the ever-watchful filmmaker, but from a betrayal committed within the club itself. Even then, though, Zacarías insists on a dramatist’s right to a happy ending — and, especially these days, there are worse sins than an unshakable optimism.

THE BOOK CLUB PLAY

Play by Karen Zacarías. Directed by Shana Gozansky. Presented by Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, Boston, through Oct. 13. Tickets \$35, 866-811-4111, www.bostonplaywrights.org

NATIVE GARDENS

Play by Karen Zacarías. Directed by Kelly Galvin. Presented by Gloucester Stage Company, Gloucester, through Oct. 20. Tickets \$15-\$48, 978-281-4433, www.gloucesterstage.com

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