



Photo by Danny Sanchez.

A NOTE FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR JOHN DIAS

I love playwrights. I'm in awe of them, actually. I know that, on the surface anyway, all they really do is write. But, when sitting in a theater watching brilliant interpretive artists—actors, directors, designers—bring life to their words, I'm sure we're in the presence of the divine. A playwright makes a world, organizes airy nothing and creates life. The playwright is my god.

I'm not sure exactly how or when I came to this certainty. Maybe it was in first grade when our teacher and amateur playwright, Miss Cohan, created for me my greatest role—my debut actually—as a Christmas present in her brilliant play, *The Year Without a Christmas Present*. I have no idea what happened through most of this play. I stood backstage for the majority of it, encased in the darkness of my costume. You see, I WAS that missing Christmas present, inside a box, wrapped up and topped with a bow. There were four little holes for my skinny arms and legs. No one thought about the fact that I might need to see when I made my entrance at the end. I staggered across to the Christmas tree in center stage, feeling my way to a spot under its boughs. Still, I was the happy ending and I got entrance applause!

Perhaps it was my high school English teacher, Mrs. Kenney, who managed the rare feat of leading me to a love of Shakespeare. Or my college professor Astere Claeysens who illuminated the brilliance of our great American playwrights. Maybe my certainty comes to me every day that I'm in the presence of our playwrights at Two River, like the two we are producing this season—Tony Meneses and Madeleine George.

These two playwrights remind us of the spiritual nature of theater. In *Hurricane Diane*, Madeleine is pointing us directly toward the roots of Western theater and the ancient Greek synthesis of religious ceremony and popular entertainment that started playwriting as we know it. Plays were—and are—at first and last, a ritual. And what is ritual but playing? Like all rituals, we come to the theater to “play” at something—often in a cathartic way—that we cannot, or are not yet fully prepared to perform in our actual lives. The ritual exists to lead us toward knowledge. Although, often the knowledge is hidden within us, and the ritual's function is to incorporate that knowledge into action. I'm not suggesting that the intent of Madeleine or any other playwright is to educate us, literally. But rather to employ ritual to guide us—like some divine spirit—to our own enlightenment.

The much-quoted Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*), says it best:

“A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth. And since myth is a projection of the deep wisdom of the psyche, by participating in a ritual, participating in the myth, you are being, as it were, put in accord with that wisdom, which is the wisdom that is inherent within you anyhow. Your consciousness is being reminded of the wisdom of your own life.”

It's tricky what Madeleine is doing because on the surface she seems to be writing about us...in a way. Yes: the play takes place in a kind of mythic Red Bank and the concerns of the characters appear to be much like ours. If a little outsized. And she uses humor to reflect some of the superficial fun in seeing ourselves. But actually she's inviting us to step outside ourselves and participate in an old ritual. She's getting us to look deeper and experience the darker beauty of who we are, to find that shared wisdom that will help us to turn a community of neighbors into a holy communion.