

WHY JERSEY? WHY ANCIENT GREECE? WHY NOW?



By Madeleine George, playwright

When my play *Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England* premiered here at Two River five years ago, I had the pleasure of beginning to get to know the Red Bank audience, mostly through conversations in the lobby after the show. I was always gratified when people had interesting questions for me about the play's meaning, or told me that they appreciated my dumb jokes. (I'll do *anything* to put over a dumb joke.) But that play was originally written as a love letter to the small college town in Massachusetts where I grew up, and sometimes it felt to me like the world of the play and the world of the theater were a little bit mismatched.

Ideally, a playwright wants her plays to have the virtues of both specificity and portability: a play should feel grounded in its environment, but not so packed with insider jokes that it can't play on the road. We shouldn't have to have been a king in pre-Roman Britain in order to get where *King Lear* is coming from, in other words. But every so often, an audience member would come up to me after a performance of *Mammoths* with a twinkle in their eye and say, "I know *exactly* what town you're from." They would have lived in my hometown at some point, or gone to school there, and they caught the most arcane references that I'd dropped in the text, almost like breadcrumbs leading myself home. And it was clear to me that those audience members felt extra close to the play for having cracked that code. They felt like they weren't just seeing the play, the play was seeing them. So when John Dias commissioned me to write a new play specifically for Two River, I knew that I wanted to create that reciprocal feeling—of seeing and being seen—for the whole audience, every performance.



Flor De Liz Perez & Mercedes Herrero in *Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

Of course the Red Bank in this play is not the Red Bank we know. It's much wilder and stranger than that, because it's inflected with the idiom of Greek tragedy. I grafted the ancient story onto the contemporary landscape because I wanted to ask questions about how we're going to live through the coming changes to our planet, and I find it incredibly hard to ask those questions. We haven't really found a way to do it yet successfully in narrative art. I grew up in the 1980s watching movies about the nuclear threat—doomsday scenarios like *The Day After*, comedies like the great *War Games*. Somehow, as terrifying as the prospect of nuclear war was, it wasn't unthinkable. If anything, it was all too thinkable. But for many of us, the prospect of climate change makes our minds go blank. Even for those of us who have been caught in the teeth of its early effects, the phenomenon of climate change itself is so vast and unpredictable that trying to consider it can have a numbing or paralyzing effect. I don't personally have a clue what I'm supposed to be doing to prevent the most dire outcomes of global warming; I don't even know what those dire outcomes might be. Really, no one does for sure. And theater isn't great at tackling issues of scale. It isn't great at abstractions. What the theater is great at is human beings. It's great at relationships, at seeing and being seen. And that's how we're going to experience the changes to our climate, after all, at the level of our own human-sized social units: our counties, our boroughs, our towns, our neighborhoods, our families, our small, vulnerable selves. Ancient Greek tragedies are preoccupied with just this difference in scale. Over and over again, in play after play, the Greeks ask, How can we mere individuals respond to the whimsy of the selfish gods? How can we navigate the implacable vastness of fate?

So that's why I set this ancient Greek story on a cul-de-sac a six-minute drive from the theater. Also, of course, so I could make a bunch of dumb FEMA jokes. And last but not least, so I could pay homage to the much-missed Delfini's (1964-2015), where I was always treated with such friendliness and good humor, and where the black-and-white cookies were as delicious as the eggplant rollatini.



Jon Hoche and Lauren Culpepper in *Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

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Mural at Delfini's in Red Bank