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THEATER

Review: The God of Wine Stirs No Sexual Whirlwind in ‘Hurricane Diane’



Becca Blackwell, left, is a gardener (Dionysus in disguise) hoping to win the devotion of a character played by Kate Wetherhead in “Hurricane Diane.” Credit T. Charles Erickson

RED BANK, N.J. — The gardener’s name is Diane, and she’s a recent arrival to this riverfront town in New Jersey, near the Atlantic coast. Well, O.K., she is actually the Greek god Dionysus in human form, but it’s a pretty good disguise, what with the plaid shirt and the boots and all.

“Recognize me?” she asks the audience at the start of Madeleine George’s puckish and brainy new eco-play, “Hurricane Diane,” at Two River Theater. “No? God of agriculture, wine and song? It’s cool. It’s been a while.”

Thousands of years, even, in which humans “have slaughtered and smothered and consumed without limit” — ungrateful behavior, as she sees it, and unhealthy for the planet. So she has come to restore some wildness to this overly groomed terrain.

And, not incidentally, to the locals, from whom she intends to pluck a new crop of devotees, like the frenzied Bacchae of ancient days. She sets her sights on a group of female pals, neighbors on a comfortable cul-de-sac who weathered the last lethal storm together.

In Leigh Silverman’s lopsided world-premiere production, the friends make a cracking ensemble, each fully human and with her own comic charge: the aggressively chipper Sandy (Mia Barron); timid Beth (Kate Wetherhead), with her failed marriage and disheveled lawn; tough-talking Pam (Danielle Skraastad), as fierce as the stilettos she wears to coffee (costumes are by Kaye Voyce); and Renee (Nikiya Mathis), an editor at a gardening magazine. She thrills to Diane’s radical landscaping plans — and the possibility of a fling with her.

Diane is problematic, though. Ms. George (“The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence”) describes her in a stage direction as “a butch charm factory,” and charisma is as vital to the success of Diane’s mission as it is to the success of the play. She needs to get the women in her thrall and seduce the audience as well.

Yet Becca Blackwell’s tentative performance as Diane has no magnetism. Subdued to the point of flatness, it drains the life out of Ms. George’s humor — a particular shame for the beautifully written monologues. Instead of an enigmatic god, the Diane before us is closer to a nonentity, and the sexual energy among her and the women, vital to moments of attraction and abandon, is nowhere to be found. It’s not credible that this outsider would succeed at not only insinuating herself into the group but also commanding it.

The other odd thing about this staging, whose set (by Rachel Hauck) is a suburban kitchen, is how little sense it conveys of the natural world beyond. Ms. Silverman doesn’t ask enough of the lighting (by Jen Schriever), but leans hard on the excellent sound design (by Bray Poor), which is particularly vivid when a new storm comes.

There’s a bacchanal, too, with original music by the Bengsons; things get a little weird. But Ms. George, whose interest in the layers of history includes the recent past, has her reasons for setting — and telling — this tale in a hurricane-ravaged place. She is sounding an alarm, examining the damage, looking to see who’s hurt.

Hurricane Diane Tickets Through Sunday. Two River Theater, Red Bank, N.J.; 732-345-1400, tworivertheater.org. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes. Credits By Madeleine George; directed by Leigh Silverman; music by the Bengsons; music director, Matthew Dean Marsh; choreography by Sonya Tayeh; sets by Rachel Hauck; costumes by Kaye Voyce; lighting by Jen Schriever; sound by Bray Poor; stage manager, Melanie J. Lisby. Presented by Two River Theater, John Dias, artistic director; Michael Hurst, managing director. Cast Mia Barron (Sandy Fleischer), Becca Blackwell (Diane), Nikiya Mathis (Renee Shapiro-Epps), Danielle Skraastad (Pam Annunziata) and Kate Wetherhead (Beth Wann).