

# Big issues hit small town in ‘A Good Farmer’ at South Orange Performing Arts Center

By: **JAY LUSTIG** | February 1, 2018



*Ariel Woodiwiss, left, and Janice Amaya in “A Good Farmer,” at the South Orange Performing Arts Center.*

In the world of theater, timing is everything. And the timing is perfect for “A Good Farmer,” which is currently being presented at the South Orange Performing Arts Center.

This play, by Sharyn Rothstein, was first presented off-Broadway in 2007. But with immigration having become such a huge issue — and with President Trump’s proposed wall, and DACA, having become the fodder for heated debates— “A Good Farmer” seems more timely than ever. It was a smart move for the American Theater Group, SOPAC’s new theater-company-in-residence (this is ATG’s first full production there), to resurrect it.

The play is set in real-life rural town of Elba in Upstate New York (“Pop.: Just Right” says a sign welcoming visitors) — in the “Present Day,” according to the program. Rothstein got her initial inspiration from an article about problems between immigrants and locals in Elba, more than 10 years ago. But, as we all now, these kinds of problems have not gone away.

Trump, no doubt, would not be crazy about Rothstein’s message. One of the play’s two main characters, Carla (Janice Amaya), is a Mexican immigrant that any sane person would roll out a red carpet for, instead of building a wall to keep her away. She’s smart, sensible and hard-working, and is willing to make any sacrifice imaginable to provide a better life for her children.

The other main character, Bonnie (Ariel Woodiwiss), a cabbage farm owner and Carla’s boss, is also a salt-of-the-earth type. Rothstein’s play is primarily about the bond that forms, in the face of adversity, between these two women, who do battle with less enlightened sorts such as Rosemary (Brenda Withers), the comically shallow PTA president, and Gabe (Todd Lawson), an unemployed local who is looking to take his anger out on the most convenient targets. (Withers and Lawson play other characters, as well.)

While Rothstein builds to an emotionally powerful climactic scene, I wasn’t crazy about everything she did before she got there. Much of the play had the kind of dialogue I associate with TV sitcoms — Bonnie, in particular, has a snappy comeback for every occasion — and several scenes felt unrealistically dramatic, with people moving from making casual conversation to telling their deepest truths in a matter of seconds.

“You people are the laziest people I’ve ever met,” Rosemary tells Carla in one scene, incensed that Carla is too busy with work to help out with school events. I could buy that Rosemary would believe that. But even as monumentally insensitive a character as this one would not actually say it.

I liked the way Rothstein structured the play. After ending the first act with something of a cliffhanger, she moved the action back, seven years, at the start of the second act. So you got a deeper sense of who these characters are — and how they came to be in their present predicaments — before she jumped back to the present for the sad but still somewhat hopeful conclusion.

*The American Theater Group will present “A Good Farmer” at the South Orange Performing Arts Center through Feb. 4; visit [sopacnow.org](http://www.sopacnow.org) (<http://www.sopacnow.org>). The American Theater Group’s next play at SOPAC will be a musical, “Small Town Story,” May 30-June 10.*



*Ariel Woodiwiss, left, with Brenda Withers and Todd Lawson in “A Good Farmer.”*

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