

## **Review of "ON DEATH AND GARDENING" from the South Bend Tribune**

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THREE OAKS

Donna Blue Lachman's "On Death and Gardening" is born in the playwright's Three Oaks garden, but it doesn't stay there for long. The one-woman show, a spirited monologue that spends well over an hour meditating on mortality, travels from rural Michigan to the foot of Mount Everest and back, pausing along the way in locales as varied as the south side of Chicago and a Buddhist retreat in Mendocino. The journey is Lachman's way of grappling with the mysteries of death, and even if she uncovers no easy answers (even if, indeed, she merely ends up deepening the mystery) the show nonetheless flirts with enlightenment and, at the very least, provides a healthy dose of thoughtful entertainment.

Lachman takes the stage amid a goofy vocal serenade, pushing a garden cart and pouring herself a nice "dirty martini" in preparation for a long day of pruning and composting, and she quickly launches into a free-flowing series of tales and anecdotes, her methodical storytelling wrapped in a cloak of effusive brazenness, sort of a marriage of Bette Midler and Spalding Gray.

The first story sets the tone: the day's contribution to the compost pile consists of the dead remains of the trees she and her husband planted on their wedding day in an elaborate ceremony that included dropping scraps of poetry-encrusted paper into the planting holes. Despite Lachman's gleeful embrace of the life cycle in her garden (of compost, she says, "It's rotting and fertile at the same time. I love that!") and the suspicion that planting the trees with an Ezra Pound poem was a bad idea, the demise of these organisms, which represent her husband, her marriage, and herself, is disturbing; from there, an alternately raucous and solemn contemplation of death is inevitable.

Lachman's monologue is energetic and funny. The story of the Buddhist retreat in California, during which Lachman was forced to endure weeks of silence and nine days of fasting, certainly a Herculean endeavor for someone like her, produces the heartiest laughs, but the jokes are sown liberally through the show. Elsewhere, Lachman treks into mystical territory, as she hikes endlessly through the Himalayas with a stoic Nepali guide, when she recalls her memory of her own birth, and when she considers the contrast between the Jewish and Buddhist conceptions of death.

The show's most affecting moments, however, come when Lachman veers from the philosophical and theological toward the personal. Her recollection of the jovial janitor at the theater she founded in Chicago is moving, and the account of the death of her father is even more so. These stories are never overly sentimental, and they provide an emotional grounding for an otherwise predominantly intellectual work.

“On Death and Gardening” is rich and erudite, relying on references to religious dogma as well as cultural tidbits that flesh out the existential pondering. Frida Kahlo makes an appearance or two, and a character from Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* plays a delightful role in the show.

The show’s stated central question, “Are we annuals or perennials?” (that is, do we cease to exist upon our deaths, or do we live on somehow?) is a good one, but perhaps more immediately relevant is another question that Lachman asks: How do we decide what to nurture in our gardens? How do we decide what is a weed and what is a flower? How do we recognize, among all the stuff that we encounter in our lives, what is important? Lachman doesn’t presume to have the solution to the dilemma, but as long as she can contemplate it in her garden, she seems to be happy.