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## BECKS COUNTY **Courier Times**

August 18, 2017



Starring in "Other Desert Cities" are (from left) Charles Socarides, Deirdre Madigan, Kevin Kilner, Patricia Richardson and Eliza Bennett.

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By Liz Johnson

Just mention the word "politics" to "Home Improvement" star Patricia Richardson and you'll know immediately that her portrayal of the Nancy Reaganesque character Polly Wyeth in "Other Desert Cities" at the Bucks County Playhouse is all an act.

It doesn't take long, though, before she switches gears to talk about the play she'll be starring in that opened this weekend and tackles political extremes, radicalism in the '70s, drugs, mental health issues and suicide.

"There's so much stuff that's dicey, stuff that's happening right now," said Richardson, who is making her second appearance at the playhouse after last year's "Steel Magnolias" production.

“This play has you constantly off balance. It’s funny, then breaks your heart so your defenses are down. You don’t know what’s going to happen next,” she said.

And that’s the way Richardson likes it, which is why she’s left television for the stage.

“I don’t want to do sitcom anymore,” she said. “It’s either going to be always funny or always serious as with drama.”

Instead, Richardson said, she likes the range of emotional intensity and comedy that a play like "Other Desert Cities" presents.

Written by Pulitzer Prize winner Jon Robin Baitz, "Other Desert Cities" — which refers to a sign on I-10 in California — is about a 2004 Christmas Eve Wyeth family reunion, where daughter Brooke announces she's written a memoir that touches upon her brother's little-talked-about suicide.

Like their brother Henry, Brooke and her recovering alcoholic sister, Silda, are devout liberals while their parents Polly and Lyman are staunch GOPers.

The political divide masks the tension and guilt the family members feel over Henry's death, shortly after he was implicated in a 1970s radical underground bombing.

“My character is contained and controlled. But she’s also very worried about everybody and protecting the family. The children don’t see that. They only feel the reigns, not the love,” explained Richardson.

“People will leave the play and argue about Polly. They’ll either love her or hate her. Some will understand where she’s coming from,” she said.

And while politics may seem to be pivotal in the family, in the end “what it’s really about is loving each other. What matters is your kids, not loyalty to a party,” she said.

Directed by Sheryl Kaller, the cast also includes Liza Bennett, Kevin Kilner, Charles Socarides and Deirdre Madigan, who played Sonia in Christopher Durang’s Tony Award-winning play "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike." Durang lives in Tinicum Township.

“It’s such a good cast,” said Richardson. Madigan is “so hilarious. She carries the play.”