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Crazy From the Heat: Bucks County Playhouse explores a family drama with 'Other Desert Cities'



"Other Desert Cities" continues at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, through Sept. 2. For tickets and information, go to www.bcptheater.org or call 215-862-2121.

By Anthony Stoeckert

Jon Robin Baitz took a few cues from Edward Albee with his 2011 drama "Other Desert Cities." The play's focus is an elite family confronting its past and airing emotions and grievances as drinks are poured and zingers are slung.

But Baitz's characters, while powerful, are more relatable than Albee's; they also truly love and care for each other, something that isn't so obvious in "A Delicate Balance." "Other Desert Cities" looks back all the way to 2004. Thirteen years later, it's tempting to think the Bush era was quaint, but let's not kid ourselves — this is a mere three years after 9/11 and the war in Iraq, which at first had a lot of support, was starting to divide the country.

It's certainly divided the Wyeth family, which is gathering for Christmas in Palm Springs, California — a haven for sun-worshippers but not exactly a ho-ho-ho kind of place. The action takes place in the home of Polly and Lyman Wyeth (Patricia Richardson and Kevin Kilner). Staying with the couple is Silda (Deirdre Madigan), sister of Polly and a recovering alcoholic. The sisters wrote hit movies during Hollywood's golden era and Lyman was a leading man in B movies, specializing in cops, cowboys, and dragged-out death scenes.

Lyman and Polly gave up the movie business to get involved in politics, with Lyman eventually making his way to chairman of the Republican Party. They're friends with the Reagans, with whom they have lots in common. Both couples used to be Democrats, were once in the movie business, and have kids who disagree with their politics.

Those kids are Brooke (Liza J. Bennett) and Trip (Charles Socarides). Brooke left California for New York (Long Island, actually) and became a writer, publishing one successful novel before a severe bout of depression sidelined her for years. Polly and Lyman went out East to help her during her depression but she hasn't been to California in six years. Polly wants to buy a house next door so that Brooke can live there, but Brooke likes New York and isn't fond of the desert, "the endless sunshine is so predictable" she says.

Trip produces a reality TV show, "Jury of Your Peers," in which celebrities serve as the jury in small claims court cases. An older son, Henry, was a liberal hippie who got caught up with a radical group in in the 1970s. A bombing by the group killed a homeless veteran. Hank's involvement is unclear but the incident apparently led him to suicide. Brooke and Hank were close, she refers to him as her best friend, but Trip barely remembers him.

The parents are happy that their daughter is better. Polly tells Brooke her glow is coming back, Lyman express joy over seeing her happy again. But Polly remains worried. Some of that worrying is comical — she's afraid Brooke is going to get mugged, confusing Manhattan with Eastern Long Island. But other aspects of her concern are justified. Yes, Brooke is good now, she "takes lovely little pills," sees a doctor, eats right and does yoga, but Polly has read that medications can lose their effectiveness. She'd prefer Brooke move back to California, next door in fact. Lyman is more optimistic, or at least acts that way. The family has finished a game of tennis and is preparing for Christmas Eve dinner at the country club when Brooke drops the news as to why she's there. She's finally written a new book but it's a memoir, one about Henry.

This stops Polly in her tracks. She's friends with Nancy Reagan and has taken the former first lady's lead in trying to control her life, but there are certain things she can't control, like Brooke publishing her book. Lyman tries to act cavalier about the book at first but is soon imploring Brooke to not publish it until after he and Polly have died. Brooke thinks her parents' concern is protecting their image. Trip understands his parents' feelings about the book but says it should be published because it's the best thing Brooke has written.

The play, on stage at the Bucks County Playhouse through Sept. 2, is worth seeing for the truth within this family and the way Baitz makes clear that politics is a divide for this family, but it doesn't get in the way of the drama. Richardson, returning to the Playhouse after last year's stellar "Steel Magnolias," does a great job as Polly. She bottles the character's emotions often but lets out just enough without losing control.

Kilner plays Lyman as a genuinely concerned father who would like to let his daughter do what she needs to but knows there are things bigger than the five people in the room. He also doesn't get comical with the character's politics. Lyman's praise of the war and Colin Powell could come off as a joke today, but Kilner plays it with the sincerity of a father who commands respect. At the time, lots of people, not just conservatives, supported the war.

As Brooke, Bennet has the most emotional ground to cover — from being apprehensive about sharing her book, to defending it and her life, and then to processing a life-changing bit of information. Socarides is the perfect Trip. For the youngest member of the family, Trip is often called upon to be the adult. He's responsible for everything from helping his parents with their cell phones to preventing his family's fight getting even more out of hand. There's also a tension between Brooke and Trip. Brooke claims not to watch television, a rejection of her brother's work. She's a serious writer, he produces fluff TV, but he sees nobility in his show, it entertains people and brings them together.

Madigan also is returning to the playhouse, having been in Christopher Durang's "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" a few years ago. She has a lot of fun with Silda, playing the saucy drunk, but there's a bitterness to the character, especially in regard to Polly, who abandoned a writing team and betrayed Silda with her politics.

The play's laugh lines didn't work for me. Baitz aims for wits but the jokes are the stuff of sitcoms. Of Silda's drinking, Polly says, "Her liver needs a liver." She talks about reading things "in" the internet and says Brooke has a "trace of lesbian in her." When Polly says she likes to spar, Silda comes back with "That's what Attila the Hun said." Those lines and others come across as forced cleverness. Better is the joke about entertainment in Palm Springs being a revue starring the world's oldest showgirls.

Clarke Dunham's set is great, a true Palm Springs home with sand-colored walls, as if this house is somehow organic to the desert. At center is a denim-colored couch, the roof is marked by large wooden beams, and above a patio area in the back is a trellis-like roof. There's also a fire pit (desert nights get surprisingly cold) a bar, of course, and a backdrop that changes from twilight purple to dark-blue night. This marks a return to the Playhouse for Dunham, who worked at the theater in the 1960s on such shows as a pre-Broadway run of "Barefoot in the Park."

The costumes by Nicole V. Moody also set the scene. Trip's shorts look like half a pair of slacks, other characters wear white pants with peach-colored tops. One of the funnier scenes is the back-and-forth between Polly and Silda over a mumu-like dress that's a knockoff of the designer Pucci.

Baitz wraps things up neatly, perhaps too neatly, but the lasting impression of "Other Desert Cities" is a family that tries, often fails, but ultimately stays together, in ways that most people can't comprehend.

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