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— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

‘Other Desert Cities’ Cultivates Fruitful Familial Drama

By
Rachel Kurland
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Sheryl Kaller | Photo provided

Swap Egypt for Palm Springs, and you’ve got a different story of Jews (kind of) wandering in the desert.

Other Desert Cities begins on Christmas Eve 2004 when Brooke Wyeth returns to her parents’ Palm Springs home.

She reveals that she is soon publishing a tell-all memoir about a traumatic family event (the details of which can only be found on the stage as the director didn't want to give away too much).

Her parents, Polly and Lyman Wyeth, are conservative Republicans, who clash with Brooke and Silda, Polly's liberal sister.

Even though Brooke thinks she knows the full story, there's another side that's been kept hidden for years. Political differences ultimately lead to secrets of perjury and mental health divulged.

This award-winning play by Jon Robin Baitz now stars Patricia Richardson at the [Bucks County Playhouse](#) from Aug. 18 to Sept. 2.

The *Home Improvement* star will take the stage as Polly, a Jewish woman married into a non-Jewish family, who chose to assimilate into a non-Jewish world in a "more waspy way," or as director Sheryl Kaller explained, "in a non-*Yiddishkeit* environment."

"What she's done is chosen to deny her Judaism as opposed to ... all the secular, religious aspects of Judaism," she said. Throughout the play, Polly often cracks wry one-liners about Jews, minorities and that world she once belonged to.

"What is so important to me about being a Jew is to insert my culture into my life everyday, and to insert the traditions that my family taught me," Kaller continued.

Tradition has taken form in Kaller's life in one way or another.

As a child, her mother would often take her out of school for a "mental health day," which took form in a Broadway matinee, as she recalled in a [Huffington Post](#) article.

Those days influenced her thoughts and broadened her opinions into adulthood. In her youth, she said her mother was open to accepting her as "part of a new generation who were thinking in new ways. ... In a way, we learned a new way to love and understand each other during those years — instead of them just teaching me, I was contributing to the proceedings."

Similarly in *Other Desert Cities*, preconceived notions one generation has differs from the one before it — until the Wyeth family inevitably reveals the full truth.

Kaller, who was nominated for a Best Direction of a Play Tony Award in 2010 for *Next Fall*, said she's contributed her own experiences into her work.

"Most of my work is about family and family binds and morality, and [Baitz] is a brilliant writer, and Bucks County [Playhouse] is a really great place, a really thirsty and vibrant theater community," said the Long Island, N.Y., native, "and it excited me to be able to do a play that's about a lot."

Kaller had tough choices to make, too. She told Broadway.com in 2010 during the hype of *Next Fall* that she briefly left theater for motherhood.

She said the thought of leaving the industry was tough, and when she called a friend in Bermuda to vent, she said to Kaller, "Well, why don't we start a theater company here [in Bermuda]? We'll keep our kids with us."

"So that's what we did," Kaller said. "Three or four months a year I'd take the kids to Bermuda. We did play development, kids' theater workshops and a big annual concert called Broadway in Bermuda, all while providing day care for ourselves and our artists."

Kaller also directed *Mothers and Sons* at the Playhouse prior to its Broadway premiere in 2014, another story of family in which a woman visits her late son's partner unannounced, who is now married to another man and has a son.

Family is an overarching theme in and out of the theater for Kaller, and for *Other Desert Cities*.

Learning how to develop her opinions stems from her Jewish upbringing, she said.

"It was about the *excavation* of the Torah and the *interpretation* of the Torah, and that was liberating to me as a young person," she explained.

Other Desert Cities illustrates just how much family can withstand from each other, and the subject matter weighs pretty heavy.

For Polly's character, the story is "about how this particular woman chose to assimilate and how that compromised her Jewish culture," Kaller added. Polly and Lyman live isolated in Palm Springs and have worked hard to find a community.

Although secrets strain family relationships in *Other Desert Cities*, those familial bonds overrule everything else.

"All of us try to fit in, and when you're not living in a town or a community — whether it's like-minded, whether it's like-economically, whether it's like-religiously," she continued, "I think how this woman, just how she wanted to do the best she could every single day is a really good lesson; to listen to each other."