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Paradise Lost: Other Desert Cities at Bucks County Playhouse



By Ralph Malachowski

Many plays have been set during the holidays. Often, holidays are when families and loved ones gather to enjoy each other's company and to celebrate their bonds. This isn't always the case. One such play which explores the darker side of family relations is Jon Robin Baitz's drama, **Other Desert Cities**, now at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope until September 2.

Set in Palm Springs, **Other Desert Cities** isn't a tale of Palm Springs as gay paradise, a new City of the Plain, a new Sodom, where hedonism reigns. No, this Palm Springs details how the ultra-conservative, wealthy folk in town live. We meet the Wyeths, upper-class conservatives who count Nancy and Ron Reagan as friends. Set in the year 2004, we get to hear references to 911, the never-found Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the war waged on their account during the banter between Polly Wyeth, famous for co-writing a hit television series, and husband Lyman Wyeth, famous Hollywood actor, and their two children (who do not share their parents' conservative views), Trip and Brooke. Politics isn't the only bone of contention in this household. There is the third child, a terrorist bomber and suicide, whose photos are absent from the family collection. Brooke has had a nervous breakdown, while Trip states later in the play that he fears his hedonist lifestyle will lead him to become Hugh Hefner. There is Polly's sister, Silda Grauman, an alcoholic, verbose, substance-abusing liberal. And it is Christmas Eve. These facts are only the beginning of the dramatic cassoulet which simmers and occasionally bubbles over during **Other Desert Cities**.

Patricia Richardson returns to the Playhouse as Polly Wyeth. Richardson's Polly Wyeth is a sympathetic, human portrayal seemingly at odds with all that is said about her domineering, monstrous personality. If we listen to the playwright's verbal descriptions of her by her children and sister, we expect someone like Colleen Dewhurst (who could freeze the blood in your veins) or Mama Rose, the egomaniac from *Gypsy*, not the calm, collected Polly we see in Richardson's portrayal. Kevin Kilner's Lyman Wyeth both looks and sounds the part of the Hollywood star who in his career played cowboys, tough cops, and detectives. Charles Socarides delivered a nuanced, intelligent, totally satisfying performance as Trip Wyeth. Liza J. Bennett had the most challenging role of all, perhaps. As the unhappy, fractured Brooke, she wrote a family expose sure to destroy her parents and their friends, remaining oblivious, or insensitive, to the damage and pain it would cause her parents. Brooke presents this bombshell to her family on Christmas Eve. Surprise, Merry Christmas! The remaining character, voraciously played by Deirdre Madigan, blew in like a mountain avalanche upon a field of saguaro. Madigan delighted the audience with her irreverent, saucy, bawdy delivery as the pickled Silda.

Watching this train wreck where narcissism and agony bloomed freely, members of the opening night audience sat spellbound, especially so when the unexpected plot twist fell like a coup de grace near the end.

For theatre goers who look for mature dramas, look no further than **Other Desert Cities**. We have a fascination with the wealthy and powerful. We often envy them because they appear to have it all. This white, privileged, and wealthy family appears to have it all, while being so very, very unhappy. **Other Desert Cities** delivers a catharsis, allowing us to experience the pain of others vicariously.

Other Desert Cities will be at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, PA, until September 2. Next up will be the world premiere musical, **Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story**, beginning September 12. For more information about either presentation call 215-862-2121 or visit www.BucksCountyPlayhouse.org