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Bucks Playhouse Review: 'Other Desert Cities'

By Neal Zoren

The ending of Jon Robin Baitz's otherwise well-crafted "Other Desert Cities" has always disappointed me. It comes out of nowhere and seems like a convenient, almost desperate, balm to two separate audiences: those who want a thorny moral dilemma solved without ambiguity, and those unable to stand conservative Republicans of a Goldwater-Reagan stamp being justifiable heroes.

The literary construction of the ending remains a problem in the Bucks County Playhouse staging, playing in New Hope through September 2. How could it not? It's embedded in Baitz's script.

The marvel is that director Sheryl Kaller and company trump literature with theater. Stars who made their reputations in television despite significant theater credits, Patricia Richardson and Kevin Kilner, find the right emotional key to make Baitz's curveball palatable. More, they make it moving. A passage that has historically had me rolling eyes and muttering "Oh brother" had me riveted and in tears.

Kilner is particularly effective in the production's last moments. His character's admonition to his wife that he is going to expose a nagging truth even if it means the end of their generally happy marriage and political teaming galvanizes with its sincerity and its no-nonsense finality. His and Richardson's presentations, along with sharp, appropriate, equally touching reactions from castmates Liza J. Bennett, Charles Socarides, and the ever-amazing Deirdre Madigan (an Estelle Parsons rejuvenated and set for an extended career), achieve no less than alchemy, converting verbal dross into dramatic gold.

A seemingly lazy conclusion becomes a stunning and gripping revelation.

This is not only remarkable because Baitz hands "Other Desert Cities" actors such a challenge but because, while making their marks, Richardson and Kilner have not been as strong as the others in the cast. It isn't a matter of flaws in their acting or characterizations. The people they play, witty but stern adherents to a way of life, have a lot to play. On opening weekend, Richardson and Kilner seemed less secure in the roles than Bennett, Socarides, and Madigan, all of whom worked some miracles. Two more weeks of playing should crystallize the star performances. Kilner already makes great strides in establishing the diplomatic, peacekeeping traits of his father figure, an actor turned politician who served as an ambassador in the Reagan administration.

Richardson is finding the balance within a character who is tough and flinty but is capable of great charm and humor. Her society doyenne, a cohort of Nancy Reagan, Betsy Bloomingdale, and Leonore Annenberg, has to mix neatly with being a mother who has high, uncompromising standards but the capability of great love

The success of the ending is not Kaller's only triumph. She veered wisely from other productions that put a plot device ahead of the more basic story about a family and its dynamics. "Other Desert Cities" most obvious business revolves around a book the daughter of a well-connected California family (Bennett) has written about a sad passage in that family's past — including the suicide of an elder brother who reacted to his parents' politics by indulging in rabid and criminal anti-Vietnam protest. The book and discussion of its publication usually takes over as the crux of the play. Yet Kaller and her cast firmly establish the tenor of family relationships before the book is mentioned and continue to do so once the book becomes the impetus for most dialogue.

This approach gives the BCP cast a chance to shine. And while Kilner is particular deft at showing the father's penchant for trying to defuse argument and bring everyone else to common ground, the astounding performances come from Bennett and Socarides. You never know either of them is acting, even when Socarides is teasing and playful while the rest of his clan is in full conflagration.

Bennett immediately establishes the right tone for a young woman who has enjoyed tremendous success with a first novel but went through six years of psychological maladies following that accomplishment. Her brother's passing, 25 years earlier, triggered that crisis. Bennett scores highly by being so adept at showing her character's strength and independence, while betraying some of the lasting weakness from her illness and the desire to be a beloved child, particularly daddy's girl.

Socarides finds more than usual in the character of the younger brother. He expresses the callow indifference often seen in the role, but adds piercing intelligence and great logic for his point of view to the portrait and projects a young man who is thrilled to be rich and enjoys his privilege. And in Socarides' hands, this brother is often the most reliable voice of reason and perspective in an atmosphere of status to be upheld and emotions to be salvaged. Bennett and Socarides let you see how each child will describe a family differently. They make you enjoy seeing the dueling perspectives.

And Madigan plays the broke sister living off a sibling and in-law she can barely tolerate with a resigned flare that makes the most of every line — even to the point of blending comedy and pathos. Her turn is like a master class in acting: standing out while fitting perfectly in the overall scheme.

Veteran Clarke Dunham creates a gorgeous Palm Springs home, with columns, views, and the perfect fireplace. Michael Gilliam's lighting enhances the mood Dunham creates. Nicole V. Moody's costumes look as if the characters shopped in the chic shops of Palm Canyon Drive, the thrift shops of Greenwich Village, and Loehmann's.

Other Desert Cities, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main, New Hope. Through Saturday, September 2, \$40 to \$75. 215-862-2121 or www.bcptheater.org.