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BROAD STREET REVIEW

Bucks County Playhouse presents Jon Robin Baitz's 'Other Desert Cities' (first review) **'Cities' in ruin**

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August 22, 2017

I think Tolstoy got it wrong: unhappy families — at least those taking up space on American stages over the last decade or so — seem remarkably alike. It matters little whether they occupy a ramshackle old Victorian on the Oklahoma plains or a manicured McMansion in Westchester. The fights, feuds, recriminations, and reconciliations feel largely interchangeable.



L to R: Kevin Kilner (Lyman Wyeth), Deirdre Madigan (Silda Gauman), Liza J. Bennett (Brooke Wyeth), Charles Socarides (Trip Wyeth), and Patricia Richardson (Polly Wyeth). (Photo by Joan Marcus.)

Kitchen-sink drama with granite countertops

In *Other Desert Cities*, Jon Robin Baitz marries his fractious family drama to an even older conceit: the theatrical dark night of the soul. His Wyeth clan are kin to the Tyrones and the Kellers — a bit more well-heeled, in flashier clothes, but still picking at the same old scabs. Yet where O’Neill and Miller plumbed true emotional depths, Baitz merely scratches the surface. It’s a problem that director Sheryl Kaller’s static production for Bucks County Playhouse only magnifies.

The plot reads like a well-worn recipe. After a long absence, prodigal daughter Brooke (Liza J. Bennett) returns home to Palm Springs for Christmas, bearing a salacious memoir alongside gift bags from Fendi and Hugo Boss. Its subject: the suicide of her beloved older brother, a Vietnam-era domestic terrorist who accidentally killed a homeless veteran during a political protest. This rankles her parents, Lyman and Polly (Kevin Kilner and Patricia Richardson), Hollywood Golden Agers turned Reagan Republicans. Her vacant-seeming younger brother (Charles Socarides), who produces vapid reality shows, surprisingly contains multitudes on the subject. The family hashes it out uncomfortably for a couple of hours before settling into an inevitable cycle of revelation and resolution.

Misdirection and a smooth ride

Other Desert Cities can work as entertainment. Baitz gifts Polly with a few sharp zingers (“This water needs vodka for flavor”) and a rock-ribbed sense of dignity and decorum the right actress can make a meal of. The role of Polly’s alcoholic, washed-up screenwriter sister Silda (here played by Deirdre Madigan) is so snappy the laugh lines practically land themselves. The premiere Broadway production — helmed by Joe Mantello, with Stockard Channing, Stacy Keach, and Judith Light — was deliciously acted, fluidly directed, and largely pleasurable.

However, Kaller never strikes the right balance of humor, tension, and turmoil. From the first moments, when the nuclear Wyeths enter en masse — fresh from a morning tennis match and still in high spirits — there’s no believing this crew as a family, however dysfunctional. Their banter has no soul, no underlying sense of shared history or hair-trigger microaggressions that could shatter the momentary holiday détente. Without establishing a suitable tone through these central relationships, the roiling anger that emerges and occupies most of the play is dead on arrival.

Individual performances largely fail to add the necessary turbulence. Bennett’s bland Brooke appears still lost in the depression that for years robbed her ability to write. She stalks Clarke Dunham’s tacky set in a daze, making it hard to believe she could cogently argue her memoir’s case to her disapproving parents. Kilner lacks the movie-star gravitas that supposedly carried Lyman from the Warner Brothers lot to the seat of power in Washington, and Richardson seems primarily concerned with remembering her lines. Socarides and Madigan fare better, but their slam-dunk stock characters — wise doofus and wise drunk — don’t require much heavy lifting.

So much of the potential enjoyment of *Other Desert Cities* depends on putting across Baitz’s meticulous plotting with skill and verve. But great theater shows us that plot is a means to an

end, not an end in itself. Baitz cannot come close to O'Neill's haunted poetry, Miller's quietly desperate characters, August Wilson's soulfulness. He simply gives us a canned set of the familiar situations that affect affluent, troubled families. The Wyeths sound appropriately anguished, but there's little to suggest an actual long day's journey into night. It's more of a reckoning squeezed in between drinks on the lanai and dinner at the club.