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## BROAD STREET REVIEW

### *Bucks County Playhouse presents Jon Robin Baitz's 'Other Desert Cities' (second review)* **Love and mercy vs. family and politics**

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Joh Robin Baitz's Pulitzer Prize finalist *Other Desert Cities* shows its age in Bucks County Playhouse's revival. Odd, considering that it premiered in 2011.



Liza J. Bennett  
(Brooke Wyeth) and Kevin Kilner (Lyman Wyeth). (Photo by Joan Marcus.)

Perhaps it's because our current president has made all pre-Trump politics feel so distant. It could be that, 16 years after 9/11, our response to terrorism has changed. Or maybe we've finally hit a

tipping point for plays about rich white people swilling cocktails and sniping at each other; in that respect, *Other Desert Cities* was old-fashioned from the start.

### **Merry frigging Christmas**

On December 24, 2004, rich Republicans and former movie people Lyman (Kevin Kilner) and Polly (Patricia Richardson) welcome their adult children home. Trip (Charles Socarides) is an acerbic reality TV star and playboy, while daughter Brooke (Liza J. Bennett), a writer suffering from a breakup and a breakdown, hopes she's not, as her mother cruelly quips, "the girl with only one novel in her." Deirdre Madigan plays Polly's sister Silda, a reluctantly recovering alcoholic. "This not drinking is gonna kill me," Silda says.

Booze flows, wits wax. Richardson — the play's "star," judging from opening night's ovation on her first entrance (she played Tim Allen's wife on TV's *Home Improvement*) — says funny things and says them funny, with a brisk cynical lilt that sometimes sounds like she's really hit the sauce and other times like someone's whispering "faster, faster, funnier!" in her ear.

She's a nice foil for Bennett's Brooke, an earnest yet brittle liberal who wrote a memoir, *Love and Mercy*, about her late older brother, Henry, a '70s antiwar, antiestablishment drug addict implicated in a fatal bombing. His body was never found and the family hasn't recovered from his presumed suicide, but the parents succeeded with assistance from friends "Ronnie" and "Nancy" — yes, those other movie Republicans, the Reagans — in hiding their grief and shame. "It runs in the family," Polly admits, "despair."

### **Red versus blue**

The script takes us through one contentious day. Brooke wants her family's blessing for her book, already scheduled for publication. Support their daughter's recovery or maintain their privacy?

The sparkling Christmas tree on Clarke Dunham's lushly appointed desert-mansion set, colorfully lit by Michael Gilliam, grows in ironic prominence as the debate rages. Much of it echoes last year's election in conservative-versus-liberal terms, with the Afghanistan war prominent (as it should be today, 13 years after the play's events, since it still rages). The most gripping conflict, however, is an intimate family drama. "I'm so tired of the indentured servitude of having a family," says Brooke, who lives in New York City but can't escape the family.

What *Other Desert Cities* says today (in director Sheryl Kaller's lackluster production, which forces actors to face out rather than look at each other in moments when characters are most trying to connect) is that, as ugly as this family wrangles, connection and understanding are still worthwhile. Moreover, there once was honor and respect on both political sides. It seems almost quaint in Trump's America.