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Review: 'Other Desert Cities' at Bucks County Playhouse



Patricia Richardson, Deirdre Madigan, Liza J. Bennett, Kevin Kilner, and Charles Socarides. Photo by Joan Marcus.

By Tim Dunleavy

In the opening moments of *Other Desert Cities*, playwright Jon Robin Baitz introduces us to a wealthy Southern California family whose members love to play tennis – but their favorite sport is getting under each other's skin. This family is on edge, and while the play starts with rather standard conflicts – parents versus children, Republicans versus Democrats – before long some long-suppressed family secrets are revealed, and the plot takes a darker turn.

If the characters seem to fit stereotypes too conveniently (the hard-drinking parents who embody both Old Hollywood and old-line conservatism, the pot-smoking liberal kids), part of the pleasure of seeing *Other Desert Cities* is watching those stereotypes exploded. True, the plot has a few too many contrivances, including a big revelation delayed until the end of Act Two which in real life probably would have happened during Act One. And Bucks County Playhouse's production doesn't always give its characters the grace they deserve. But the depth of the characters and Baitz's sharp dialogue make *Other Desert Cities* worth seeing.



Patricia Richardson. Photo by Joan Marcus.

It's the story of the Wyeth family, reunited at home in Palm Springs for Christmas. Father Lyman is a movie star turned ambassador, now retired; mother Polly is a patrician ex-screenwriter; daughter Brooke is an author with a mental breakdown and a marital breakdown behind her; son Trip is a producer of trashy reality TV; and Silda, Polly's sister, is just back from a stint in rehab and looking like she could be headed back there any minute now. But the specter of another family member hangs over the Wyeths: son Henry, a radical who took his own life a quarter century earlier after being involved in a deadly anti-government bombing. When Brooke announces she's about to publish a memoir dealing with Henry's life and death, the fireworks begin. Brooke sees her book as a way to exorcise the demons that have tormented her for years, but her parents see it as a guarantee of public humiliation — or something far, far worse. Polly describes the Wyeths as "A family that has so valued discretion," but if the book were to be published, that discretion would come to an end.



Liza J. Bennett and Charles Socarides. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Baitz mixes comedy and drama well in the first act before moving to more serious matters during the second act. But Director Sheryl Kaller's production doesn't establish a light enough tone early on, so a lot of the jokes don't land; while the dramatic moments in Act Two work, the balance is never quite right, and the production comes off as too somber. And some of the performances are out of step: Kevin Kilner's Wyeth is too detached even at his most compassionate moments, while Liza J. Bennett's Brooke has a flat voice and expression that makes her hard to sympathize with. (It doesn't help that Bennett has been directed to turn away her body in profile at key points, so that her voice is not projecting toward the audience.)

Fortunately, the other actors fare better. As Trip, Charles Socarides conveys the stress of trying to be a peacemaker in a family that's not interested in peace. Deirdre Madigan plays Silda with an acidic edge. And as the domineering yet beleaguered Polly, Patricia Richardson has the proper arch bitterness, not to mention a terrific way with a withering quip. (Madigan and Richardson excel, even though they lack a certain ethnic authenticity; in fact, they may be the least likely Jewish sisters since Blythe Danner and Judith Ivey in *Brighton Beach Memoirs*.)

Michael Gilliam's lighting sets the action at different times of day efficiently. Alex Neumann's sound design uses jazzy Christmas Carols to establish the time of year. And Nicole V. Moody's sophisticated-casual costumes and Clarke Dunham's light and airy set design give the show an elegant touch – just right for this show about a proud, elegant, repressed family that may not be able to hold onto its pride, or its secrets, much longer.

Running Time: Two hours and 15 minutes, including an intermission.