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Theater: 'Other Desert Cities' at Bucks County Playhouse



Patricia Richardson in "Other Desert Cities." (Courtesy photo)

By Ted Otten

19th century novelist George Eliot once wrote, "What greater thing is there for human souls than to feel that they are joined for life - to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories," but not every member of the family portrayed in "Other Desert Cities," the dramedy running through September 2 at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse, would agree with that comment.

This play by Jon Robin Baitz, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2012, comes to New Hope with an outstanding reputation. First produced in California in 2010, it arrived in New York Off-Broadway at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theater in 2011 and then moved to Broadway later that year for a run of 261 performances at the Booth Theatre where it was nominated for five 2012 Tony Awards.

At BCP, the production is directed by Sheryl Kaller whose work on another problematic family play called "Mothers and Sons" by Terrance McNally and starring Tyne Daly was at the Playhouse in 2013. That production transferred to Broadway in 2014 for a run of 103 performances at the John Golden Theatre and received two 2014 Tony Award nominations.

The cast of five includes both BCP veterans and first timers. One of the veterans is Patricia Richardson whom TV viewers will know from her continuous role as Jill Taylor on the Tim Allen series "Home Improvement" which earned her four Emmy Award nominations, and BCP-goers will remember her as M'Lynn in the acclaimed staging of Robert Harling's "Steel Magnolias" in 2016.

Richardson plays Polly Wyeth, mother of Brooke Wyeth, the writer of a best-selling first novel of a decade earlier, who returns to the family home in Palm Springs on Christmas Eve, and Brooke causes unexpected havoc with the contents of her possible next work, a family memoir which reopens old wounds.

Polly's sister Silda Grauman, who's been living with Polly and her husband after a serious slide in her treatment for alcoholism, is played by another BCP veteran, Dierdre Madigan, fondly remembered for her portrayal of Sonia, an endearing character in Christopher Durang's "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" in 2014. Hilda and Polly had written charming romantic screen comedies for Hollywood years ago, but the once close sisters have drifted apart over the years because of their differing political opinions.

"Silda is Brooke's aunt, her only aunt, and they're very close, and I think that Silda may be closer to Brooke than her mother is. I think that for some people, you can be closer to an aunt than to your mother because you can say things to your aunt that you can't say to your mother," said Madigan who claims not to have a favorite role among the many she's played but to always love the character she's playing at the moment.

"Like Brooke, she's damaged, and, at this family reunion, everybody talks about Silda's damage, and she talks about it too, so there's no secrecy involved. Even Silda's entrance is talking about her damage, but in a very funny way. She has a very sharp tongue, and she's a recovering alcoholic who's recently slipped which is why she's there.

"They're all very clever and witty and erudite people, and they play with words," said Madigan, "but Silda does resent being watched, not so much by Lyman as by her sister who's always there, maybe not directly keeping an eye on her, but right there. I think sometimes family members who are trying to shield other family members from pain can actually cause more pain.

"One of the amazing things about this play is that it can be so funny, but it's so serious too, and there's something of a mystery here too. I'll bet that anyone who sees this play will recognize themselves or their relatives in these characters," said Madigan, who's delighted to be back in New Hope, "and, like so many family reunions, what happens is a mixture of laughter and tears. They all care for each other, but they don't always like each other."

The Wythe family members do have secrets, things that one or two of them know but don't think it's appropriate or necessary for someone else to know. Polly and Lyman have such secrets about the older of their two sons, Brooke's brother Henry, a political activist who committed suicide after a deadly bombing in which he was involved.

"Polly and Lyman, at first, think that Brooke has written another novel after years of producing magazine articles in New York," said Kevin Kilner who plays Lyman Wyeth and is one of those making his BCP debut, "so they're shocked when they find out that it's really a painful family memoir and that it's about things from their family's past that they'd rather forget."

In what one critic called "the Wyeths' competitive hyper-articulateness," Polly and Lyman live almost in exile in Palm Springs. In his past, Lyman had been both an actor and an ambassador serving under Lyman's idol, Ronald Reagan, but his life now in one of those "other desert cities" has earned him a comparative calm which Brooke's memoir could seriously upset.

"The mystery of Henry's death is driving her almost crazy," said Kilner, "but Polly and Lyman don't want this painful and, to them, shameful and embarrassing event revisited. Why would anyone want to bring up something that has been successfully buried for so long?"

IF YOU GO

"Other Desert Cities"

Where: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, Pa.

When: Through September 2: Tuesday to Thursday at 7:30; Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. with matinees at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.