

<https://www.newhopefreepress.com/2017/08/23/other-desert-cities-at-bucks-county-playhouse-is-smart-timely-provocative/>



# New Hope Free Press

August 23, 2017

## ‘Other Desert Cities’ At Bucks County Playhouse Is Smart, Timely, Provocative



Liza J. Bennett (Brooke Wyeth), Charles Socarides (Trip Wyeth). (Photo: Joan Marcus)

By John Dwyer

In the 2011 theater season, “Other Desert Cities” was a hard ticket to get. It premiered off-Broadway at Lincoln Center in January, and due to its commercial success there, transferred to Broadway in November. It was deservedly singled out for a Pulitzer Prize and Tony nomination. The play is brilliant and the production is a true ensemble piece that was renowned in its off-Broadway and Broadway productions for its acting. Bucks County Playhouse is ending its regular season with this play, and it is more timely now than ever before.

I do love the play — arguably the best that Jon Robin Baitz has written. It originated in 2010 at the Ojai Playwrights Conference, where he is a writer-in-residence. To Baitz, we live in a political age, where much of our discussion between family and friends goes toward politics.

“Other Desert Cities” takes place on Christmas Eve 2004 in the upscale Palm Springs home of staunch Republicans Lyman and Polly Wyeth. Lyman was a former actor, and his wife Polly had been part of a screenwriting duo, along with her sister, Silda Grauman. Over the years, Polly’s views became increasingly conservative, while Silda remained true to her Jewish liberal roots. Their political differences were the primary reason for breaking up their writing collaboration. The Wyeths actually knew the Reagans quite well, and Lyman became an ambassador at about the same time that Silda became an alcoholic.



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

On this Christmas holiday, she is trying to stay sober and not fight with her sister who, adding insult to injury, is not just conservative but observes Christmas in an off-hand way. The Wyeths have been very successful in their lives and have raised three children, Henry, Brooke and Trip. Brooke and Trip have come home for Christmas, but Henry unfortunately died years earlier. Brooke is a writer who is about to publish a book about her family and, in particular, about Henry's involvement with a radical group and his subsequent taking of his own life. The truth of what happened is Brooke's truth. Her parents have not read the book. Family gatherings at the holidays can typically be emotional, especially when political discussions arise, and this is amplified when moral judgements are made not just about the macro-situation of the country, but the microcosm at home.

"Other Desert Cities" is well written, funny, smart, and thought-provoking. It leaves questions, as in life, for you to answer: Which character's politics do you identify with? Who is the real protagonist in the play? The antagonist?

Patricia Richardson, who gave an outstanding performance in last year's "Steel Magnolia's" at Bucks County Playhouse, is perfection. If you saw Stockard Channing in the original production, you may have thought that you could not find a better performance in that role. Ben Brantley in the New York Times said it was possibly the best performance of her career. Richardson finds so much nuance at every moment that her performance as Polly Wyeth is second to none.

As mentioned, this is an ensemble piece, and the center of power in the family dynamic ebbs and flows between the five characters on stage, along with the missing character of Henry. Kevin Kilner gives a strong performance as Lyman Wyeth, the patriarch of the clan. Deirdre Madigan captures the funny yet sad character that is Silda. Her caustic wit is the crumbling barbed wire fence that protects her self-esteem. Many will remember her for her standout performance as Sonia in Bucks County Playhouse's 2014 production of "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike." Liza J. Bennett plays daughter Brooke. Battling bouts of depression as Brooke, Bennett is tasked with presenting vestiges of that past as she doggedly persists in getting out her truth about the family. Her performance is of a more stable Brooke than I have previously seen, but that allows for a more striking contrast later in the show and brought more attention to the final moments of the play. Charles Socarides was a charming Trip, playing the centrist on the political spectrum, trying to balance out the family and make peace.

The director Sheryl Kaller has history with the playhouse. She re-opened the theater in 2012 with “Barefoot in the Park” and, in 2013, directed Terence McNally’s “Mothers and Sons” there. “Mothers and Sons” went on to Broadway and a Tony nomination. This show, as well, is a perfect match, and the producing team is to be commended.

Clarke Dunham, two-time Tony award nominee, was scenic designer for this show. Dunham certainly was familiar with this stage, having been the resident scenic designer for the playhouse from the glory years of 1963 to 1967. The set was pitch perfect, reflecting a Palm Springs desert chic.

See this show. Think about it afterwards. Discuss with family and friends the themes of family, loyalty, politics, depression, mental illness, addiction, truth, and writers’ obligations. “Other Desert Cities” will not desert you — it stays in your mind and makes you think.

“Other Desert Cities” runs through Sept. 2. For tickets and information, check out [Bucks County Playhouse](#) online.