

THEATER REVIEW

‘Other Desert Cities’ family drama blooms

By Dany Margolies

What happens in other people’s homes behind closed doors? That’s the stuff of so much Great American Theater.

Jon Robin Baitz’s “Other Desert Cities” will likely join the pantheon of those works, despite a few already dated references. But family dynamics, political clashes, addictions and depression will always be with us and are exquisitely rendered for the stage here.

And what happens when a family member wants to very publicly disclose very private family secrets? Here, daughter Brooke writes a memoir about her politically radical elder brother, a topic her parents have buried along with their son.

Brooke’s parents, Polly and Lyman Wyeth, have settled into a comfortable retirement of early morning tennis games, quickly followed by nonstop unabashed alcohol consumption, yet a cigarette habit they hide from each other.

They have also settled into a Palm Springs lifestyle



PHOTO BY MIRIAM GEER

Mark Bramhall, Willow Geer and Ellen Geer, from left, star in “Other Desert Cities,” which continues in repertory at Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum through Oct. 1.

with their Reaganite circle of friends, including Nancy, whom Polly has modeled herself on.

Now it’s Christmas, and the grown children are back in the fold. Brooke has come in from Sag Harbor for the first time in years, having been hospitalized for a “breakdown.” Her younger brother, Trip, is here on a holiday break from producing television schlock. Polly’s

sister, Silda, is fresh from rehab.

Director Mary Jo DuPrey, to her artistic credit, tones down the comedy, though the script offers plenty at its start, as the Wyeths rib one another over politics and lifestyle. DuPrey instead heads straight for the souls of these characters, each of whom is utterly human.

Her cast is stupendous, in their individual charac-

terizations and working together as an ensemble to create a feeling of a family that knows itself and yet doesn’t.

Mark Bramhall plays Lyman, a former movie star and now a stately but loving patriarch. Ellen Geer plays Polly, a former Hollywood writer who hasn’t lost her quick wit but who has given up that life to take care of a family that might not want her care.

OTHER DESERT CITIES

★★★★

When: Repertory schedule, but in general evenings at 7:30 p.m., matinees at 3:30 p.m., through Oct. 1.

Where: Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga.

Length: 2 hrs., 30 min., including intermission; note early curtain.

Suitability: Teens and up, for language and themes of violence. The theater is outdoors, with cushions available for rent.

Tickets: \$15–\$38.50.

Information: 310-455-3723, theatricum.com.

what may be her best performance yet. She gives a magnificent portrayal of the tenuously recovering alcoholic Silda, childlike and yet a former successful writer in the unwelcoming world of movies, holding fast to leftist ideals amid her right-wing hosts.

Most notable among the design elements are costumes by Vicki Conrad. Lyman wears classics, Trip wears Hollywood comfy, Silda and Brooke wear loose-waisted clothing to accommodate the anti-depressant weight gain, and Polly gets a ladies-who-lunch kaftan that’s a gem.

This play tells a very specific story about this particular family. And yet the entire opening-night audience was noticeably gripped by it as the Wyeths’ long-kept secret was recounted. How many families have kept truths like these to themselves? How many have been torn apart by politics and war, in America and perhaps in those “other desert cities” halfway across the world?

Dany Margolies is a Los Angeles-based writer.

Willow Geer takes on Brooke, who has been through life’s worst and survived but still fears her parents. Rafael Goldstein is the delightful Trip, always the baby of the family yet who wisely fends off a caregiving role.

Melora Marshall, an actor who has made herself court jester in decades of Theatricum productions, at last plays it straight here in