

Family Issues Surface in *Desert Cities*

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When a playwright ventures into family dynamics, the stakes are high. The author must have the fortitude to accept that the topic has yielded some of the most accomplished American dramatic works, including *Death of a Salesman*, *Angels in America* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, and must deign to tackle a subject that we all know well—the family.

Playwright Jon Robin Baitz accepted the challenge in his 2011 *Other Desert Cities*, now on stage at Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum.

For us Southern California natives, the desert (Palm Springs) ambience is recognizable and familiar. Baitz uses the setting for the family reunion at Christmas, fully aware of the absurdity of a decorated Yule tree.

Polly and Lyman Wyeth have retired to Palm Springs, joining compatible people who share their comfortable Republican complacency. Lyman is a former actor, who enjoyed marginal fame in Westerns and voiceovers, and later was rewarded by the GOP with a minor ambassadorial posting.

Polly cocoons in a smug assurance of the conservative party's worldview, stabilized by her acquaintance with GOP socialites, such as Nancy and Betsy (Reagan and Blooming-



Mark Bramhall, Ellen Geer and Willow Geer.

Photo: Miriam Geer

dale). The play is set in 2004, allowing for heated debate over the American invasion of Iraq.

We soon learn that the Wyeths are anticipating a happy Christmas get-together with their grown children: Brooke, a once promising novelist living in New York, is about to publish a memoir that erupts into the pivotal plot point, and her younger brother Trip is a reality TV writer in L.A. They will

be joined by Aunt Silda, Polly's liberal younger sister, a struggling alcoholic whose other home is a rehab facility.

So, the strains on this family are obvious from the start. Mom and Dad gallantly defend their life of tennis, the country club and cocktails well before the sun passes the yardarm.

While playwright Baitz pours a long list of ingredients into the mix, which can potentially ignite any number of simmering resentments, Brooke's memoir blows open the family's years of pain and fear.

Memoirs by definition belong to the writer; they are an account of one's personal life and experiences, not subject to multiple perspectives. In hers, Brooke is trying to make sense of her beloved brother Henry's suicide, a subject her family has been incapable of talking about. We understand that in the turbulent anti-Vietnam war roar, he planted a bomb in an army recruiting station and then killed himself.

Brooke needs to talk about it, "not in code and not obliquely," she says to her father. "I want to talk about Henry until it makes sense. When I imagined his suicide, I imagined I died too." Brooke, who copes with depression and suffered a serious

breakdown several years before, is a constant worry to her parents.

The mere existence of Brooke's memoir, its publication date set and a New Yorker option to publish excerpts, unhinges her parents, who recoil with horror at exposing their life to the world and threatening their blissful denial.

The argument is compelling. Is it cruel to publish this family memoir that does indeed offer harsh and painful judgments of her parents? Or should Brooke respect her parents' feelings and publish it after their deaths?

Trip, who serves as the play's insight and truth, offers his tough perspective. "Because you had a breakdown, you think that gives you a free pass to present a picture of two people who failed as parents," he tells Brooke. "They've been really good to you. They think about you every day. This may well kill them."

This skeletal plot synopsis leaves much uncovered, a climatic revelation that drains much of the family's well of self-delusion and sadness.

Other Desert Cities, under the skill of director May Jo DuPrey, is a masterful piece of ensemble work. Every one of these fine actors provides the flesh and blood that makes this a believable family.

It should be noted that three members of the cast are in fact related. Ellen Geer embodies Polly, who while waltzing around in her desert caftans cauterizes the action with her stinging racist and sexist barbs. Ellen's sister, Melora Marshall, presents Silda as having been able to endure her older sister all these years, through the numbing haze of booze. Willow Geer, Ellen's daughter, defines Brooke's emotional journey with subtlety and compassion.

Mark Bramhall takes Lyman beyond the handsome and agreeable former actor to the vulnerable center of his being. Rafael Goldstein as Trip manages to deliver the best of Baitz's clever and funny dialogue, while also nailing the truth of the family.

Other Desert Cities continues through September 30 at the outdoor amphitheater in Topanga Canyon. Contact: theatricum.com or (310) 455-3723.