



OTHER DESERT CITIES

FAMILY SECRETS WILL OUT IN *OTHER DESERT CITIES*. Photo by Ian Flanders

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

It's no wonder Jon Robin Baitz's family drama, "Other Desert Cities" was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2012 and picked up other awards that year, including five Tony nominations. It's smart, funny, explosive and highly entertaining.

It's not always easy to watch the Wyeth family tear each other apart with biting, verbal slings and arrows as we feel their pain, passion and frustration. But the zingers flying around the stage are delivered with such wit and aplomb by the five actors, it's a rousing experience to witness this production at Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum.

The seemingly perfect life of conservative actor-turned-politician Lyman Wyeth (Mark Bramhall) and his overwhelming and controlling wife Polly (Ellen Geer) is thrown into turmoil when their daughter Brooke (Willow Geer) and son Trip (Rafael Goldstein) come home for Christmas. Bring Polly's recently sober but still struggling sister Silda (Melora Marshall) into the mix — bringing her own axe to grind with Polly — and fantastic fireworks are assured.

Tensions reach the boiling point when Brooke reveals she is about to publish a memoir that focuses on a tragic family event. Years before, another brother was involved in a terrorist plot that resulted in the death of an innocent bystander and the brother's subsequent suicide.

This production, directed by Mary Jo DuPrey, is a real-life family affair, featuring members of theater founders Will Geer's and Herta Ware's own families: daughters Ellen Geer and Melora Marshall, and granddaughter Willow Geer.

It's a given that Ellen Geer and Melora Marshall will be brilliant. That they play sparring sisters with a painful history and have the best lines in a play rich with great dialogue is as much a treat for them as it is for the audience. Geer and Marshall were having a fine time and it made the experience all the more pleasurable for the audience.

But it's Willow Geer, as the depressed novelist who has taken six years to regain her writing chops following the death of her brother, who

shines and is a revelation as her emotional arc takes her through the depths of despair.

Rafael Goldstein as the family peacemaker is also terrific, while Mark Bramhall as the patriarch trying to keep everybody sane and happy gets to mine different and difficult emotions from witty to weary to heartbroken.

With smart, believable arguments from both sides of the political spectrum, the takeaways from *Other Desert Cities* is that there are two sides to every argument and secrets will make a family sick. Watching this clan unravel is compelling and will strike a chord with everyone who has ever dared discuss politics with blood relatives. The dialogue is never preachy or condescending, yet always thought-provoking.

The play's title refers to a roadside sign on the eastbound I-10 that directs drivers to exit at Palm Springs or head on to "other desert cities" — something Brooke wishes she'd done once she tells the family about her memoir and reopens an old family wound that never healed.

In her director's notes, DuPrey tells the audience that with so much political division in America today, it is easy to forget how personally affecting these divisions can be in our daily lives. *Other Desert Cities* painstakingly reminds us that people are complex creatures, and can never be singularly defined.

Costume design is by Vicki Conrad, lighting design by Zach Moore, sound design and original music by Marshal McDaniel, set design is by Rich Rose, and props are by Sydney Russell. The production stage manager is Elna Kjordan. ■

Other Desert Cities runs through September 30. Tickets range from \$15 to \$38.50.

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley. For a complete schedule of performances and to purchase tickets: (310) 455-3723; theatricum.com; facebook.com/theatricum; Twitter: @theatricum.