



HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS: (left to right) Rachel Griffiths, Stacy Keach & Stockard Channing in the must-see masterpiece, *Other Desert Cities*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Politics, secrets all in the dysfunctional family

OTHER DESERT CITIES

By Jon Robin Baitz

Directed by Joe Mantello

Open run

Booth Theatre

222 West 45th Street, (212-239-6200)

www.lct.org

By Scott Harrah

Other Desert Cities is that rare show that turns the saga of a troubled, affluent family into a blockbuster. In an era when Broadway relies so heavily on revivals of musicals and British imports, it is refreshing to see a drama as original and intrinsically all-American as this. And with such acting heavyweights as Stockard Channing, Stacy Keach, Rachel Griffiths, Judith Light, and Thomas Sadoski in the cast, it is certainly one of the theatrical events of the year.

Other Desert Cities, while not completely seamless, has all the elements of classic American drama: a California family torn apart by their writer daughter Brooke (Griffiths), visiting from back East after suffering a six-year nervous breakdown; the acerbic-tongued, alcoholic sister, Silda Grauman (Judith Light); and son Trip (Thomas Sadoski), who is fed up with Brooke's self-centered angst. The Wyeths, a prominent Republican family of retired Hollywood luminaries, live in a posh but sterile Palm Springs house and do everything to maintain their public image of being upper-class and righteous. Lyman (Keith) is a former actor, and wife Polly (Channing) is an ex TV writer, and they fill their golden years in the desert going to the country club, attending GOP fundraisers, and dropping names like Nancy Reagan and Mrs. Pat Buckley. Polly thinks of herself as a Texas socialite transplanted to California, but sister Silda loves to remind her that she's "just a Jew from Texas."

Playwright Jon Robin Baitz has a gift for crisp, marvelously literate dialogue. This is one of the few plays in recent years that gives us lines we want to savor and demand our constant attention. For each of Trip and Brooke's jabs at their parents and their conservative values, Polly has a caustic zinger about her

children's bleeding-heart liberalism. There is much humor and truth in the otherwise grim tale of the Wyeths. Most Americans, rich or poor, GOP or Democrat, have silly arguments about politics at Christmas. Beneath their privileged, right-wing veneer, the Wyeths are just a typical American family that still manages to care about each other after years of grief and misunderstanding.

The show, which debuted earlier this year at the Mitzi Newhouse at Lincoln Center, suffers slightly from technical glitches in its Broadway transfer. It is difficult to pinpoint why—poor acoustics or faulty microphones—but Jill BC DuBoff's sound design in the small Booth Theatre needs tweaking, because there are times when the actors' brilliant dialogue sounds muffled.

Despite such minor flaws, *Other Desert Cities* is so provocative because of the intriguing twist in act two. The Wyeths are all worked up over the tell-all, bombshell memoir about a dark family secret Brooke is about to have published and also excerpted in *The New Yorker*. She hands over copies of her manuscript on Christmas Eve before the family plans to have dinner at the country club, but everyone—particularly Brooke—is in for a shocking revelation that changes everything, from our perception of the characters to the outcome of the play itself.

A story this powerful needs a great cast, and it definitely has one here, under the careful direction of Joe Mantello. Ms. Channing and Mr. Keach are sublime as Polly and Lyman, revealing the many layers of these complicated people. Ms. Griffiths has one of the trickiest tasks here, portraying Brooke as a woman for whom it is difficult to feel any sympathy. It takes awhile for Mr. Sadoski to truly get into the role of brother Trip, but he redeems himself in act two when the character ultimately snaps. Although hers is merely a supporting role, Judith Light gives one of her finest stage performances ever as Polly's recovering alcoholic sister, Silda. Ms. Light often steals the show with her vitriolic delivery of dialogue, and adds much-needed levity in many of the play's bleaker scenes.

There is one glaring narrative defect: A tacked-on epilogue that adds nothing to *Other Desert Cities*. The final moments of the climax, set in 2004, are so forceful that there is no need for a brief denouement, six years later in 2010. Despite its minor flaws, *Other Desert Cities* is one of best-written American plays of the New Millennium.

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