

Pacifica Tribune



Lance Huntley photo

After a six-year absence Brooke Wyeth (Heather Skelley), far right, enjoys holiday hopes with her mom Polly (Mary Bishop) and her dad Lyman (Louis Schilling).

THEATER REVIEW

Secrets and wit rule this tale

By Jean Bartlett

Tribune Writer

In author Louisa May Alcott's novel "Little Women," one of her major characters, Amy March, says, "I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship."

This quote is not referenced in Jon Robin Baitz's exploding, tender, funny and riveting drama "Other Desert Cities," but its insightfulness constantly gathers its characters and its audience in a real drink from life's most constant churning waters – that great, bottomless well called "family," where anchor and extended mast call the same place home.

Astutely directed by Steve Bologna and currently presenting in the Muriel Watkin Gallery Performance Space of the Pacifica Spindrift Players, "Other Desert Cities" clangs the bravo meter for top-of-the-line storytelling, and it is profoundly highlighted by five actors who give every gem of this playwright's "American canon" its full due.

The story opens on Christmas Eve, 2004, at Lyman and Polly Wyeth's home in Palm Springs. Lyman and Polly, both retired, are Reagan conservatives and the only conservatives in their immediate family. Lyman was a former B film movie star who became a U.S. ambassador during his buddy's (Reagan's) presidency. Polly, a great friend of Nancy Reagan, used to write B movie screenplays with her sister Silda Grauman.

Silda, a bohemian, has taken up residence in her sister and brother-in-law's home to stay on a successful road of sobriety. Tripp, the couple's son and youngest child, is a successful television producer of a courtroom "reality" show. Brooke is the couple's daughter. She is a resident of New York City, a professional writer and the author of a well-received first novel published some years back. Her clinical breakdown behind her, Brooke has returned home after a six-year absence to show her family her newest book – a tell-all memoir with a focus on a decades-old tragedy that nearly broke her family's resiliency. Her memoir has been approved for publication. She kinda sorta, not really, wants her family's blessing before she signs the contract.

What every character in "Other Desert Cities" gets and delivers is real conversation by people who are smart, hilarious, angry, hopeful, wounded, politically divided yet deeply connected, and thoroughly ruled by the anchor and sail of family. It is a true ensemble piece, and director Steve Bologna gives his audience stand-up-and-cheer theater.



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Heather Skelley is daughter Brooke. Oh, that's right, "plays" daughter Brooke. She is so deeply relaxed into her character's skin that I imagine I will be reading her next book, or taking a class from her on how to deliver fabulous, biting lines. It is a spectacular performance. Mary Bishop as Polly is a powerhouse. She gives us a fierce, no-nonsense, highly intelligent and very dedicated mother, wife and sister walking a secretive high wire of a devastated heart. Wow.

Louis Schilling plays Lyman and he is a charmer. Of course his Lyman would be an ambassador. Who could not like this guy? Mr. Schilling also delivers deeply touching layers of a quiet, well-aware father. Jason Bustos as Tripp is a beacon, leading his Wyeth family and his audience with right-on good nature, honest observation and hilarity. His character is very self-aware and Jason's walk in Tripp's shoes is a smile-maker.

Pamela Ciochetti as Polly's newly-sober sister Silda is funny, sturdy, wobbly, smart, lost and found. She paints a beautiful portrait of the flaws in our individual stars.

For people who hunger for: well-written dialogue; a believable, touching, well-paced (and quite often funny) story on family dynamics; and also for evidence that people can remain dedicated to each other despite their political differences – this one is for you.

"Other Desert Cities" directed by Steve Bologna plays the Muriel Watkin Gallery Performance Space of PSP, 1050 Crespi Drive, Pacifica. Through March 17. Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets: \$20. Box Office: 650-359-8002 or online at www.pacificaspindriftplayers.org.

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