

## STAGE

Everyone has secrets, but most don't see theirs published in someone else's memoir.

In *Other Desert Cities*, an emotional and thought-provoking drama now in rehearsals at Starkville Community Theatre, skeletons in the closet are brought out into the light, and years of simmering tension boil over as a family must face a long-buried event in their past and the ways its damage rippled out through the rest of their lives.

It's Christmas Eve in 2004, with Polly and Lyman Wyeth welcoming their two adult children – Brooke and Trip – home to Palm Springs for the holidays. Polly (played by Marsha Williams) and her sister Silda (Terry McDowell) co-wrote a series of comedy films in the 1960s.

Lyman (Kent Gravett) was an actor. Polly and Lyman emerged as staunch Republicans as their wealth and age accumulated; Silda slid into alcoholism and doubled down on outspoken liberalism, in and out of rehab stays.

Entering this minefield of political sparring and sibling rivalry, Trip (Michael Dendy), who produces a reality TV show, is a would-be peacemaker, while Brooke (Justine Moser), a struggling author, has a bombshell that will make peace much harder to maintain.

She's written a book about the death of her brother Henry, whose violent death as part of a subculture movement is the family shame. Fresh from hospitalization for a breakdown after a divorce, Brooke feels the book will help her understand and move on with her life, whether her family is ready to have its dirty laundry aired publicly or not.

"At the heart of this play is a story of love," said Moser.

"Love that comes at great costs to the ones giving it... that is so great that it hurts deep down to the core. The characters of this play cling in different ways to the people, memories and ideas that they love and value," Moser said. "It's very interesting to see their battles to understand, to resolve, and to protect, especially when they clash with and question each other."

Every character has a well-reasoned argument for why or why not the memoir should see the light of day, and playwright Jon Robin Baitz never stacks the deck solely to one side, adding new wrinkles and revelations throughout the show that keep shifting the audience's loyalties.

When asked who the hero of the show is, Gravett picked his own character, a stoic who tries to keep the family from pain and falling apart. Dendy, on the other hand, stuck to Trip's perspective that no one is a hero and that everyone is most invested in seeing their own interests come to completion.

Point-of-view is the core of *Other Desert Cities*, said Williams.

"Each of these five family members has a different perception of an event in the past," Williams said. "Each knows at least a part of the story and bases his or her responses to the event on those parts they know. Not on the 'whole story.' We all have events in our family life which are likely to have provoked differing responses."

McDowell believes the push and pull of the familial "love/hate" dynamic is something many audience members will recognize.



Gabe Smith

"(Family) is about sacrifices, secrets and strength. It's about the unspoken things that have happened in our past that we never talk about, but which influenced and shaped us into the beings that we are."

Gravett, making his SCT debut in this production, heaped praise on his fellow performers, who are creating their own stage family along with director Jo Durst.

"I feel the cast is the strongest I have seen in my time here," he said. "All have given their all as a company."

Since SCT primarily offers crowd-pleasing and family-friendly shows during its main season, the thematic heaviness and contemporary charge of *Other Desert Cities*, an extra production outside that main season, has been difficult but gratifying, said McDowell.

"The process has been a journey, to say the least. My character adds a small amount of much-needed levity, but that is only because she hides her pain behind sarcasm and a sharp tongue," McDowell said.

That sharpness means the production comes with mature content and potentially offensive situations designed to make audiences have a visceral reaction.

"The language and images (Baitz) uses are intriguing and lead the audience to question their own beliefs concerning their relationships to those they love," said Durst.

"I believe every theatre needs to be doing this type of challenging work and letting their community see, feel and experience this type of theatre," said Dendy. "It's engaging, it's poignant and it's important."

It's also a page-turner, said McDowell.

"I am not usually drawn to audition for dramas," she said, "but this one had me hooked from the first reading. People should see it because it's one of those plays that stays with you. You won't forget it a year from now. It's gripping."

Though set more than a decade ago, Durst says the show could have been written with current American politics in mind.

"It is relevant to (what) is taking place in the presidential race," she said, "and what it is doing to the fabric of society just as the fabric of (the Wyeth) family is being ripped apart."

Like Moser, Durst stresses the importance feelings beneath the fighting, the hope lingering when the dust settles. "This play helps us see the way toward healing," she said. Bombs are detonating everywhere, and only love might keep the family, and the rest of us, alive.

"Other Desert Cities" opens Tuesday, May 24, at the Playhouse on Main Street. Performances are nightly through Saturday, May 28, at 7:30 p.m.

General admission is \$15, \$10 for college and high school students. Discretion is advised, and the production is intended for mature audiences. For reservations, call the SCT box office at 662.323.6855.