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Other Desert Cities
Teaching resources

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Other Desert Cities

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Teaching Resources

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JON ROBIN BAITZ

Jon Robin Baitz was born in Los Angeles, California although he grew up in South Africa. He feels this led him to idolise the States and become a believer in the American Dream, although not a fully informed one.

After graduating from Beverly Hills High School, he worked as an assistant to two producers. This experience became the basis for his first play *Mizlansky/Zilinsky*. He also drew on his background for his first two-act play *The Film Society*, about the staff of a prep school in South Africa. Its 1987 success in LA led to an Off-Broadway production in New York the following year, which earned him a Drama Desk Award nomination for Outstanding New Play. This was followed by *The End of the Day* and *The Substance of Fire*.

In 1991 Baitz wrote and directed the two-character play *Three Hotels*, based on his parents, for a presentation of PBS's American Playhouse. He then reworked the material for the stage, earning another Drama Desk Award nomination for Outstanding New Play. In 1993 he co-scripted *The Frightening Frammis*, which was directed by Tom Cruise and aired as an episode of the Showtime anthology series *Fallen Angels*. He was one of the finalists for the Pulitzer Prize for his semi-autobiographical play *A Fair Country* and was nominated again with *Other Desert Cities*.

Subsequent stage works include *Mizlansky/Zilinsky* or *Schmucks*, a revised version of *Mizlansky/Zilinsky*, a new adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, *Ten Unknowns* (2001) and *The Paris Letter* (2005). His screenplays include the adaptation of his own *Substance of Fire* (1996) and *People I Know* (2003), which starred Al Pacino.

Baitz's occasional work writing for such television series such as *The West Wing* and *Alias* led to his position as creator and executive producer of the TV drama *Brothers & Sisters*, which premiered in 2006 and ran until May 2011.

His play *Other Desert Cities* opened Off-Broadway at the Mitzi E Newhouse Theater (Lincoln Center) in New York on 13 January 2011, it was originally titled *Love and Mercy*. In *Other Desert Cities*, 'Love & Mercy: A Memoir' is the title of Brooke's book.

Other Desert Cities was among the ten most-produced plays in the United States in 2012/13.

SYNOPSIS

The story follows the Wyeth family at Christmas in their home in Palm Springs, California.

Brooke has written a novel that none of her family have read yet. Her parents, Polly and Lyman, try to persuade her to move back home as she has previously suffered a serious attack of depression. Brooke reveals to her brother, Trip, that actually the novel is a tell-all memoir about their older brother, Henry, who was implicated in a bombing of an army recruitment centre and then committed suicide.

Polly interrogates Trip about Brooke and warns him that if Brooke faces another breakdown she will be his problem. She uses her sister, Silda, who is currently staying with them as she recovers from alcoholism, as an example.

Brooke gives copies of the manuscript to the family, before she's read it Polly assumes (correctly) it must be about Henry and they argue as Polly struggles to talk about what happened. Brooke then reveals that *The New Yorker* is running a section in two months. Lyman decides not to read it and gives Brooke his full support. Polly is outraged and warns Brooke that if she goes ahead, she will lose them as parents.

Brooke has been sending some parts of the book to Silda. Silda begs her not to back down in the face of parental disapproval.

Polly is furious at her sister for giving information to Brooke and reads out a section of the book which describes Lyman hitting Henry. Lyman rages that the implication is that because he held up American traditions, he broke his son. Polly reveals that when called for, Silda wasn't there for Henry. Silda is horrified and Brooke is furious that Silda has left this fact out. Brooke says there will be a book if it is the last thing she publishes and turns to leave.

At this Lyman snaps and unearths the greater deception behind Henry's death. Polly and Lyman then tell the story of how Henry became implicated in the bombing, that he wasn't to blame, and eventually how they found him and faked his suicide in order to ensure his safety. They agreed never to tell anyone and Polly and Lyman returned to Palm Springs but they know he's alive. If Brooke is to publish the book, the Wyeth family secret will be at risk. Brooke throws the manuscript at her parents, shouting that she has spent years trying to hold on to her life because of them.

The last scene takes place in March 2010, Brooke is at a book reading, she explains the book took so long to be published because she needed to look at it from a distance. She wraps up the session by reading a section about Henry.

ACT BREAKDOWN

All of the action takes place in The Wyeth home, Palm Springs, California.

Act I Scene I

Christmas Eve morning, 2004

The play opens on Christmas Eve morning with the whole family together. Lyman and Polly try to persuade Brooke to move back to Palm Springs so they can keep an eye on her since she has only recently recovered from an attack of depression.

Conversation turns to Brooke's latest novel that she has written. Lyman and Polly are proud of their daughter and curious to read a copy of the manuscript. The family tease Trip about the TV programme he produces called 'Jury of Your Peers'.

Brooke asks whether Aunt Silda will be joining the family for breakfast. Silda, Polly's sister, is staying with Polly and Lyman as they help her recover from alcoholism. Polly leaves.

Brooke and her father discuss Brooke's brother Henry who committed suicide after being implicated in the bombing of an army recruitment centre due to his involvement in an extremist left-wing group. Lyman leaves.

Brooke reveals to Trip that she's concerned that their parents will hate her new book as it's about the story of Henry's downfall. Trip reassures her and Brooke leaves to get ready for breakfast.

Polly re-enters and argues with Trip about the nature of family obligation and warns him that one day Brooke will be his problem, just as Silda is Polly's problem.

Right on cue Silda interrupts making a big entrance. She is a mess and rants without making much sense, belying her alcoholism.

Act I Scene II

Late afternoon. The family have returned from their breakfast.

Brooke surprises everyone by handing out copies of her manuscript. She wants to 'get it over with' and warns them that it's not really a novel but a memoir of everything that's happened to them. Polly immediately (and correctly) assumes that the book is about Henry and gets upset and agitated. Silda chips in but only adds fuel to the fire. Lyman attempts to reassure Polly by pointing out that it takes a great deal of time to get a book published so there's no need to come to an agreement immediately.

Brooke undoes this as she announces that *The New Yorker* newspaper will in fact be running a feature on her book in only two months' time. Over the argument that ensues it becomes clear that whilst Brooke wants her parents' blessing to publish the book, she may not get what she wants.

Brooke is eventually left alone with only her Aunt Silda. It turns out that Brooke has been sending Silda excerpts of the book, and that Silda has encouraged her throughout the writing process. She now continues to support and encourage Brooke, who is shaken up by her parent's (and particularly her mother's) reaction.

Lyman re-enters and tries to talk Brooke out of going through with publishing. He and Brooke argue and Brooke is left shaken and upset.

ACT BREAKDOWN

Act II Scene I

Trip and Polly read Brooke's manuscript and the family tensions running throughout the play boil over. Polly feels that the book essentially accuses her and Lyman of driving their son to suicide. Polly also resents her sister's involvement in the book's creation and points out that Henry turned to Silda for help in his time of need, but Silda was too drunk to do anything.

Lyman eventually breaks down as he cannot hold on to the secret any longer. Lyman and Polly tell the story of losing their son to an extremist left-wing group which then went on to bomb an army recruitment centre. Henry swore to his parents that he had no idea of the bombing but rather than go to the police he went on the run. Lyman tracked him down and helped him to cross the border into Mexico. He and his parents decided to fake his suicide and together the three of them wrote his suicide note.

If Brooke publishes the book, the family's secret will be at risk of discovery and Henry's life in jeopardy. Discovering that her parents have kept the truth from her is devastating to Brooke as she feels that she has spent years not killing herself in order to protect her parents from losing another child.

Act II Scene II March 2010

Brooke is at a book reading and reads a section from her book. She says that people always ask why it took so long for the book to be published as it had been announced and then never came out. She says it was to do with looking at it from a distance. She wraps up the session by reading a section about Henry as a teenage boy.



Daniel Lapaine

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

Brooke Wyeth

Brooke is the central character. She has now recovered from a serious clinical breakdown which led to her being hospitalised and for which she is still taking medication. She has written a tell-all memoir about her family, specifically about her older brother Henry. Brooke and Henry were very close and she found her brother's death incredibly difficult. She loves her family and doesn't know if she can publish her book without their approval. She is also similar to her mother, as she doesn't like any weakness though she doesn't admit this to herself.

Polly Wyeth

Polly is Lyman's wife and mother to Brooke and Trip. She is elegant, outspoken and very smart. She is also controlling, calculating and observes people's behaviour. She has strong conservative views and is a believer in tough love, though members of the family feel that she is often harsh and makes people nervous. She is confident and says that she 'knows who she is'. Polly also feels that she is constantly supporting other people, particularly her sister Silda who is a recovering alcoholic. She is a realist and fiercely dedicated to her family's survival.

Lyman Wyeth

The head of the family, Lyman is a sturdy man and a strong believer in American traditions and values. Lyman used to be a movie actor but then turned to politics and became an ambassador of the Republican Party. He communicates his opinions in a more diplomatic way than Polly. He is overprotective and worries for Brooke since her breakdown. He often tries to relieve moments of tension within the family, though shocks Brooke a few times when he rallies against her.

Silda Grauman

Silda is Polly's sister. She is a recovering alcoholic and is currently staying with Polly and Lyman. Silda stands up to her sister several times, pointing out how harsh she is. Silda has helped Brooke to write her memoir and provided her with more detail about Polly and Lyman. Silda encourages Brooke to publish her book in the face of Brooke's doubts. However, she does not tell Brooke that when Henry turned to her for help she was too drunk to be able to do anything. Silda has a volatile but loving relationship with her sister.

Trip Wyeth

Trip is Brooke's brother, roughly ten years her junior. He is a bright, funny man and is a TV producer. Caught in the middle between Brooke and his parents he wants to protect Brooke and believes she has the right to publish whatever she wants but also understands why their parents are pushing back. Baitz has stated that Trip's way of surviving is to adopt a 'let it go, it's all fine' attitude which is partly the reason why he is constantly called upon to make peace between Brooke and Polly. Trip feels that he has always lived in the shadow of his older brother Henry whom he never knew. He also isn't actually as happy as he seems.

CONTEXT

Other Desert Cities is set in Palm Springs, California, 2004.

California has a reputation as ‘the land of fresh starts’ as everyone is in pursuit of a dream of one kind or another. It is where newcomers come seeking a better life, hoping to explore, invent or reinvent themselves and they’re going to be rich and famous. In California, creative artists have flourished as they could create buildings, paintings or dances their own way, casting aside the more traditional and routine. Helgi Tómasson, the Artistic Director and principal choreographer for the San Francisco Ballet states that ‘we think of California as not being burdened by tradition, you are not locked into doing things a certain way just because that is how it has been done and should be done.’

But that freedom comes with a price tag, in recent weeks, newspapers and magazines have declared that California is suffering from the worst drought in its recorded history, the poor have inadequate housing, the prisons are overcrowded, and everyone is waiting for ‘the Big One,’ the earthquake that will make everything else irrelevant. Where better to escape reality than Palm Springs? Here, in an oasis about two hours from Los Angeles, swimming pools sparkle, palm trees sway and there’s sunshine all year round.

Playwright Jon Robin Baitz’s believes Palm Springs embodies ‘the great promise of the west’, it’s a place to hide and therefore no accident that ‘old Hollywood’ used to camp here. Incorporated as a city in 1938, Palm Springs drew such stars as Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.

The characters of Polly and Lyman in *Other Desert Cities* are part of the ‘old Hollywood’ that Baitz describes. Where they live is important as it reflects the theme of deception, as they are trying to hide away from their secret.

Just as the highway sign, coming in from the airport, reads ‘Palm Springs and other desert cities,’ so do the west coast locations of Baitz’s plays harbour unnamed, unexplored places. ‘The sign evokes the great unknown that is part of western mythology,’ suggests Baitz. ‘The cowboy disappears into the sunset, alone, towards an uncertain and new future.’

Edited from an article written by **Barbara Isenberg** in *The Old Vic Other Desert Cities* programme 2014.



In the rehearsal room

GLOBAL CONTEXT

World events that occurred during 2004 included the US and British invasion of Iraq as they believed Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. Ten years on from the invasion, Iraq remains the most divisive war in recent history and is therefore important to consider in the context of *Other Desert Cities*.

Following the terrorist attack of the twin towers (referred to as 9/11) in 2001, President George Bush Junior declared that the US was going to disarm Iraq through warfare in 2002. Most nations of the world, the United Nations and the US Congress disagreed with President Bush that a US invasion into Iraq should be the first step in solving the problem. In fact, most agreed that war should be the last step rather than the first.

They insisted that UN inspections should be attempted before starting a war. If inspections failed then warfare would be an option. Not all of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were found during the inspections of the 1990s and many believed that Iraq was still hiding some.

The US Congress pressured President Bush into trying UN inspections before starting a war. After months of looking, UN inspectors did not find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Nevertheless, President Bush then ordered

the US military to attack Iraq because Iraq had apparently failed to prove that it did not have weapons of mass destruction. Britain was the only other major world power joining in the attack. Other nations opposed the attack on the grounds that the UN inspectors had not had enough time to complete their work under the agreement established by the United Nations. After several weeks the leadership of Iraq was removed by the US with help from Britain. Iraq did not use weapons of mass destruction against the invading troops from the US and Britain.

No weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq. The reason President Bush gave for the attack of Iraq, that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and was close to using them against the US, has not been supported by what has happened so far.

Other Desert Cities is set in 2004 which was early in the invasion of Iraq. The US public were still reeling from 9/11 which was reflected through 47-60% of Americans supporting the invasion subject to UN approval. The Iraq war split opinion and there was political unease worldwide with mass protests in the US and Britain against the government decisions to invade.



Sinéad Cusack, Daniel Lapaine, Clare Higgins & Lindsay Posner

THEMES

Family

A major theme of *Other Desert Cities* is the family and their history. The play explores the complex relationships children have with their parents and vice versa, what responsibilities we have to ourselves and those we're related to. A traditional family consists of a married couple with children who love, support and care for each other. This extends to deep rooted notions such as family loyalty where children obey their parents and reflect their parents' outlooks on life. Jon Robin Baitz rips open this concept in *Other Desert Cities*, as Brooke has pulled far away from her family's principles – she is divorced and has a strong left-wing political stance. Nonetheless, she is bound to her parents as they are to her as people who have supported and cared for her throughout her life. This theme is of particular relevance to a modern audience who have experienced this shift in today's society as the concept of the traditional family is increasingly challenged with rising divorce statistics, more complex family structures and greater opportunities to express individual opinion.

The role of the writer

Baitz explores the role of the writer within our society through the character of Brooke and her memoir. Brooke's debate of whether to publish the book to the potential detriment of her family is incredibly difficult for her. She is, of course, allowed to publish whatever she wants but she is unsure whether she will be able to carry on if she loses her family. Brooke's turmoil is a microcosm of a wider debate of whether 'art comes before life'. Do writers have a duty to challenge and inform our society, regardless of the damage this may cause them personally? Trip captures this dispute perfectly as he tells Brooke if she chooses art over life she must 'accept the consequences... which in this case is likely to be losing the trust of the people you love, for the sake of these *opinions*'.

Politics

The political divide between the characters is clear. Polly and Lyman are both very conservative, with Polly making strong, brazen statements throughout such as 'Arabs with all sorts of plans they're hatching' with which Brooke and Silda vehemently oppose.

Jon Robin Baitz describes how politics have influenced the play in this statement: 'America is currently in a giant political debate, and you can see a kind of war going on that's actually a very old war. Our elections are about the soul of this country. It's like every four years there's open heart surgery here. I see the country as really broken, much as the family in the play is breaking'

Loss and grief

The loss of Henry is a key theme throughout the play. For Brooke, it is the reason behind her depression as she is burdened by the memory of his suicide. It has taken her years to recover and writing this book has been a healing process for her. In contrast, Polly and Lyman are unable to speak about the incident as they simply wish to forget. However, it is clear that the incident haunts them, particularly through Lyman's overprotective behaviour towards Brooke.

For a modern theatre audience, the fact that Henry was implicated in the bombing of an army recruitment centre is of importance as it ties to the wider global context of the Iraq war. Thousands of American soldiers and an estimate of over a million Iraqi deaths have occurred as a result of the conflict (Opinion Research Business Survey), for which nations grieve as a whole. However, in *Other Desert Cities* Baitz achieves in making a national grief a personal one through illustrating the effect Henry's death has had on the Wyeths' family life.

THEMES

Depression

Brooke has suffered from a serious clinical depression, stemming from the loss of her brother Henry. Her ability to function dwindled and she became hospitalised, during which her parents Polly and Lyman took care of her. When the audience is introduced to Brooke, she has regained her sense of self and has written a new novel. She is monitoring her depression through anti-depressant pills, though her parents are in constant fear of her having another breakdown. Depression is a common problem although many feel there is still a stigma attached to mental health problems in our society today. Through charting Brooke's journey from hospitalisation to regulating her depression with anti-depressants and the support of her family, Baitz breaks down barriers of talking about the realities of mental health on stage.

Addiction

Silda suffers from alcoholism and has moved to live with Polly and Lyman who are caring for her. It is a constant battle between Polly and Silda, with Polly using Silda as an example when she warns Trip that Brooke could become his problem as she believes 'families are terrorized by their weakest members'. Silda's addiction is also the reason why she wasn't able to help Henry when he turned to her; a secret she keeps from Brooke. Similarly to depression, addiction seriously affects one's life and relationships. Silda's battle with alcoholism is often compared to Brooke's depression throughout the play and without Polly and Lyman's support Silda would be on her own. This links back to the overarching theme of the family and the responsibilities we share, as Polly feels a loyalty to take care of Silda.

Deception

Throughout *Other Desert Cities*, we see members of the family keeping secrets from each other. Baitz introduces this theme with small lies and builds momentum through secrets such as Brooke sending parts of the manuscript to Silda and Polly revealing that Silda was unable to help Henry. The climax of the play and where we see this theme most clearly is at the end when Polly and Lyman reveal the truth about Henry's suicide. Throughout *Other Desert Cities*, Baitz examines the effect deception has upon the Wyeth family.



Lindsay Posner

MARTHA PLIMPTON

Brooke Wyeth

What was your initial response to the play?

I read it a long time ago because Robbie [Jon Robin Baitz] is a good friend of mine and I had also seen it in New York. I love the play; I think it's one of Robbie's best. I think it's very precise and a vigorous exploration of a family dynamic. One of the best things about it is that there's a lot to excavate. It's complex and it's multi-layered. There's always more than meets the eye to who these characters are, they're either concealing or revealing things in very calculated ways. I really loved it, I was surprised by it and I was moved by it and I thought the characters were people that I knew and understood and had seen before. Being an American these are people I know, they're definitely a very classic American family.

As Brooke is such a central character, how have you built her character? What kind of process did you go through to find her? Brooke is a very tough role because she is central to the story; she is the catalyst for much of what happens in the play. She's the antagonist in the story. But she's almost entirely reactive – she is not a commander, she is not in control of her own life. So much of who she is and much of how she behaves and where she's coming from is really dependent upon the other characters in the story, more so than a lot of other roles and more so than in many of the roles I've played.

It's not to say that she's passive but she is who she is because of a certain set of circumstances and personalities who have conspired to inform this person's character. It's still a work of progress because the relationships are still being fleshed out, all of the dynamics are being fleshed out and it's hard to say today where we might end up by the time we open [the play at the Old Vic] or even beyond. But Brooke is a person who in a strange way has developed in an emotional vacuum and she is desperately trying to cleave to some form or vision of reality that will explain why she is the way she is because no-one else in her world is able to provide that context.

Do you think she manages to do that through her memoir? You've got to watch or read the play to find out and see because circumstances are not always what they seem. One person's bad guy is another person's hero so you really don't know.

Martha Plimpton



Have you ever performed in the round before?

No and I'm finding it particularly interesting and challenging. I think it's really well suited to this particular play. But I've never worked in the round before so I'm still adjusting to it. Also, this isn't your traditional round – it's sort of oblong round. I'm really enjoying it but it does present its own particular challenges.

What advice would you like to give someone at the beginning of their career? How did you begin? Well I got into acting in a very unusual way, which doesn't work for most people. I started when I was a very small child at 8 years old. It was entirely by accident, it just happened as what seemed like a natural evolutionary process where I came from.

If I were to say anything to anyone who is starting out in their career it's that it's so important not to take yourself so seriously. Of course, it's a natural state of affairs for young actors to see what they do as extremely important and in a way it is because actors are story-tellers and an important part of our world. But to find the pleasure in everything and enjoy it and have fun is the best and smartest way to actually get the most out of every experience and to learn the most from every experience. In as much as one is able, one should try to have fun at all times. And to just do what you really want to do and not worry about career or where it's going to take you or ambition so much because when you're doing what you truly love and enjoy and feel challenged by all of those other things come.

PETER EGAN

Lyman Wyeth

What do you think are the main themes of *Other Desert Cities*? The main themes are how damaging a commitment to any 'ism' is - like fundamentalism, radicalism, Republicanism, conservatism. Also the misunderstandings you get within a family who have highly positioned parental structures and people who cannot adapt, who cannot move forwards with time.

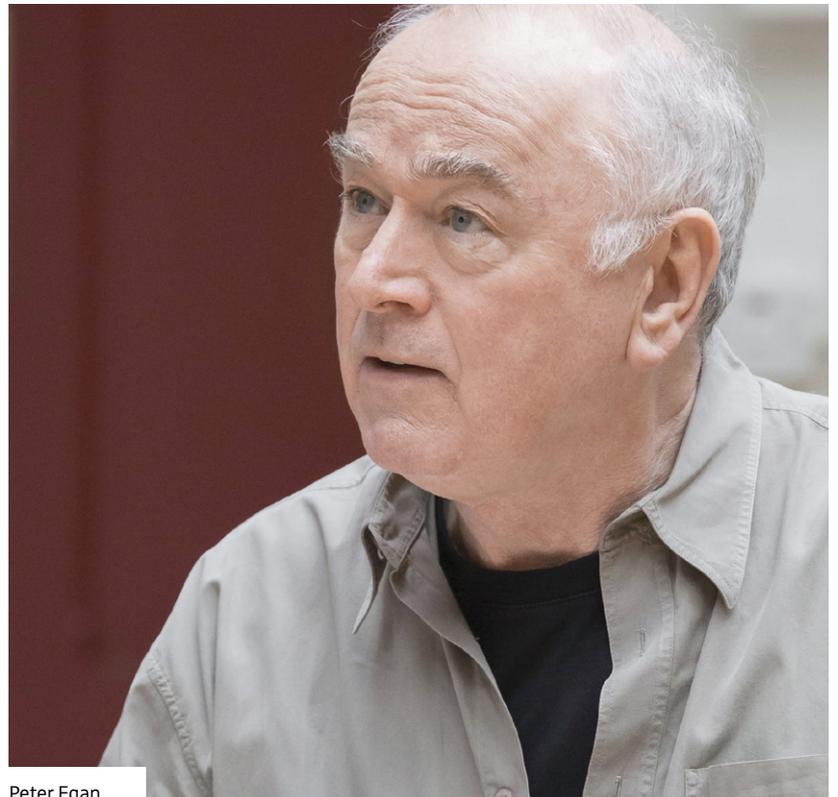
I guess that's particularly relevant to Polly and Lyman. Exactly, Polly and Lyman. If one took the tragedy of their son away from their situation I think Polly and Lyman would have moved towards a more liberal republicanism than any of those extreme right wing politicians. I have a feeling anyway that Lyman wouldn't have become quite so right wing, particularly in the way that he journeys through this play. He has quite a big heart I think. Once you start any episode in life that is predicated by a lie you are in very troubled water because you are consistently frightened of being found out, particularly with some very highly designed political lives. These two characters have spent twenty years living with a lie and have constructed a life and a relationship. It is no accident that they've moved to the desert. They are isolated and I think they also wanted to escape because of the politics in say LA, they were much more under the spotlight. They have chosen to escape and they are struggling with the fear that their secret will be exposed, particularly by Brooke's book so that is a major threat to the lives they have structured.

The only way you can survive in a modern society is by being very eclectic. The world is getting bigger and smaller at the same time. We learn so many things so fast it's important to keep up with the way the world is moving. These two people haven't done that and the world catches up with them very fast and it does that through the power of Brooke and her book and her desire to pursue her brother's story. I think *Other Desert Cities* is beautifully written and very difficult to play.

What do you think are the biggest challenges in playing it? For me, the biggest challenge is being a right wing Republican. It's the totally the opposite of who I am. I'm a humanist and completely opposed to the extremes of politics because I think they push people away from humanity. That's a challenge for me as an actor. Also getting the rhythms of the language. We are as someone said, 'two nations divided by a common language' and I certainly feel that's quite present.

I'm working hard on trying to achieve the requisite rhythms, when it's not working it's like patting your head and rubbing your stomach. Normally I'm used to working in my own language and this is not standard it's extreme right-wing American and that's a challenge.

Baitz has a history of writing for TV such as *Brothers and Sisters*. Have you noticed any differences in his style of writing? I first did a Job Robin Baitz play 20 years ago, *Three Hotels*. He was dealing again with the corruption of high powered conglomerates and the destruction they pose on mortals and there's a similar refrain in *Other Desert Cities*. I think first and foremost he is a theatre writer. *Other Desert Cities* is an orchestral piece and what I mean by that is that it has a variety of different moods. It's a family saga and if you touch the right button it emotionally sends the group in opposite directions from where they are. Because the stakes are very high it's a pressure-pot situation and that in itself is very interesting and makes for a multi-layered and exciting evening.



Peter Egan

CLARE HIGGINS

Silda Grauman

What do you feel are the main themes of the play? Families. Family betrayal, family politics, families basically.

What has your approach been in developing the relationship between Polly and Silda? The relationship is pretty clear; it's two sisters who are extremely different. One has, in Silda's eyes, betrayed herself by becoming a Republican, a member of the right wing and re-inventing herself in that way. The other sister has gone down completely the other road become an alcoholic, remained a liberal and messed herself up. So they're from extreme ends of the spectrum and that creates a lot of tension; in any family it would.

When approaching a contemporary text in comparison to a classical text what would you say are the different challenges? Every text is the same in that you've just got to find your way through it. Really when you think about Shakespeare, when he wrote he was writing modern plays so it doesn't really matter to me in the slightest. All plays are texts that you mine for information. In Shakespeare and much older plays there are textual challenges, some of the words aren't current, the meter is very strong and that is a classical discipline. But in a modern play I don't think anyone's going to misunderstand any of this.

Have you ever performed in the round before?
Yes, many times.

What do you find are the biggest challenges when performing in the round? It's not a question of challenges it's just a question of playing. You don't just walk into the round and think 'Oh I can't do this'. There's an audience and you work out that you face different parts of the audience as often as you can and hope you can be heard!



Clare Higgins

SINÉAD CUSACK

Polly Wyeth

What are you enjoying most about the rehearsal process or what have you found the most challenging? I think the most interesting thing is the politics and the mind-set of a particular group that I would never have met in my life: this particularly old guard republican couple in the mould of Ronnie and Nancy Regan. I would never have met those sorts of people. It's challenging to understand that mind-set

and to understand that 'entrepreneurial American spirit' as my character describes it, what it means to them and the importance of it and how they probably caused great problems for their children as a result of this particular mind-set.

Polly is such a strong, dynamic character. What do you think are the most important values to her? I think the mantra that

Nancy Regan gave her which was 'Order. Precision. Discipline' those were the values that she espoused. But above all, I think she wants control. She wants to be able to control every situation and her children, so the impulses and rebellion of her children are very difficult for her to deal with. She's proud of her daughter Brooke for being a writer but she wants her to be a very particular sort of writer. The idea of their family history being used in a book is absolutely abhorrent to someone like Polly.

Sinéad Cusack



How does it feel to perform as part of a small ensemble? You do feel quite a burden of responsibility in carrying the play and getting it across. Particularly because it's such an American play, it has such American values and American sensibility that many of us Irish/ English actors in the cast had to learn a great deal from Jon Robin Baitz. We had to find out so much about that detail and then of course we had the accent on top of that. So yes, it has been challenging.

What advice would you give someone who's just beginning their character or how did you find your way? I find that difficult as I never went to drama school. I learnt from the school of hard knocks as I went straight into the business. I'm not a fantastic example of how to get it right as it took me years and years before I learnt the skills of projection and movement. I had to learn on the hoof so to speak. Whereas if you go to drama school all of those skills are part of your training and as I didn't I had to pick them as I went along.