

Secrets and Lies: "Other Desert Cities," at the Village Theatre through October 27

Written by Thom White

Monday, 21 October 2013 06:00

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While leaving Friday's performance of *Other Desert Cities*, a friend told me that he thought it was the best play he'd seen by New Ground Theatre, and I agreed that, if not *the*

best, it is at least among the best productions by the local company. Director David Turley's staging of playwright Jon Robin Baitz's smart, realistic dialogue and intriguing storyline has a tremendous palpability to it, both in the family dynamics of those on-stage and in the tensions and emotions they feel.

Baitz's story begins with Tracy Pelzer-Timm's Brooke returning home for Christmas, where the author plans to show her family her latest book: a memoir about the death of her older brother who, she believes, committed suicide after taking part in a war-protest bombing, and about the subsequent rejection of their son by his parents. Those parents – Susan Perrin-Sallak's Polly and Pat Flaherty's Lyman – do not want such a family secret released, it turns out, partly because Brooke doesn't know all of the facts behind their son's death, and could consequently reveal a secret that even she doesn't know about.

Brooke is up against a conservative father who was once an actor before moving into a career in politics, and Flaherty shapes this man with a long-suffering countenance and willingness to stay quiet in the midst of family discontent. Yet he's not disengaged; Lyman is ready to interject when he has something relevant to say, and he's a patient father (to a point) who puts love of family above their differences in opinion, especially political opinion.

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Meanwhile, if there were Tony Awards given out for local productions, Perrin-Sallak would deserve a nomination, and perhaps a win, for her Polly. Her matron of the family is tough, opinionated, controlling, and, at times, frightening. She shows no compassion in her demeanor, though she employs it in her actions, and we learn that this hard shell is her way of protecting the family, guarding their secrets, and countering poor opinions of them. When Polly takes Brooke's book and retreats to her bedroom to read it, we're given a sense that she's to be feared based on the way she walks with proud anger, setting up the expectation that she'll be a force to be reckoned with when she re-emerges. Perrin-Sallak is commanding in the role until she is broken during *Other Desert Cities'* climactic revelation of the family secret, at which point defeat crumbles her emotions and, in her tear-filled sadness, the protectiveness behind her previously cold nature is made clear.

Of all of the palpable emotion on stage, it's the tension between Perrin-Sallak and Pelzer-Timm that's most deeply felt. What starts as a typical, conservative-parent-versus-liberal-child sort of banter develops into a clear wall between mother and daughter, with Pelzer-Timm obviously starting to cower internally, a change made clear in the wavering of her voice and the emotion on her face. Yet she still stands her ground externally, defending her memoir's take on what really happened with her older brother, even while Brooke's initial, seemingly forced happiness melts into a confused depression shaded with a desperate want for approval for her revealing, damning book. Brooke's bright smile gives way to pleading sadness and eventually tears – with guttural wails eventually escaping when Brooke learns the truth behind her brother's death – and the sincerity in Pelzer-Timm's portrayal drives home the poignancy of Baitz's tale as an exploration of family dynamics and emotional connections.



In addition to these three members of the family, Jared Svoboda seemingly unflappable, wise, peacemaker son Trip is also home for the holidays, taking Brooke's side when talking politics, but also warning her that what she's doing with her book will have consequences. And Christina Marie Myatt delights as Polly's sister Silda, also visiting after a recent stint in rehab for alcoholism. Silda is the crazy aunt and a rabble-rouser, encouraging Brooke to stir the family pot, and Myatt shapes her as a fast-talking dynamo, boisterous in both speech and personality.

Beyond eliciting excellent performances, what's also striking about Turley's direction here is his

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staging; each character's movements are obviously planned but come across as completely organic, and the believability of these movements is rather stunning. All of this action is played across Tom Sallak's notable set, designed as the living room of a home likely built in the 1970s, with that style most apparent in the floor-to-ceiling, mantle-less, stone fireplace at the back of the stage.

New Ground Theatre's *Other Desert Cities* received a standing ovation following Saturday's performance, and as someone who believes standing ovations are overused, this one, I think, was deserved. Turley's staging of the piece is truly equal to the excellence of the script.

Other Desert Cities runs at the Village Theatre (2113 East 11th Street, Davenport) through october 27, and more information and tickets are available by calling (563)326-7529 or visiting NewGroundTheatre.org