

Review: “Other Desert Cities”

By Mary Cusack

Wednesday, November 6, 2013

Curtain call: 'Desert' storm

Peppermint Creek unleashes a battle royal with family drama

The theme of Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.'s 2013-'14 season is “battle lines,” and they mean it. The group's artistic director, Chad Badgero, has never shied away from a complex script, nor settled for a middling cast, and his production of “Other Desert Cities” is no exception. In this battle royal, what seems to be primarily a mother versus daughter conflict opens up wounds from which the whole family must recover.

The script launches slowly. A privileged Palm Springs family comes in from a friendly tennis match, their jibes establishing personality traits and family pecking order. It is quickly recognized that matriarch Polly (Janine Novenske Smith) rules this roost with her iron will, fortified with a pinch of emotional blackmail. Daughter Brooke (Shannon Rafferty Bowen), now an East Coaster, is visiting for the holidays. She has come bearing an unwanted gift: Her memoir, soon to be published, about her brother Henry's suicide, an event from which she still has not recovered more than 20 years later.

Typical of family dramas, there are many layers of guilt, tragedy, resentments and secrets that are deftly peeled away. The characters are fairly stereotypical. Stern, protective matriarch Polly; affably hen-pecked husband Lyman (Michael Shalley); brittle, damaged daughter Brooke; peacemaking clown son Trip (Michael Banghart); and wacky but dependent aunt Silda (Lela Ivey). Yet playwright John Robin Baitz develops each character fully. None are one-note caricatures, and in turn each character reveals a complex depth of emotion.

In the beginning it is easy to demonize Polly and empathize for Brooke. As more truth is revealed about Brooke's motivations and Henry's death, it becomes obvious that neither is right or wrong. As the saying goes (modified for the size of the cast) in this play there are five sides and then there's the truth.

The performances are strong all-around, but it is no surprise that seasoned, multiple award-winning vets Ivey and Novenske Smith stand out. Silda, having squandered her fortunes and fresh out of rehab, is dependent upon the charity of her sister. Ivey knows how to play Silda's resignation of sobriety for laughs, but when sibling rivalry and resentment emerges, she gives as good as she gets from Novenske Smith.

As for Novenske Smith, only one word suffices: Wow. Although she gets to chew the scenery as an egotistical former Hollywood player, she also has the unrewarding task of being unlikeable throughout most of the play. Her performance is reminiscent of Connie Curran Oesterle's role as a similarly powerful matriarch in Riverwalk's January production of “August: Osage County.”

Which makes one wonder what local director will be smart and brave enough to find a suitable play that would put these two formidable actors toe-to-toe? Better book a theater with an asbestos-lined stage for that one.

“Other Desert Cities”

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Nov. 7-9 \$15/\$10 students and seniors 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing (517) 927-3016 peppermintcreek.org