

Review: "Other Desert Cities"

By Jane Zussman

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Other Desert Cities is a fascinating tale of family conflict, lies and facades (a tad reminiscent of August; Osage County, but a little more funny and a lot less long.) John Robert Baites' script brings estranged, troubled writer, Brooke (Shannon Rafferty Bowan) home for Christmas after a six-year absence, bringing a manuscript of her memoir that opens up a family wound the parents (Janine Novenske Smith and Michael Shalley) are determined to keep hidden.

Political divides, secrets and lies, false-front identities, and "the indentured servitude of having a family" are all explored in a way that begins with dark humor and descends into facing serious buried truths. The title refers to a sign at the turnoff on Highway 10 to Palm Springs (where mom and dad live) and how Brooke (Shannon) is tempted to keep driving on to the "other desert cities" beyond. Perhaps this suggests that she has "gone too far" with her memoir? This is a fascinating script that challenges stereotypes and reveals the humanity of each person. Director Chad Badgero has led this cast to the creation of five very whole characters.

Janine is both maddening and heroic in the challenging role of mother Polly with Michael Shalley as her Reagan-esque husband, avoiding conflict and truth as long as he can. Shannon is intense and convincing as estranged daughter, Brooke. Michael Banghart brings humor and a natural style, caught in the crossfire and pushed to take sides. Lela Ivey is a gem as mom's lovable, alcoholic, burnout sister.

Other Desert Cities continues at 8pm Fri/Sat and 2pm this Sunday only - and next week Thur/Fri/Sat at 8pm at the Miller Performing Arts Center
6025 Curry Lane Lansing, MI 48911 - north off Miller Road, just west of the South Cedar intersection. \$15 (\$10 for seniors 65+)

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