

STUDY GUIDE

CONTENTS

The Play

Meet the Playwright

Meet the Wyeths

Welcome to Palm Springs!

Key Historical Background

Memoir: Writing from Memories

Three Big Questions

THE PLAY

Lyman and Polly Wyeth met working in the glamor of Hollywood, but when their close friends Ronald and Nancy Reagan became leaders of the Republican Party, the Wyeths entered politics. They became one of the best known Republican couples in California.

Like many elite Hollywood and political families, the Wyeths gather in Palm Springs, California for Christmas. **Brooke** does not see eye to eye with her conservative parents, and has refused to come home for six years. Now it's Christmas 2004, and Brooke is back, but with a secret. She has written a memoir (see article) about her famous family. In it she details one of the most painful episodes of their past.

Over two nights of bickering and battling, truths are revealed that rock the Wyeth family. How does a person balance personal values with family loyalty? Who decides what should be public information and what should be private? How can a family recover from even the hardest of battles? ●

Major support for this program is provided by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

Funded in part by the D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities, an agency supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

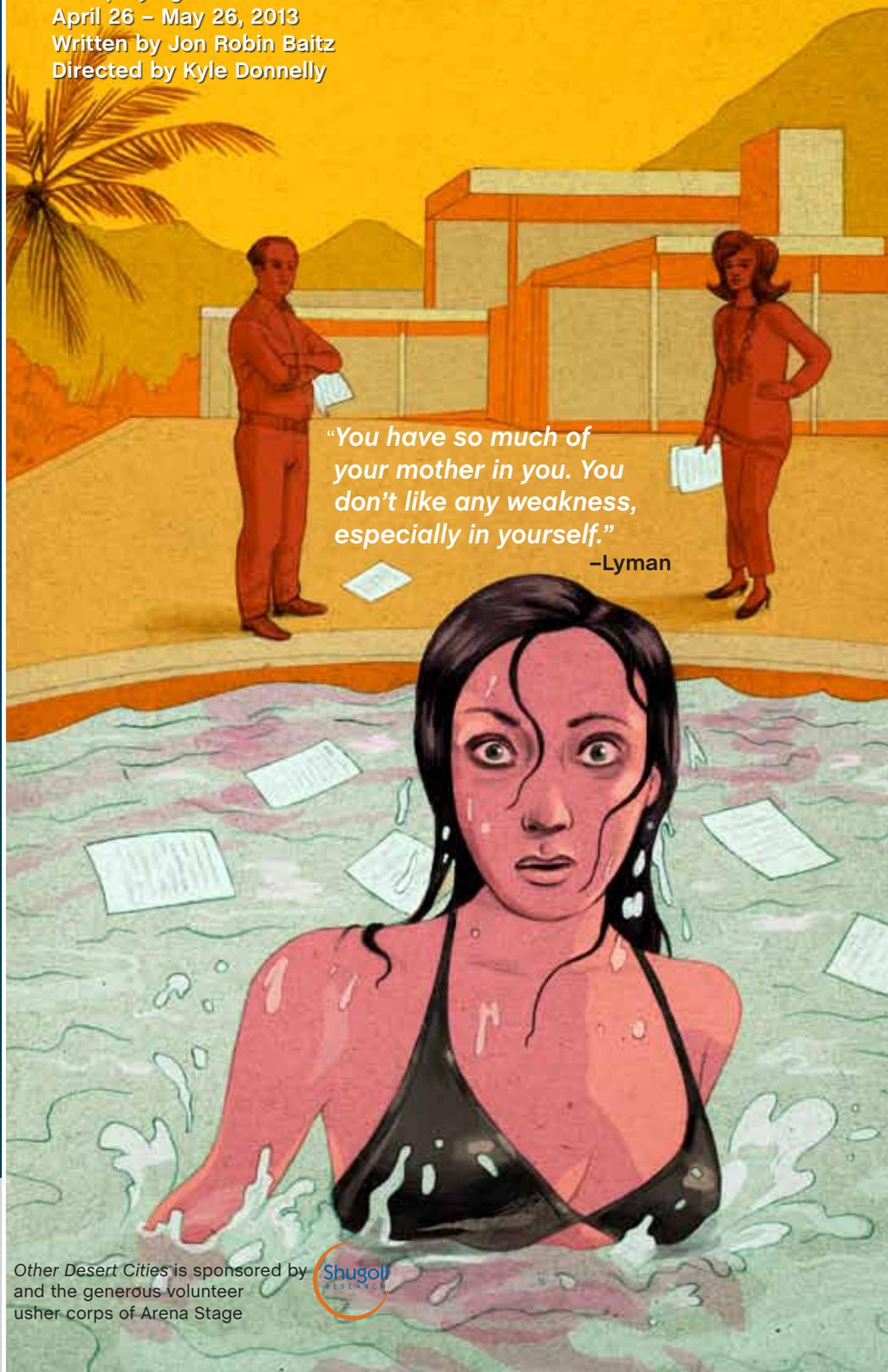
OTHER DESERT CITIES

Now playing in the Fichandler

April 26 – May 26, 2013

Written by Jon Robin Baitz

Directed by Kyle Donnelly



*"You have so much of
your mother in you. You
don't like any weakness,
especially in yourself."*

—Lyman

Other Desert Cities is sponsored by
and the generous volunteer
usher corps of Arena Stage



MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT:

Jon Robin Baitz



"I strive to find the exact point in a narrative where the personal and the political intersect perfectly,

because I find the two things completely inseparable."

—Jon Robin Baitz

Jon Robin "Robbie" Baitz was born in Los Angeles, California. He spent years of his childhood in South Africa and Brazil because of his father's work with the Carnation Company. His time in California and abroad play a large role in his plays. In an interview with *Bomb* magazine, he said, "South Africa made me who I am. Being party to, not mere witness to, pure and simple state-run racism... is the genesis for my interest in how systems operate. I write about that as much as I do parents and children; they're exactly the same thing."

After graduating from high school, Baitz worked as a producer's assistant and bookstore clerk while diving into writing. At 26, his second play debuted off-Broadway and since then he has been nominated for Tony, Outer Critics Circle and Drama Desk Awards. His plays include *The Film Society*, *The Substance of Fire*, *The End of the Day*, and *Three Hotels*. In 1996, his play *My Fair Country* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He teaches at The New School for Drama, where he is artistic director of the BFA division.

Baitz is also known for his work in film and television. He created the TV drama *Brothers and Sisters*, which ran for five seasons on ABC. Baitz has said that *Other Desert Cities* explores what he wishes he could have explored on that series.

MEET THE WYETHS



LYMAN WYETH: Dad

"I'm not easily bruised."

Baitz on Lyman: "Like many fathers he loves his children in ways that sometimes

shock even him."

Once famous for death scenes in 1950s western movies, Lyman traded in acting for politics in the 1980s. He became an ambassador for the U.S. government under President Ronald Reagan. Diplomatic and sturdy, Lyman often acts as the mediator between Polly and Brooke.



POLLY WYETH: Mom

"The only way to get someone to not be an invalid is to treat them as such."

Baitz on Polly: "She's a

realist, and she's fiercely dedicated to her family's survival."

Born to a Jewish family in Texas, Polly was a Hollywood TV writer before joining Lyman in the political limelight. With conservative first lady Nancy Reagan as a guide, Polly works to maintain a respectable public image for her family.



TRIP WYETH: Son

"Nobody who takes pleasure as seriously as I do could possibly be happy."

Baitz on Trip: "His

overarching **dogma** consists of 'Let it go; it's California; it's all fine.'"

The youngest in the family, Trip produces the reality series *Jury of Your Peers*. His go-with-the-flow attitude often has him mediating conflict between his parents and sister.



BROOKE WYETH: Daughter

"Is there a blanket ban on writing about my life if it involves anyone else?"

Baitz on Brooke: She has, "...

exiled herself from the West much like I did; moved out to Sag Harbor much as I did; has written professionally, been a novelist, and has dried up, much as I occasionally have."

Brooke worked as a travel magazine writer and novelist, but fell into a deep depression. Now divorced and writing again, Brooke is home to unveil the book she has written about her family.



SILDA GRAUMAN: Aunt

"Honey, I deserve a Nobel Peace Prize for loving you as much as I do."

Baitz on Silda: "She is as much

a liberal as Polly is a conservative, and they have a volatile relationship but one that's built out of love."

Once the co-writer of a TV series with her sister Polly, Silda is living with the family while battling alcoholism. She is often on Brooke's side. ●

dogma – an established belief or principle



ACTIVITY

What is something that you disagree with your parents about? Write a monologue explaining your side of the issue to your parents. Then, write a second monologue from the perspective of one of your parents explaining *their* side of the issue.

PALM SPRINGS ON THE FICHANDLER STAGE



A home in Palm Springs.

The large rock formations in Palm Springs have inspired creative home designs. Some have been built around boulders! Set designer Kate Edmunds places a boulder on one corner of the set in homage to these designs. What could the boulder symbolize?

Lyman: *Palm Springs should be a refuge, where she wants to come when life in New York gets unbearable for her.*

Silda: *Palm Springs isn't a refuge; it's King Tut's tomb. The whole town is filled with mummies with tans.*

Welcome to PALM SPRINGS



The Setting

Tucked into the western edge of the Colorado Desert at the base of the San Jacinto Mountains, Palm Springs is a village-like community of tall red rocks, dry waving palm trees, days of hot sun and nights of cool desert air.

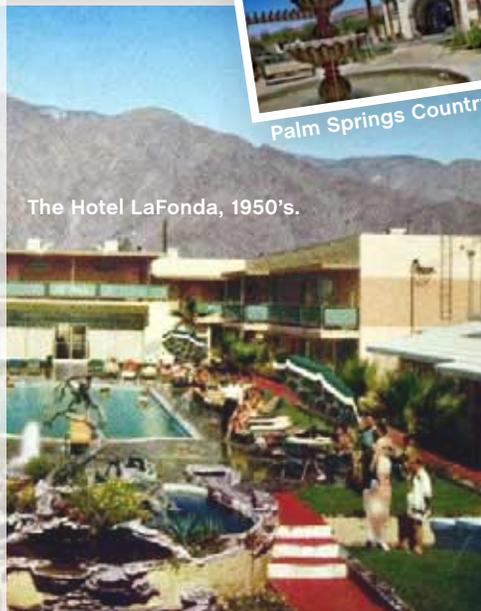


The History

More than 2,000 years ago, what is now Palm Springs was home to the Agua Caliente band of the Cahuilla Indians. In the late 1800s government surveys noted the land's mineral-rich waters and expansive land. By the 1930s Hollywood A-listers and business tycoons were flocking to the city's first hotels. A key site for military operations during WWII, Palm Springs went on to become one of California's most-populated tourist destinations in the post-war economic boom. Today, stars like Leonardo DiCaprio, Dakota Fanning, and Gwen Stefani vacation in Palm Springs.



The Hotel LaFonda, 1950's.



The Sights

In addition to hotels and spas, many with natural hot springs, Palm Springs is home to a variety of arts and outdoor entertainment. Palm Springs has its own Walk of Stars with star plaques in the sidewalk for stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Bob Hope.



The 26-ft. sculpture of Marilyn Monroe in Palm Springs.

KEY HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ronald Reagan earned his first Hollywood contract in 1937. He acted in 53 films over the next 20 years. After two terms as governor of California, he was elected President of the United States in 1981. Known for his conservative values, he served two terms. Reagan increased funding for defense while cutting taxes for citizens. In his farewell speech, Reagan said, "Man is not free unless government is limited."



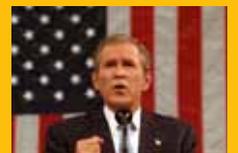
Nancy Davis Reagan acted both on Broadway and in Hollywood before marrying Ronald Reagan in 1952. As first lady, she spoke out against drug abuse in youth, supported war veteran rehabilitation and oversaw the PBS arts series *In Performance at the White House*.



Declared in 1955, the **Vietnam War** was fought between North Vietnam and the U.S.-backed South Vietnam. The north wanted to unite the country under a communist government, which the US did not support. The war lasted over 19 years. Many American soldiers were drafted and over 58,000 U.S. soldiers died. The war polarized Americans with people strongly for or against it.



Brooke was in New York City when two hijacked planes crashed into the World Trade Center on **Sept. 11, 2001**. A third plane hit the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.



One week after the attacks, President George W. Bush declared a war on the militant Islamic groups deemed responsible for the attacks. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in search of al-Qaeda supporters and operatives. In 2003, the U.S. invaded Iraq to remove the country's president Saddam Hussein and search for nuclear weapons. At the opening of the play, both wars are being waged.



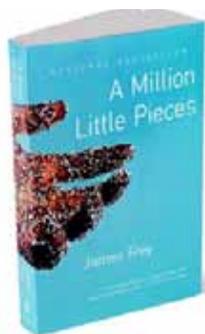
a! ACTIVITY In the play, the 9/11 attacks spark debate between people with different political views. Choose five adults in your life and ask them where they were on 9/11 and how they feel about the war today. Make a chart mapping their opinions.

MEMOIR: WRITING FROM MEMORIES

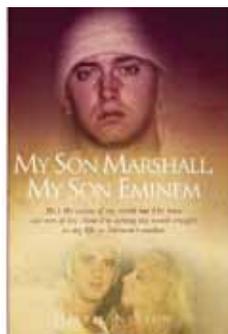
The novel that Brooke shows her family is a memoir. A memoir is a story a person writes using his/her own memories as the source material.

Polly challenges Brooke to consider how her memoir will impact her family. She also questions Brooke's memory of key family events. How accurate is a memory? Who is affected by the public revelation of personal stories? These questions often follow the publication of a memoir.

Controversial Memoirs



A Million Little Pieces by James Frey: This hit memoir about addiction and recovery made headlines when several facts were called into question.



My Son Marshall, My Son Eminem by Debbie Nelson: The memoir was written after Nelson won a \$25,000 lawsuit against her son over the lyrics to his album *The Slim Shady LP*.



The Way I See It by Patti Davis: Eldest daughter to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Davis' depiction of her famous parents was hotly debated.

The memoir genre can be traced to 4th century B.C., when Greek military strategist Xenophon began documenting his military maneuvers in what is now Iraq.



a! ACTIVITY Whose memoir would you like to read? Research their history. Who might NOT want them to write the memoir? Write a letter to the icon from the perspective of this person that details why it would be harmful to publish a memoir.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS **ONE** How does one balance responsibility to self and responsibility to others?
TWO How much can we trust our memories?
THREE What should be public and what should be kept private in a family?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS & ARTICLES

Memoir: A History by Ben Yagoda, 2010.

"But Enough About Me" by Daniel Mendelsohn, *The New Yorker*, Jan. 25, 2010

ON THE WEB

Ronald Reagan - www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/reagan

Palm Springs - www.pshistoricalsociety.org

Agua Caliente Indians - www.aguacaliente.org/content/History%20&%20Culture/

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



the mead center
for american theater

1101 Sixth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024
Phone: (202) 554-9066
Fax: (202) 488-4056

By Fareed Mostoufi

Edited by Rebecca Campana

Quotations from Jon Robin Baitz
courtesy The Goodman Theatre.

Visit www.arenastage.org
for more information on
Arena Stage productions
and educational opportunities.