



# OTHER DESERT CITIES

BY  
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Originally Produced by Lincoln Center Theater, New York City, 2010.

*For André Bishop and Joe Mantello; two men of the theatre  
who kept the lights on and drew the maps for me.*

*And for Gordon Davidson and Sir David Hare;  
both of whom make me want to read, watch, and write plays.*

## INTRODUCTION

A daughter returns home for Christmas for the first time in years, bearing the manuscript of a memoir, which reveals a devastating episode in the life of her wealthy Republican family. Her beloved older brother, eldest child of the family in question, was involved in a radical group in the 1970s that bombed a draft center; the explosion killed a man and brought about the brother's suicide. The events, years in the past at the time of the play, emotionally ravaged the daughter; disturbed the upbringing of the younger son, a child when the events happened; opened a schism between the mother and her sister; and shattered the orderly lives of the parents, causing their ostracism from an intimate circle of friends, which included President and Mrs. Reagan.

It was millennia ago that the first actor stood forward from the chorus and the theatre began. In outdoor arenas seating thousands, ancient communities worked out tragedies and contradictions. Think of *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, in which women in the ruling family of a conquered nation mourn their husbands and sons who died there; of *Lysistrata*, in which Aristophanes depicts an antiwar sex strike by the women of Athens; of *Antigone*, in which a daughter battles to give her brother a proper burial. These great plays constructed stories that held their audiences in thrall long enough to affect their emotions, to change their attitudes — the original meaning of “catharsis” was “purification.”

As the novel was the product of the rise of the bourgeoisie, so the contemporary memoir is a direct consequence of the revolution that disrupted American cultural life in the 1970s when African American writers, women writers, gay writers, and other non-white or minority writers began to publish, in numbers, the stories of our lives. We wished to speak our own realities rather than allow ourselves to be characterized only by (mostly) white and male writers — and we began to speak in memoir. Though fiction and poetry by these formerly outsider populations also moved decisively into the mainstream, it was memoir that flourished, as if fiction might distort reality and the canvas of poetry were insufficiently vast.

Four decades on, the genre whose origins I mark at the publication in 1974 of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, is still threatening enough to inspire jeers; recently, in the book review of record, a critic, assessing four memoirs, concluded that in the presence of so many inferior examples, prospective memoirists might "take a break." Why me? asks the memoirist. Every year thousands of novels and books of poems of debatable quality appear right alongside those considered great or at least good, and no one calls for a moratorium.

Such battles are nothing new in the history of literature, but no literary movement since the Modernists banished the metric line has brought on such conflict. In the last few years, when certain memoirs have been exposed as invention, reports on the perfidy of autobiographical writers have raged across front pages, as if something akin to murder had been committed. Since when have human beings not told lies? Since when have there not been literary hoaxes? Could it be that the intensity of the ruckus has less to do with the prevarication of a few authors, than with cultural resistance to the truths memoirs continue to reveal?

Change is not comfortable, neither is the most influential literature. Every time a truth formerly withheld bursts into view, the dynamics of society alter a little, freeing stories already lived and expanding the range of stories it will be possible to live in the future. Employing dramaturgy, which draws on Greek tragedy (the returning daughter), boulevard comedy (the play is funny), and Arthur Miller tragedy (children challenge their parents' integrity), Jon Robin Baitz meticulously unpacks all the ethical dilemmas of the present controversy while constructing a play that turns on the revelation of a truly surprising secret, just like a great memoir. Evenhanded, but never sacrificing a commitment to the truth or to the emotions that bind a family, Baitz allows all the important questions to be asked. When a family is involved, who owns the story? What kind of consequences might require a writer to have a responsibility beyond herself and her commitment to her art? When is the publication of "just a book" worth the splintering of a family? What is a writer talking about when she says that telling her story is for her "a matter of life and death"? Is there any such thing as a secret that should be kept?

As the play unfolds, the making of art — in this case the publication of a book — becomes a metaphor for the investigation of the cost of telling the truth inside one particular family. At the same time, a contemporary dramatist reveals to us that we are in the midst of a cultural shift that challenges us to a higher standard of ethics, to greater courage and honesty in that first society where we all begin our lives, the family. I was not the only one in tears when the lights dimmed after the last scene. No one could stop clapping. What a relief, I thought to myself as I walked out into the snowy night. I am not alone after all.

—Honor Moore  
New York City, 2011

OTHER DESERT CITIES had its world premiere at Lincoln Center Theater (André Bishop, Artistic Director; Bernard Gersten, Executive Producer) at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater in New York City, opening on January 13, 2011. It was directed by Joe Mantello; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by David Zinn; the lighting design was by Kenneth Posner; the sound design was by Jill BC DuBoff; and the original music was composed by Justin Ellington. The cast was as follows:

BROOKE WYETH . . . . . Elizabeth Marvel  
POLLY WYETH . . . . . Stockard Channing  
LYMAN WYETH . . . . . Stacey Keach  
SILDA GRAUMAN . . . . . Linda Lavin  
TRIP WYETH . . . . . Thomas Sadoski

OTHER DESERT CITIES had its Broadway premiere at the Booth Theatre, opening on November 3, 2011. It was directed by Joe Mantello; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by David Zinn; the lighting design was by Kenneth Posner; the sound design was by Jill BC DuBoff; and the original music was composed by Justin Ellington. The cast was as follows:

BROOKE WYETH . . . . . Rachel Griffiths  
POLLY WYETH . . . . . Stockard Channing  
LYMAN WYETH . . . . . Stacey Keach  
SILDA GRAUMAN . . . . . Judith Light  
TRIP WYETH . . . . . Thomas Sadoski

## **CHARACTERS**

BROOKE WYETH

POLLY WYETH

LYMAN WYETH

SILDA GRAUMAN

TRIP WYETH

## **PLACE**

The Wyeth house.

## **TIME**

Christmas Eve, 2004.



# OTHER DESERT CITIES

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*Christmas Eve morning, 2004.*

*The Wyeth living room. There is a metal fireplace, one of those Scandinavian flying saucer types from the sixties, giving off a nice glow. Desert-French regency is the style, decorated for movie stars circa 1965, but somehow it still works, perhaps better now than it did in its time.*

*A game of mixed doubles has just ended. Brooke Wyeth, an attractive and dry woman, her oak-like father, Lyman, who is sturdy in the way of old Californians of a particular type. Brooke's younger brother, Trip, a bright, funny man, perhaps a decade her junior, and her mother, elegant and forthright and whip-smart Polly. They are still tired, recovering from the game. In easy, good spirits.*

POLLY. All I am saying, Brooke, is that I don't know how the hell you stand those East Coast winters, and in that little village of yours out there on the edge of the sea, it's just, it really makes us worry —

BROOKE. *(Laughing.)* Sag Harbor is really cozy, it's quiet, it's peaceful, my God, I've been here less than three hours and you're starting in on me? About where I live?

LYMAN. What your mother is saying is that closer to home — we would love to have you closer to home —

TRIP. I can't believe you're doing this. Mom, Dad — she split. She gave up on California, last century. It's not in her blood.

BROOKE. It really is true, even when I was a little girl, I knew, I just knew I was going to live back East. I couldn't do this — this endless sunshine — this — it's so — predictable!

LYMAN. But you're a child of California, you grew up with beaches and orange groves —

BROOKE. And the weather that never changes. I need seasons to mark where I am. Last winter I was still pretty blue, as you know, but this odd thing — when spring started to just hint — those crazy flowers popping up out of the snow — it matched where I was, I was coming out of it. My winter. I was popping up too. *(A moment.)*

POLLY. I think you might have that thing where the winter is part of what makes you blue, really, have you ever thought of that?

BROOKE. I am fine, I'm — is this what this trip is gonna be?

TRIP. Brooke. The house next door? It's for sale. They want us to have it. *(Mock horror.)* They want us here ALL THE TIME! *(Trip pretends to be dying of poison gas. The parents grin. Brooke laughs.)*

LYMAN. Yes, we know we bore you two to tears. But ... *(Beat.)*

Brookie. What if there were another attack? It's a rather likely possibility, isn't it? It's only been a few years. It's only been — I mean —

BROOKE. *(Moaning.)* Here we go.

TRIP. No, no, no. Let's not do this.

POLLY. You know, we still have friends in Washington, you wouldn't believe what they don't tell you. Well, we hear it, blood-chilling. Arabs with all sorts of plans they're hatching, crazed Indian people with —

BROOKE. I live in eastern Long Island, not Times Square, and I refuse to live like some sort of terrified — *(Beat.)* This is how you win at tennis, you agitate me — you get me really just — impossibly overheated —

POLLY. I have no idea what you're talking about. If you have a lousy serve, you have a lousy serve, darling, and if all it takes to win is to tell you that I think this war is entirely justified, well then, you shouldn't be playing tennis. *(Polly has a smile on her face. She is having fun, it's light needling.)*

BROOKE. *(Grinning.)* Do you still own a revolver, Dad?

POLLY. You know I'm not cooking dinner? We're having Christmas Eve at the country club. *(Brooke lets out a moan.)*

TRIP. Jesus, Mom, who has Christmas at a country club?

BROOKE. Jews is who has Christmas at a country club. That's why God made country clubs, so half-goy hipsters and their aging parents don't have to cook.

POLLY. Oh, it's terrific. Stone crab claws, Bloody Marys, chink food, and a mambo band. If you want to stand here slaving over a hot stove in the desert, be my guest. I can't face it anymore.

BROOKE. (*Smiling.*) Did you just say "chink food"? 'Cause I'm still stuck back there.

POLLY. (*Laughing.*) Oh, stop it! I don't have a bigoted bone in my body, you're just so correct about everything, and if you can't joke in your own home — you're so — I wanna know this; when did everyone get so damn sensitive about every last thing? When?

BROOKE. Um. Around the time you people started using words like "chink" in public, is when.

LYMAN. You don't like the Palm Springs Country Club? Is there anything about our lives you don't mind? Our politics, our —

BROOKE. (*Over him.*) That country club does not let in —

POLLY. (*Over her.*) Yes, they do. Yes, they DO! That ended years ago! Stop it!

BROOKE. Do they? Mom? How many —

POLLY. Most of the club is! Now. Believe me, I should know!

BROOKE. Really, please stop talking about it like it's temple Beth Shalom.

LYMAN. It's a great place, and by the way, we heard Colin Powell lecture there last month and if he's behind the war, you can trust it's the right thing to do. He knows a lot more than you do, Brooke. Most trusted man in America. (*Brooke is about to counter this statement, and is halted by Trip.*)

TRIP. Look; we talk politics, it's only eight in the morning, the whole day will be shot to shit, really. It will just dissolve into stiff upper-lipped thermonuclear family war.

LYMAN. (*Grimacing.*) Can't have that, can we? Look: Despite your abhorrent and repugnant lefty politics, we want you to know we're damn proud of you.

BROOKE. Proud? What did I do?

LYMAN. Brooke. C'mon. Your book. You sold it to the first people who read it.

POLLY. Which is a great relief as you will no longer be known as the girl who had only one novel in her.

BROOKE. (*Bursts out laughing.*) Well, I didn't realize I was!

POLLY. Oh come on, dear, after six years, everyone was beginning to wonder. You did bring it, didn't you? *(Beat.)*

BROOKE. Yeah, but I have to make copies in town, I wasn't going to carry a bunch of copies on the plane.

POLLY. We got the craziest call. Someone's doing a vulgar little picture book on old Hollywood nightlife, and they heard we had lots of pictures from Chasen's and the Brown Derby and Ron and Nancy. I said I would be saving them in case I decided to do a book of my own, which I can assure you, I will not. *(Drinking water.)* This water needs vodka for flavor. *(Lyman picks up the Los Angeles Times.)*

LYMAN. *(Reading.)* Huh. Look at this: Don Rumsfeld is paying a visit to the troops in Baghdad.

POLLY. Isn't that a nice thoughtful Christmas present.

BROOKE. Maybe while he's out in the desert he can dig up some of them weapons of mass destruction —

TRIP. *(Over her.)* NO! No! No discussion of the war. This is a cardinal goddamn rule — we'll be here all day, and I want to get back in time so you can see my show. *(He has a sly smile on his face. She looks at him, caught.)*

BROOKE. I told you it won't really mean anything to me, I don't watch television —

TRIP. Well, unless you've suddenly become Amish, that's unbelievably pretentious.

LYMAN. *(Grinning.)* Oh, Brooke, you really have to see it.

POLLY. It's quite extraordinary, really. You've never seen anything quite like it.

BROOKE. I don't understand even the premise. It's like a courtroom thing with a — ?

POLLY. *(Relishing this.)* Oh, I can explain. You see — this is what your brother's talents and education have led him to, Brooke: a fake TV courtroom with fake trials featuring roving litigants out to make a buck.

TRIP. Hey! *Jury of Your Peers* is a huge hit. It's not fake!

LYMAN. That man is a real judge?

TRIP. He's a retired judge from Encino. It's a regular trial, only, the jury is made up of stars.

POLLY. Stars? Those are not stars! Gary Cooper was a star! These are what appear to be some very moth-eaten, down-on-their-luck has-beens.

TRIP. *(To Brooke.)* Who basically — you know — roast both the — it's very funny — both the defendant and the plaintiff — and render a verdict. And if some of them are midgets, well, why not?  
LYMAN. Please! This is how the law is conducted in this country now? A freak show with carnies making mock.

TRIP. Dad, come on, it's show biz. Everyone signs a waiver, it's civil court, the show pays.

LYMAN. Oh, so there's no harm, no foul, no matter how wrong the person is, the show pays! What is the name of the judge?

TRIP. *(Trying not to laugh, looking down.)* Um. Him? He's uh, well, yeah, his name is Judge Myron C. Glimmelman. *(The three of them stand there, saying nothing. Polly stifles a derisive snort. Brooke is grinning madly, waiting. Shaking her head.)*

POLLY. *(Shakes her head.)* Oh, my people, my people, my people.

TRIP. *(A smile.)* He is a great guy! All moral rectitude and good hair.

BROOKE. Just like you, Daddy.

LYMAN. *(Playing straight man.)* I would never sell myself like some common —

BROOKE. *(Laughing over him.)* Oh really? Mr. Ambassador?

TRIP. Respectfully, what was being the spokesman for the California Wine Board?

LYMAN. Public service, something you know nothing about —

TRIP. *(À la his dad, stentorian.)* “Drink in the wines — ”

TRIP and LYMAN. “ — of the Golden State, and taste how the West was won.” *(There is laughter. This is an old bit.)*

LYMAN. We were trying to promote the state's growing —

BROOKE. *(Over him.)* And let's not forget some of those movies you were in before you sold out and became a politician.

LYMAN. *(Laughs.)* I did not sell out, I found a higher calling, you ungrateful little brat!

TRIP. Hey. People need to laugh today. It's all so serious and god-damn, you know, horrible out there. We could all get anthraxed any minute — people need a laugh!

POLLY. It's our fault, Lyman, we failed at providing normalcy — we had two children, and both of them have entirely abnormal careers ...

BROOKE. *(Cuts her off, tense.)* Three, actually.

POLLY. Excuse me? *(There is a moment.)*

BROOKE. Three children. *(Beat.)*

POLLY. Three. Of course. *(A slight tension, which Lyman labors to climb over.)*

# OTHER DESERT CITIES

by Jon Robin Baitz

2M, 3W

Brooke Wyeth returns home to Palm Springs after a six-year absence to celebrate Christmas with her parents, her brother, and her aunt. Brooke announces that she is about to publish a memoir dredging up a pivotal and tragic event in the family's history — a wound they don't want reopened. In effect, she draws a line in the sand and dares them all to cross it.

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—**New York Magazine**

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ISBN 978-0-8222-2605-5



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