



BRETT FRENCH, TRACY ILENE MILLER, BILL CAMPBELL, CHRISTINE HANKS AND PAMELA LEHAN-SIEGEL IN VLT'S OTHER DESERT CITIES

# DOMESTIC CRIMES IN ARID CLIMES

*Christmas is fakakta for the family in VLT's Other Desert Cities*

No American playwright — and perhaps no playwright ever — was as adept as Tennessee Williams at pulling apart the icky, sticky tangle of hurt that one furiously guarded secret can exact on a family. In the humid atmosphere of a Williams play, a single skeleton in the closet can level an entire clan for generations down the line, by way of recrimination, jealousy, resentment, obsession, addiction and, most of all, fear. Shit gets ugly when we tamp down the truth.

A new generation of playwrights, foremost among them Tracy Letts (*August: Osage County*), has taken up the Williams mantle, revealing in intimate details the greater and lesser consequences of keeping mum. Jon Robin Baitz's 2011 play *Other Desert Cities*, currently playing at Very Little Theatre under the direction of Claude Offenbacher, is among the latest entrants in this derby of dirty secrets. It is

a well-written, finely observed work, and VLT does a good job with it, despite a few miscues.

*Other Desert Cities* is an intimate chamber piece for theater set in Palm Springs, Calif., where the Wyeth clan has gathered to celebrate Christmas. That the Wyeths — headed by retired actor-turned-diplomat Lyman (Bill Campbell) and his domineering wife, Polly (Christine Hanks) — are Jewish neo-cons who idolize Ronald Reagan cues you in to the first dark joke of the play. Also gathered for the holidays are daughter Brooke (Tracy Ilene Miller), whose new memoir threatens to out a devastating family secret, as well as their porn-addict son Trip (Brett French) and Polly's sister Silda (Pamela Lehan-Siegel), a recently recovering alcoholic whose frantic energy recalls the nebbish comedies of Woody Allen.

What transpires over the course of Christmas Eve's day is a slow burn of domestic angst, as the family

members negotiate the potential toll of Brooke's tell-all memoir. Baitz's writing is quick-witted and often hilarious, though the final act tends to drag a bit too long. At times, Offenbacher's staging is awkward, creating too much space among the actors for such a heated, argumentative play.

On the whole, however, VLT's production achieves a heady momentum, as the family careens toward a shocking revelation. French and Miller are strong, but this play belongs to the older generation: Lehan-Siegel, Hanks and Campbell each crackle in their various representations of family dysfunction — especially Campbell, whose portrayal of the beleaguered, lumbering, endangered patriarch recalls the defeated glamour of Richard Burton. — *Rick Levin*

*Other Desert Cities* plays through Jan. 31 at the Very Little Theatre; \$12-\$17, 344-7751.

# WHAT A WAY TO MAKE A LIVING

*ACE Pours a Cup of Ambition  
with 9 to 5*

In the iconic 1980 movie *9 to 5*, workaday heroines Doralee Rhodes, Judy Bernly and Violet Newstead (played by Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin) suffer under — and ultimately triumph over — their “sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot” boss, Mr. Hart (rendered to oily perfection by Dabney Coleman).

It's a classic film, with a title song that's been scientifically proven to be the foremost go-to karaoke anthem of all time.

And now, like so many favorite movies and TV shows, our beloved *9 to 5* has received a Broadway musical work-over in an adaptation making its Eugene premier at Actor's Cabaret.

With book by Patricia Resnick, who penned the original story for the movie, and music and lyrics by Dolly Parton, this 2009 show has a strong foundation. Unlike some

“Potion Notion.” And we see Mr. Hart for the cad he is, as Michael P. Watkins slithers through “Here for You.”

Director and designer Joe Zingo's set is clever and detailed, sliding and rotating to create the “high-tech” office, Hart's inner sanctum and his bedroom/holding cell. Costumes by Zingo, Mary Jensen and Anthony Krall evoke the shoulder-padded, pastel armature of early-'80s career climbing.

The quartet of comedians inhabiting the film is admittedly hard to beat, so Zingo veers his leads away

*The quartet of comedians inhabiting the film is admittedly hard to beat, so Zingo veers his leads away from celebrity imitation.*

musicals-based-on-movies that pad their songbooks with odd digressions, Parton's Tony Award-nominated score is lively and fun, full of her patented accessibility and heart.

“Backwoods Barbie” expresses Doralee's longing to fit in, and Michelle Sellers gives it a cheery Parton twang. In “Heart to Hart” we feel the unrequited heat that office lackey Roz, played by Maida Belove, kindles for her unctuous employer. Sue Schroeder-White as Violet relishes the thought of poisoning Hart in fairytale fantasy sequence

from celebrity imitation. Kim Fairbairn as Judy shows the greatest arc as the show progresses, moving from nervous divorcee to corporate doyenne. Fairbairn's singing voice is balanced throughout, and a real pleasure to listen to.

Vocal director Colleen Darnall Dietz guides cast members through the music, and while singing abilities vary, none are lacking in esprit de corps. — *Rachael Carnes*

*9 to 5* plays through Feb. 14 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene; \$16-\$42.95, 683-4368.