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“The apparent ease of California life is an illusion, and those who believe the illusion will live here in only the most temporary way.” – Joan Didion

“The was sittin’ in a crummy movie with my hands on my chin
Oh the violence that occurs seems like we never win
Love and mercy, that’s what you need tonight
So, love and mercy to you and your friends tonight.”
– Brian Wilson, “Love and Mercy”
Setting

The Wyeth home, Palm Springs, California. Late 2004, and the last scene, March 2010.

Characters

**BROOKE WYETH** – daughter to Polly and Lyman, writer. Recovering from a debilitating depression, extended hospitalization and the breakup of her marriage. Lives on Long Island.

**POLLY WYETH** – former screenwriter, wife of Lyman, mother of Brooke and Trip. Outspoken, well-connected conservative, assimilated Jew, originally from Texas. Fiercely loyal to her family.

**LYMAN WYETH** – former high-profile actor, US Ambassador and conservative politician, retired from public life after his eldest son Henry was linked to a terrorist bombing during the Vietnam War.

**SILDA GRAUMAN** – former screenwriter, sister of Polly. A recovering alcoholic, her career abandoned, living with Polly and Lyman.

**TRIP WYETH** – TV producer, Polly and Lyman’s youngest son. Showrunner of *Jury of Your Peers*, a moderately successful reality/court TV show.
Synopsis

Acclaimed writer Brooke Wyeth is visiting her family for the first time in six years. She is about to publish a new memoir centered on her older brother Henry, who committed suicide after being implicated in a terrorist bombing protesting the Vietnam War.

The incident ended the political and social life of their father, Lyman Wyeth, a former Ambassador and Hollywood actor. Nevertheless, thanks largely to their mother Polly’s fierce devotion to her family and their image, the surviving Wyeths managed to enjoy their wealth and reclaim their right-wing social connections over time. Henry’s younger siblings Brooke and Trip went on to privileged educations and successful careers.

Brooke’s life came to a standstill after a bitter divorce and an extended hospitalization for depression, now managed with medication. Brooke blames her parents’ politics for Henry’s death, and has written her memoir as a means of recovering from her depression and facing her family’s poisonous politics and judgment. In writing the book, Brooke relied on input from Silda, Polly’s sister and former screenwriting partner, now a recovering alcoholic living with Lyman and Polly. Silda’s liberal politics and washed-up lifestyle are an endless source of conflict with Polly.

Trip, the youngest sibling of Brooke and Henry, traditionally brokers the dysfunctional relationships between Brooke, Polly and Silda. An assimilated Jewish family, the Wyeths are planning on spending Christmas Eve together at the Palm Springs country club.

As the play begins, Brooke has yet to share the news that her new book will dredge up Henry’s radical politics, examine the conservatism of Lyman and Polly, and potentially expose the whole family to renewed scandal and trauma.

Playwright Jon Robin Baitz

In addition to “Other Desert Cities,” acclaimed American playwright Jon Robin Baitz is the author of “The Film Society,” “The Substance of Fire,” “People I Know,” “Ten Unknowns,” “The Paris Letter” and “A Fair Country.” A Guggenheim and NEA Fellow and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award Winner, Baitz was born in Los Angeles and raised in Brazil and South Africa before returning to Beverly Hills to finish high school.

His plays have been finalists for the Pulitzer Prize (“A Fair Country,” 1996, “Other Desert Cities,” 2012) and nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play (“Other Desert Cities,” 2012). Film credits include “People I Know” (2002) and the screen adaptation of his play, “The Substance of Fire” (1996). TV credits include the acclaimed series “Brothers & Sisters,” “Alias,” “The West Wing” and “American Playhouse.”

A founding member and former Artistic Director of The Naked Angels Theatre Company, he currently teaches at The New School for Drama in New York City.
The Play in Context: Vietnam and Iraq

The Vietnam War (1955-1975) bitterly divided American society and culture. An increasingly unpopular war, the US political leadership of both parties resorted to ever more strident rhetoric as the war deteriorated over time, and a conventionally acceptable “victory” became impossible.

Domestically, Vietnam War protests severely disrupted politics and transformed the social fabric. The Anti-War movement was strongest on college campuses, and found some of its most passionate voices amongst draft-eligible young men seeking radical, nonviolent social change. The Anti-War movement found common cause with the concurrent Civil Rights movement and the growth of Feminism. Social conservatives identified the protests with drug culture, anti-authoritarian juvenile delinquency and crime, the deterioration of family values and the rising violence of urban life in America.

During this period, several anti-war organizations resorted to violence, bombing and murder, including the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Black Panthers and the Weather Underground. Police and National Guard units also exerted deadly violence against civilian protestors, most infamously during the protests at Kent State University in 1970.

Like the Vietnam War, the Iraq War (2003-2011) continues to polarize American politics and culture for many of the same reasons: an increasingly unpopular war, subject to increasingly strident political rhetoric, the Iraq War also proved “unwinnable” by the conventionally accepted standards of military victory.

“Other Desert Cities” is set in December, 2004 and references the progress of the Iraq War during this time. Begun in March 2003, “major combat operations” were said to have concluded in May of that year, but by 2004 it was increasingly clear that US involvement in the conflict was far from over. Domestic politics grew ever more dominated by support for or opposition against the War during this period, often echoing Vietnam-era arguments with renewed currency and resonance, once more bitterly fracturing communities and families over their political beliefs.

The social, cultural and political life of America was irrevocably changed by these events. Political liberals and conservatives were driven to further distinguish their pro-war “hawk” or anti-war “dove” positions. These distinctions increasingly followed generational divides, echoing in family dynamics to this day.
Glossary of Terms and Events
(courtesy of Vermont Stage Company Flynn Student Matinees Study Guide)

• Colin Powell (b. April 5, 1937) is a retired four-star general and was the first African-American Secretary of State, serving under George W. Bush from 2001 through 2005. He resigned in January 2005. Powell is a moderate republican, well known for his willingness to support centrist and liberal causes.

• Chasen’s and The Brown Derby were restaurants/celebrity hangouts in Hollywood, CA.


• Nancy Reagan (b. July 6, 1921) acted under the name Nancy Davis in films through the 1940s and 50s. She met Ronald Reagan in 1949, when he was then president of the Screen Actors Guild. They were married March 4, 1952. The woman behind a great man, she was extremely involved in her husband's political career.

• Donald Rumsfeld (b. July 9, 1932) was the U.S. Defense Secretary circa 2001-2006.

• The Weather Underground, one of several radical leftist groups, conducted a campaign of bombings through the mid-70s, including aiding the jailbreak and escape of Timothy Leary, and the 1972 bombing of a women’s restroom in the Pentagon. The bombings caused hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage.

• al-Qaeda, Arabic for “The Base,” is a global, militant Islamic organization founded by Osama bin Laden around 1989. It operates as a network comprising both a multinational, stateless army and a radical Sunni Muslim movement calling for global Jihad and a strict interpretation of sharia law. It has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council, NATO, the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, and various other countries. It carried out the September 11 attacks of 2001, as well as the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings and the 2002 Bali bombings.

• Farkakte is an alternative spelling of the Yiddish word verkakte, that can mean “poorly constructed, cheap”—the literal translation is “becraped.”

• Totie Fields was an American comedienne in the 1960s and 1970s.

• Emilio Pucci, Marquis of Barsento (November 20, 1914 – November 29, 1992) was a Florentine fashion designer and politician. He and his eponymous company are synonymous with geometric patterns in a kaleidoscope of colors.

• A sign on the I-10 in Southern California uses “Indio” and “Other Desert Cities” to guide motorists east past Palm Springs.
Loehmann’s is a chain of off-price department stores in the United States. Best known for its “Back Room” where one can find designer clothes at lower prices than in department or specialty stores.

Patricia Aldyen Austin Taylor “Pat” Buckley (July 1, 1926 – April 15, 2007) was a Canadian socialite, noted for her fundraising activities and her height; she stood just under six feet tall. She was the wife of conservative writer and activist William F. Buckley.

Palm Springs (population 44,552) is a desert resort city in the Coachella Valley of California. In the 1970s many retirees flocked to Palm Springs, turning it from a winter retreat into a year-round community. The city has a thriving arts and culture community, with its own International Film Festival and Walk of Stars.

The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies is a dance and musical review show that plays at the historic Plaza Theatre in Palm Springs, seasonally from November to mid-May.

Dorothy Dale Kloss, (born October 27, 1923), began dancing when she was 3 years old. Kloss performed with The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies, a dance and musical revue where she was a regular “Long-Legged Lovely,” performing in ten shows weekly until May 2010. She was billed in the Guinness Book of Records as the “Oldest ‘Still Performing’ Showgirl in the World.”

The term Trust, but verify was a signature phrase adopted and made famous by U.S. president Ronald Reagan. Reagan frequently used it when discussing U.S. relations with the Soviet Union. The phrase was originated by Russian leader Vladimir Lenin.

Joan Didion (b. December 5, 1934) is an American author best known for her novels and her literary journalism. Her notable works include Slouching Towards Bethlehem and The Year of Magical Thinking.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is a permanent tribunal to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression, it came into being in July 2002, when its founding treaty, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, came into force. Its official seat is in The Hague, Netherlands, but its proceedings may take place anywhere.

Xanax, the common name of Alprazolam, is used to treat anxiety and panic disorders. It is the most prescribed and most abused anti-anxiety drug on the U.S. retail market.

Paul Frederic Bowles was an American expatriate composer, author and translator.

Betsy Bloomingdale (b. August 2, 1922) is an American socialite and philanthropist, married to businessman Alfred S. Bloomingdale.

Leonore (Lee) Annenberg (February 20, 1918 – March 12, 2009) was a businesswoman, government official and philanthropist. She was married to Walter Annenberg, an ambassador to the United Kingdom.

Bohemian Grove is a 2,700-acre campground located at 20601 Bohemian Avenue, in Monte Rio, California, belonging to a private San Francisco-based men’s art club known as the Bohemian Club.
Unanswered Questions for Further Discussion

• “Other Desert Cities” was originally titled, “Love and Mercy,” after the Brian Wilson song and the title of Brooke’s memoir. How does this working title reflect on the issues of this play? Which title do you believe is most appropriate? Why?

• What is the responsibility of a writer when their work draws from their real-life experiences and events? When it draws from the emotional and real-life experiences of others?

• “Other Desert Cities” is a fictional play with fictional characters that reference real-life events and real political figures. Do you agree with how the play characterizes these real events and individuals? Why or why not?

Sources

Spotlight On Learning: the Pioneer Theatre Company Classroom Companion, Other Desert Cities
The Grand Theatre Study Guide: Other Desert Cities
Vermont Stage Company Flynn Student Matinees Study Guide: Other Desert Cities