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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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OTHER DESERT CITIES ** 1/2 out of ****
69 DEGREES SOUTH * 1/2
CHINGLISH * 1/2

OTHER DESERT CITIES ** 1/2 out of ****
BOOTH THEATRE

One of the most acclaimed plays of the year, Jon Robin Baitz's drama has moved from Lincoln Center to Broadway with two key changes in the small but starry cast. The result is a show far more cohesive and convincing, though it still can't paper over the fact that there is less than meets the eye here.

The story is simple: The daughter of two conservative political heavyweights a la Ron and Nancy Reagan, Brooke Wyeth (Rachel Griffiths) has come home for the holidays with a burning secret: she's publishing a memoir about her family. That would be betrayal enough for most public families, but Brooke's family has an especially painful past: her anti-war older brother was implicated in the firebombing of a recruiting station that resulted in the death of a war veteran before he took his own life, an event that shook their parents to their core.

Brooke isn't the only one with a Secret, of course, has mom (Stockard Channing, whipping her lines out with relish), dad (Stacey Keach, quite moving), and Aunt Silda (Judith Light, also new to the cast) all have something to reveal. Only Brooke's caustic reality TV producing brother Trip (Thomas Sadoski) seems

free of closets in his skeleton.

You can read my earlier review for a full critique of the play itself. But even on a second viewing, it's still unclear to me exactly what Aunt Silda did, even though I knew it was coming and parsed every word to figure it out. Since I'm vague on her particular failing, it's naturally difficult to grasp how I should feel about it. The same goes for the parents: I'm not sure how radically my attitude towards them should change either. It's all moot since it's the revelation that the play savors, not the ramifications, which would be the province of a richer work.

But what a change casting can make. Elizabeth Marvel played the daughter in the original Lincoln Center production and she was by far the weakest link in this five person cast. Griffiths has stepped into the role with aplomb (it's almost typecasting to have her play a damaged, fragile soul like Booke). Suddenly, Sadoski's performance is richer because he has Griffiths to play off. The same goes for Channing and Keach, the highlight of the original edition and now only deepening their hold on these juicy roles.

Light is not quite the perfect fit that Linda Lavin was for Aunt Silda. But in a way, this works to the current production's advantage as well. Lavin -- who was exceptional and didn't overact for a moment -- nonetheless almost tilted the show towards her secondary character. Light is more low key, simply because she doesn't feel Silda in her bones the way Lavin did, but she mines the humor and with the addition of Griffiths helps this show find the right balance.

This excellent ensemble can't overcome the gaps in the tale or the weak, unnecessary epilogue. But they provide full entertainment for your dollar and Griffiths alone shows how crucial casting not just a good actor but the *right* actor for a role can be.

69 DEGREES SOUTH * 1/2 BAM

I might be the ideal audience for this performance piece/mediation by Phantom Limb about Ernest Shackleton's doomed expedition to the Antarctic. I love puppetry; I relish the abstract, visually daring theater pieces of directors like Robert Wilson and Robert Lepage, and like many I'm fascinated by and have read books on the voyage of the Endurance.

Unfortunately, Phantom Limb's show rarely cohered into a moving tableaux for more than a few moments. We're told in the production notes that one of the creators had a dream while working on the project and that in the dream people in red jumpsuits were cavorting about a snowy landscape. This is also repeated in interviews, which is lucky since otherwise you might be immediately thrown off by what appear to be red-suited ninjas who appear on the white landscape of the beautiful Harvey Theatre. One doesn't really need -- or shouldn't need -- any outside information to absorb a theatrical piece. A work like this must somehow have some sort of internal dream logic; we may not know what it is but we can feel it and respond to it. Here, the choreography immediately feels random and the music (which combines live musicians with recorded pieces by Kronos Quartet) meanders.

A few visuals stay with you. Icebergs rise slowly out of the ground and are quite lovely. The crew of the Endurance come slowly on stage, small puppets manipulated nicely by a team of puppeteers mounted on stilts and clothed in white that hide their faces. When the puppets somberly move to the front of the stage and stare off into the sky with the music surging and the sound of icy desolation around them, you can feel how daunting it must have been not to snap mentally from the mere strain of existing.

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Modest moments occur, like a shared joke or watching the ship collapse. But the 75 minute performance is essentially static. When film footage of Shackleton praising his crew is suddenly introduced three-quarters of the way through, it feels jarring and out of place, almost like cheating. We're trying to burrow into the psychological dreamscape they've created and this pulls us out completely. The jokey image of a black skeleton that represents Death breaking to song at the end feels similarly tacked on.

The puppets by Erik Sanko are beautifully designed, though I'm less enthusiastic about his score. The video design by Shaun Irons & Lauren Petty is essentially murky collages of wintry imagery and ships and the like. It never comes into focus any more than the rest of this ambitious but flawed production.

CHINGLISH * 1/2

LONGACRE THEATRE

In David Henry Hwang's new play, an American businessman (the very bland Gary Wilmes) comes to China hoping to land a deal to provide signs for a cultural center in Guiyang. His translator (Stephen Pucci) is a business consultant with ties to the local official in charge of the project and can provide an "in" as well as tips on how to navigate the clash of cultures that will inevitably occur. Our hero falls hard for the driven and smart Xi Yan (Jennifer Lim), who reveals the real agenda of the minister and promises to help.

The result is a tension-free show whose tone is set perfectly by the bland, PowerPoint presentation our hero is making about doing business in China that frames the show. Like most such lectures, it's dull and unrevealing.

Two good scenes anchor the show, though their humor is based almost solely on the old joke of having a person say one thing in one language while their translator either intentionally or incompetently misunderstands what is said and turns the sentence into gibberish. It's an old joke but it has been mined amusingly by Monty Python and Doonesbury and Woody Allen and countless others. Hwang has fun with the businessman's first scene meeting with the officials of Guiyang and even more fun later on in another meeting where the Enron scandal plays an amusing part.

Despite a great deal of plot -- including adultery, lies, corruption, secrets, arrests, emotional breakdowns and the like -- very little seems at stake here. Ultimately, we realize our hero has risked everything on the longshot of landing this deal, but Wilmes plays his character like any doughy businessman on a routine call. We should feel something when his business consultant and the party official have a moving goodbye towards the climax, but it feels forced and unnecessary. One typical revelation? The consultant has never done it before; mostly, he just teaches English to the children of powerful officials. But so what? He speaks flawlessly in at least two languages and his insights into China and how business works are spot on. Is it really wrong of him to not trumpet the fact that this is a new venture for him?



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Only Jennifer Lim manages to create a convincing and intriguing character in this career-driven woman who is happy to have an affair as long as the man she's sleeping with respects his own marriage too. (If he doesn't, then he's a threat to her marriage as well.) The set is an ever-rotating series of scenes that feels too clever by far. It has to shuffle through various settings -- like a hotel lobby -- to get to where it's going, which is the only explanation for time-wasting moments like watching people stride through a lobby. Presumably, we're going to have to see the lobby to get to the hotel room set so they decided to try and liven up the changes.

Director Leigh Silverman never burrows down into what might have been a more tense, dramatic show, content to stay on the surface of Hwang's play and harvest what little humor he could. Likely, if he had attempted to go deeper, the results would have been even more awkward. Sometimes a work isn't poorly translated, whether it's from Mandarin to English or page to stage. Sometimes it just isn't good to begin with.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

- [The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs](#) ** 1/2
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- [Master Class w Tyne Daly](#) ** 1/2
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- [Newsies](#) **
- [Olive and The Bitter Herbs](#) ** 1/2
- [One Arm](#) ***
- Other Desert Cities on Broadway ** 1/2
- [Relatively Speaking](#) * 1/2
- [The Select \(The Sun Also Rises\)](#) ** 1/2
- [Septimus & Clarissa](#) *** 1/2
- [Silence! The Musical](#) * 1/2
- [69 Degrees South](#) * 1/2
- [Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark](#) * 1/2
- [The Submission](#) **
- [Sweet and Sad](#) **
- [Unnatural Acts](#) ***
- [We Live Here](#) **
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- [Central Avenue Breakdown](#) ** 1/2
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- [Cyclops: A Rock Opera](#) *
- [Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon](#) ** 1/2
- [F---ing Hipsters](#) **
- [Ghostlight](#) **
- [Gotta Getta Girl](#) ** 1/2 for staged reading
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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