

Spotlight on Learning

a Pioneer Theatre Company
Classroom Companion

Other Desert Cities



Pioneer Theatre Company's *Student Matinee Program* is made possible through the support of Salt Lake County's Zoo, Arts and Parks Program, Salt Lake City Arts Council/Arts Learning Program, The Simmons Family Foundation, The Meldrum Foundation Endowment Fund and R. Harold Burton Foundation.

Spotlight on Learning is provided to students through a grant provided by the **George Q. Morris Foundation.**

Approx. running time:
2 hours and 20 minutes, including one fifteen-minute intermission.

Student Talk-Back:

There will be a Student Talk-Back directly after the performance.



PTC's *Other Desert Cities* cast, from left to right: Kate Skinner, Nancy Lemenager, Michael Zlabinger, Joyce Cohen and Dennis Parlato.

OTHER DESERT CITIES • October 25 - November 9, 2013

By Jon Robin Baitz • Directed by Charles Morey

A Journey Toward Truth

by Dramaturg Janine Sobeck

In 1939, after 14 years of legendary success, American playwright Eugene O'Neill retreated to his San Francisco home to grapple with demons of his youth. Possibly his most famous work, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, resulted, offering raw accounts of the depression, alcoholism, drug addiction, and general dysfunction of his family.

In spite of telling his wife that he believed he had reached a state of compassionate detachment that allowed him to write about his family with "loving and forgiveness," O'Neill had *Long Day's Journey Into Night* placed in a vault with a contract that it would not be produced until 25 years after his death.



Michael Zlabinger and Nancy Lemenager (foreground). Joyce Cohen, Kate Skinner and Dennis Parlato (background).

Continued from page 1.

His wife skirted the contract, and the play was first produced a mere three years after his death, to great acclaim: it won the 1957 Tony Award for Best Play and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the Season. O'Neill was also posthumously awarded the 1957 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. For many, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is considered O'Neill's masterpiece, a poignant, compelling, and brilliant piece of drama.

Unless, of course, you are his mother.



Kate Skinner and Nancy Lemenager

That question of the artist's right to self-exploration versus his responsibility to the living is something that Jon Robin Baitz continues to explore in his play *Other Desert Cities*. Baitz himself left behind a successful New York playwriting career to move to Hollywood and pursue his television show *Brothers and Sisters*. After only one season, and amidst extremely nasty disputes with studio executives, Baitz returned to



New York and secluded himself in his Sag Harbor cottage. After spending a year "in silence," a year that Baitz says was full of bitterness, rage, and depression, he started to write, channeling his confusion, anger, and frustration over life events into the play that would become *Other Desert Cities*.

Through his character Brooke, Baitz explores questions about staying true to one's self as an artist, the cost of that truth, and the delicate balance between truth and diplomacy. As Silda says, "telling the truth is a very expensive hobby," and yet the question of how it affects the lives of those the author exposes – and whether the clarity received by the author is worth the potential devastation of others – remains open and valid.

While Baitz does not provide any easy answers, he does invite you to join the Wyeth family in this exploration of the balance between artistic self-exploration and familial loyalty. As he, O'Neill, and other artists have discovered, there is much to be revealed along the journey.

Post Show Discussion

- The title of the play comes from Brooke's line: "You know that sign on the highway where you can either turn off for Palm Springs or keep going to 'Other Desert Cities'?" I am always tempted to just keep on driving." What does this reveal about Brooke? What else could the title allude to, based on the issues in the play?
- *Other Desert Cities* was originally titled *Love and Mercy*, after the title of Brooke's memoir. How does this working title apply to the issues of the play? Which title do you like better? Why?
- Although the play isn't based on any real characters or events, there are some characters and events that are similar to historical ones. What Hollywood film stars turned political figures, like Lyman Wyeth, can you think of? What do you think of the relationship between fame and politics?

Study Guide compiled by Heather Nowlin.

2003 - 2004 Iraq Timeline

A timeline preceding the Christmas holiday in which the action of the play takes place reveals controversy over the war in Iraq, including questionable intelligence sources, staged events, vast amounts of American dollars poured into the effort, and thousands of US soldiers dying for a cause disputed on both sides of the aisle.

These conditions could be argued to have been much like those of the Vietnam War some thirty years before, and set the stage for tension and strife within the politically divergent Wyeth home.

MARCH 19, 2003: Bush launches invasion of Iraq with “Operation: Shock and Awe”

APRIL 1, 2003: Pfc. Jessica Lynch recovered by U.S. forces. What the Pentagon framed as a heroic rescue was later revealed to have been staged.

MAY 1, 2003: Mission Accomplished “[M]y fellow Americans: Major combat operations in Iraq have ended.” *But post-war involvement in Iraq proved to be at least as controversial as the War itself.*

MAY 9, 2003: WMD rationale agreed on for bureaucratic reasons “The truth is that, for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason [to go to war].” [Paul Wolfowitz, 5/9/03]

MAY 29, 2003: Bush: We found the WMD “We found the weapons of mass destruction.”

JULY 11, 2003: Condoleezza Rice: Doubts about Iraq intel were not communicated to Bush “All that I can tell you is that if there were doubts about the underlying intelligence in the NIE, those doubts were not communicated to the President.”

APRIL 28, 2004: Images of horrendous abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners by Americans at Abu Ghraib are revealed

MAY 11, 2004: Video released showing Nicholas Berg, an American contractor, being beheaded by Iraqi militants

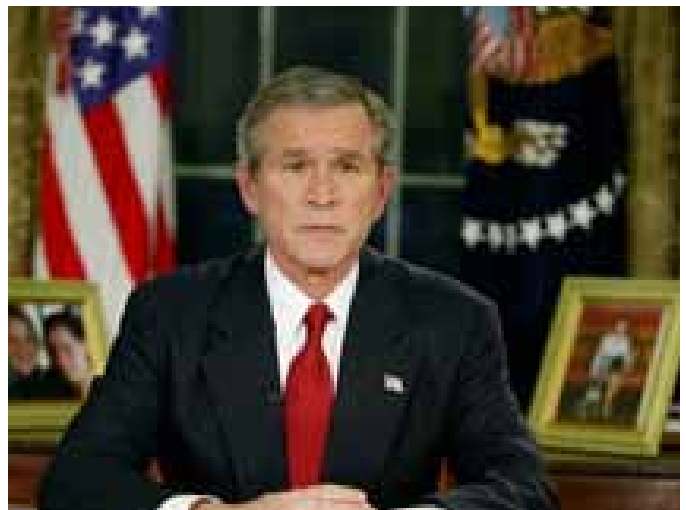
AUGUST 27, 2004: Bush acknowledged for the first time that he made a “miscalculation of what the conditions would be” in postwar Iraq [Reuters, 8/27/04]

SEPTEMBER 7, 2004: Death toll of U.S. soldiers in Iraq reaches 1,000

SEPTEMBER 16, 2004: U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan declares Iraq war illegal

OCTOBER 7, 2004: Duelfer Report: Iraq did not have WMD Saddam Hussein did not possess stockpiles of illicit weapons at the time of the U.S. invasion in March 2003 and had not begun any program to produce them, a CIA report concludes.

Timeline provided by ThinkProgress.org



President George W. Bush

Protesting the Vietnam War

As divisive to the country as the Iraq conflict (including the war, the occupation, and the insurgency) was, just imagine what it would have been like had the war itself lasted nearly 20 times as long, spanned five presidencies, and reached a death toll of nearly 60,000 US troops (and more than three times as many wounded). Those were the conditions of the Vietnam War, and the state of the nation in which the Wyeth family lived when they lost their oldest son, Henry, after his involvement with a protest bombing of a military recruiting center.

One can hardly think of the Vietnam War without bringing to mind images of its many protests, some of which were peaceful, others bloody and violent, and even others tragically fatal.



Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

The anti-war movement began mostly on college campuses, as members of the leftist organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began organizing "teach-ins" to express their opposition to the way in which it was being

conducted. Though the vast majority of the American population still supported the administration policy in Vietnam (which began in 1955, under President Eisenhower), a small but outspoken liberal minority was making its voice heard by the end of 1965. This minority included many students as well as prominent artists and intellectuals and members of the hippie movement, a growing number of young people who rejected authority and embraced the drug culture.

On October 21, 1967, one of the most prominent anti-war demonstrations took place, as some 100,000 protesters gathered at the Lincoln Memorial; around 30,000 of them continued in a march on the Pentagon later that night. After a brutal confrontation with the soldiers and U.S. Marshals protecting the building, hundreds of demonstrators were arrested. One of them was the author Norman Mailer, who chronicled the events in his book "The Armies of the Night." Also in 1967, the anti-war movement got a big boost when the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. went public with his opposition to the war on moral grounds, condemning the war's diversion of federal funds from domestic programs as well as the disproportionate number of African-American casualties in relation to the total number of soldiers killed in the war.

Soon after, there were reports of many protests turned violent, where protestors threw projectiles at police officers and set fires, and even protests where officers responded to these threats with



Photo by John Paul Filo

tear gas and rubber bullets.

What is now probably the most famous of these protests gone horribly wrong arrived on May 4, 1970, when students at Kent State University in Ohio set fire to the campus ROTC building. Armed National Guardsmen, 900 of whom had been dispatched by Ohio governor Jim Rhodes, responded by opening fire into the young crowd. They killed four students and wounded nine others.

A similar incident took place ten days later, on May 14, at Jackson State University, an all-black school in Mississippi. During a student protest, police and state highway patrolmen fired automatic weapons into a dormitory, killing two students and wounding nine others. No warning had been given and no evidence was ever found of student sniping that might have justified the shootings. Nevertheless, unlike the Kent State episode, this incident evoked little national attention, embittering many blacks who felt that the killing of black students was not taken as seriously as that of whites.

Source: The Reader's Companion to American History, Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, Editors

Protest or Terrorism?

Although peaceful opposition to the War in Vietnam was the major rallying cry during this time of upheaval, some opponents abandoned the “peaceful” qualifier and intentionally incorporated violence into their protests.

The Weather Underground was an American radical left organization founded on the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan. They first organized in 1969 as a faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) composed, for the most part, of the national office leadership of SDS and their supporters. Their goal was to create a clandestine revolutionary party for the overthrow of the U.S. government.

With revolutionary positions characterized by Black power and opposition to the Vietnam War, the group conducted a campaign of bombings through the mid-1970s, and took part in actions such as the jailbreak of Timothy Leary. The “Days of Rage,” their first public demonstration on October 8, 1969, was a riot in Chicago timed to coincide with the trial of the Chicago Seven. In 1970 the group issued a “Declaration of a State of War” against the United States government.

Another event, unaffiliated with any organized group or faction, most closely mirrors the event described in *Other Desert Cities*. On Aug. 24, 1970, during a time of intense agitation against the Vietnam War, four young men bombed a building on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison. At 3:42 a.m., an explosion tore through Sterling Hall, a building that housed both the university physics department and the Army Mathematics Research Center. The center, which operated under a contract with the United States Army, had been the target of many nonviolent protests since it opened in the 1950s.

Though the bombers said afterward that they had not intended to hurt anyone, the explosion killed Robert Fassnacht, a physics researcher who was working late. Mr. Fassnacht, 33, a father of three, was, his family said afterward, against the war.

On Sept. 2, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began a nationwide hunt for four men charged with the bombing: Dwight Armstrong, who had turned 19 five days after the explosion; his brother, Karleton, 22; David S. Fine, 18; and Leo F. Burt, 22.

Source: *New York Times* article “Dwight Armstrong, Who Bombed a College Building in 1970, Dies at 58”

OUR EQUITY CAST



Joyce Cohen

CHARLES MOREY (Director) former PTC Artistic Director. He has directed over eighty productions for PTC including the world premieres of Bess Wohl’s *In* and *Touch(ed)*.

JOYCE COHEN* (Polly) many PTC shows. Broadway: *Once a Catholic*. Off-Broadway: The Mint Theater Co., Playwrights Horizons, Westside Arts. TV and film: *Granite Flats*, *High School Musical*, *Pixel Perfect*, *Read It and Weep*, *Touched By an Angel*, *Everwood*, *Archie Bunker’s Place*, *SLC Punk*, *The Dance*, *Adventures of Food Boy* and *Independence Day*.



Kate Skinner

NANCY LEMENAGER* (Brooke) Broadway: Velma in *Chicago*, Brenda in *Movin’ Out*, *How to Succeed... Guys and Dolls*, others. TV: *Elementary*, *Girls*, *The Good Wife*, *Nurse Jackie*, *30 Rock*, *Law & Order*, *Law & Order*. Many regional theatres, including The Alley, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Hartford Stage and others. This is her PTC debut.



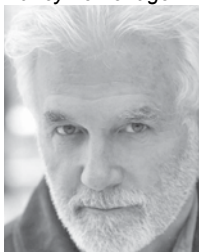
Nancy Lemenager

DENNIS PARLATO* (Lyman) Broadway: *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *The Graduate*, *Salome*, *The Sound of Music*, *Chess*, and Rooster in *Annie*. Many off-Broadway and regional credits. Film: *Johnny Suede*, *Delirious*, *Dillinger’s Dead*, *Bury the Evidence*, *Rick*, *First Born*, *Starting Out in the Evening* and *Bride Wars*. PTC: *42nd Street*, *Touch(ed)*, *Paint Your Wagon* and *The Vertical Hour*.



Michael Zlabinger

KATE SKINNER* (Silda) Broadway: *The Graduate* and *Uncle Vanya*. Off-Broadway: Roundabout, Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights Horizons. Two National Tours. Regional: *Boeing Boeing* (NY), *Doubt* and *Agnes of God* (Chicago), *Noises Off* (Denver) *Uncle Vanya* (NY), and *Rabbit Hole* (Cleveland). Film/TV: *Unforgettable*, *Blue Bloods*, *Law & Order*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, *The Rage*, *Carrie II* and *Down the Shore*.



Dennis Parlato

MICHAEL ZLABINGER* (Trip) Off-Broadway: *Desperate Writers*, *The Tempest* and *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress*. European premiere of *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (Vienna’s English Theatre). Regional: *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Iago* in *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, many others. TV: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Pacific Blue*, *MTV’s Undressed* and *MTV’s Now What?* He returns to PTC after playing Laertes in *Hamlet*.