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Robin Weigert taps Brooke Wyeth's mind in 'Other Desert Cities'

Robin Weigert, who says she 'grew up psychoanalyst,' knows how the 'Other Desert Cities' character she plays at the Taper thinks. She impressed Jon Robin Baitz.

December 08, 2012 | By Margaret Gray

On your way to meet actress Robin Weigert for the first time, you may be forgiven for feeling some trepidation about who, exactly, will greet you at the door.

Will it be Calamity Jane, the buckskin-wearing, dirt-encrusted, foul-tongued frontier woman Weigert portrayed on HBO's "Deadwood"? Or the winged, hovering Angel from the 2010 off-Broadway revival of "Angels in America"? The straight-talking lawyer Ally Lowen on "Sons of Anarchy"?

Or perhaps you'll find yourself face-to-face with Brooke Wyeth, the fragile, leftist, Ivy League-educated writer Weigert plays in Jon Robin Baitz's "Other Desert Cities," which opens Sunday at the Mark Taper Forum.

PHOTOS: Arts and culture by The Times

But although Weigert is both highly educated (Sidwell Friends School, Brandeis University, a master's in acting from New York University) and a liberal Democrat, she doesn't otherwise much resemble the troubled Brooke — or any of her other characters, for that matter. She may throw herself so deeply into each part that she's hard to see. But when she's welcoming you into her West Hollywood apartment, she makes an entirely distinct impression.

Barefoot, slender and elegant in a simple long black jersey shift and a chic but cozy-looking ankle-length cardigan, Weigert is a natural beauty with shiny hair and a dreamily conspiratorial smile. In her resonant alto voice she offers strong coffee, "because that's how I like it," and her late grandfather's chair, which "will bring you luck," and curls up on the love seat.

If under her attentive gaze you feel bathed in empathy, and inclined to talk of your childhood melancholy, it might not be a coincidence: Weigert comes, as she puts it, "from a long line of therapists." Her grandmother, Dr. Edith Weigert, was one of the earliest psychoanalysts — she knew Freud and Jung — and her father was a psychoanalyst too.

"You know how people grow up Catholic," she says and laughs. "Well, I feel like I grew up psychoanalyst."

Baitz, the author of "Other Desert Cities," admired Weigert's work long before he met her. "Her performance in 'Deadwood' is so transformative that it is almost like a European actress. If it were a man, it would be the kind of turn that a De Niro does," he said.

"Other Desert Cities," which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and nominated for the Tony Award for best play, is springing up at theaters across the country. Baitz said he won't be involved with most upcoming productions — he is focusing on new work — but he couldn't resist the opportunity to collaborate with director Robert Egan at the Taper, which he considers, "along with Lincoln Center, my home theater."

He flew in from New York for casting.

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"Robin came in to read, which I was sort of embarrassed by because I didn't need her to read," he recalled. "But she in fact wanted to, and she gave an audition that I had never seen anything like. She took the power in the room and gave us a master class in what she thought that part could be. It was sort of like jazz, and improvising, where she looked at us and would say, 'I think of her as something like this.' She turned it into — well, the only traditional term would be a work session."

"I did!" says Weigert and laughs when told of Baitz's description. "It was so unlike me. It could have gone very, very south. But I sort of thought if I can't do it this way, I don't want it, which is a strong way to come into an audition."

It worked. "I had, within literally four seconds of her opening her mouth, written a note to Robert Egan, who was sitting next to me," remembered Baitz, "and the note said, 'Cast her now.'"

Having admired the performances of Elizabeth Marvel, who originated the part of Brooke at Lincoln Center, and Rachel Griffiths, who took over when the play moved to Broadway, Weigert nonetheless had her own ideas about Brooke, a recovered depressive who visits her GOP-affiliated parents in Palm Springs with a manuscript of a revealing family memoir she has just sold.

For Baitz, the play is not only a family drama but an allegory of the American political landscape over the last several decades, which he sees as the story of "the degradation of the Republican Party."

Set in 2004 during the Iraq war, "the play is called 'Other Desert Cities' for very good reasons," he pointed out. "There's a war happening in

a home in Palm Springs, while we're at war in the desert thousands of miles away, and the two are very much connected."

Although such descriptions suggest a polemic, the play has been praised for its subtle, sympathetic characterizations. The Republican characters may not share the playwright's leftist politics, but they are not portrayed as villains. In fact it's Brooke, determined to expose the truth at any cost, who is often more difficult to like.

"She's threatening," Baitz agreed. "She has a great deal of intelligence, compounded by a profound emotional fragility. You're always trying to figure out how to manage her, but she's almost unmanageable. I like to say that she brings the ghost of Patty Hearst with her into the play. I once saw some graffiti that read, 'May the bridges I burn light the way for others.' I think that Brooke is that person. But she's difficult to play. I think one of Robin's concerns was that she not be this sort of strident figure of accusatory child's rage."

Indeed, Weigert says she struggles to prevent Brooke from coming across as a whiny adolescent. "There's so much insistence on self that rends the fabric of family. It's very, very hard to empathize with a character like that.

"I got a lot of juice right before rehearsals started from listening to a talk by Lana Wachowski, formerly one of the ["Matrix" and "Cloud Atlas" directors] Wachowski brothers, who became a woman — you can find it on the Internet. It was one of those situations where there was a personal imperative that was so powerful that she could do nothing but bring it forth, at whatever cost. And so I thought, for Brooke, that's what it has to be ... the memoir is her personal imperative. And if I approach it with that kind of grounding, then I have a fighting chance."

Although Weigert says she initially wrestled with the decision to become a professional actor ("I didn't know that it was something I could respect myself for. I had attitudes about it. I thought it's vain, and this and that."), she has found it increasingly rewarding. "It's an interesting time to be an actor. Things I'm getting to do are more important to me."

She had a small role in the 2012 movie "The Sessions," and she played the lead in an independent film, "Concussion," which, she's just learned, has been selected for the 2013 Sundance Film Festival.

"I play a woman who becomes a prostitute for women," she says. "I don't think anything like it has ever been done before. I was scared to death, which is why I knew I had to do it, which is the perversity of my psychology."

She has spent much of her career on the stage, or deeply engaged in unconventional TV roles, so the publicity side of things still feels new to her.

"It's like a hall of mirrors," she says. "Whatever you've done most recently is what you are. I'd been stomping around as this cowboy [Calamity Jane], and then I showed up on a red carpet somewhere, and somebody said, 'So this is what you're really like. You're actually a very pretty girl.' And I thought, 'This isn't what I'm really like! This took seven hours! Anybody would look like a princess after seven hours!'"

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'Other Desert Cities'

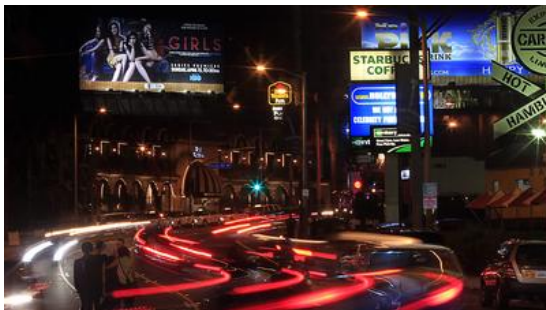
Where: Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

When: Tuesday through Friday at 8 p.m.; Saturday at 2:30 p.m. and 8 p.m.; Sunday at 1 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. No performance on Mondays. Call for exceptions. Ends Jan. 6.

Tickets: \$20 to \$78

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