

OPENING THE CURTAIN



What We've Lost

With *Pocatello*, Rogue Machine Theater returns to Samuel D. Hunter's small town, Idaho, this time with the closing of an olive garden. But the play's less about the closing of a chain restaurant and more about the loss of a way of life.

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This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain on LA Theater* for KCRW.

I'm about to tell you not to miss a play that on one level is ostensibly about the closing an Olive Garden.

Now, I realize that the closing of a chain restaurant probably feels like the last thing you'd want to devote a night of theater to, but stick with me because Samuel D. Hunter's play *Pocatello* at [Rogue Machine Theatre](#) is also a play that's speaking to our political moment. It might do a better job than a room full of pundits at explaining why a particular slice of white America is feeling as lost and desperate as their votes would seem to indicate.

It's *famiglia* week at the Pocatello Olive Garden. TLU, the manager, is desperate. Sales have been down, corporate is breathing down his neck. If he can't turn things around quickly his staff is going to be out of a job. That's a big deal because since the paper mill shut down years ago, there aren't a ton of jobs in town. So as a last ditch effort to bring in business, or maybe just to bring everyone together, he's giving employee families half off.

While that might not be the best business decision, it's a great dramatic device to bring the problems of these families onto stage. Now if you've seen Samuel D. Hunter's earlier plays at Rogue Machine, [Boise](#) and [A Permanent Image](#), you'll recognize these families and the actors that play them. While the specific characters don't overlap between the plays, most of the actors do. The effect is a bit like living in a small town or seeing three Chekhov plays back to back. You recognize these people without necessarily knowing them. They remind you of another mother, or another meth addict, or another alcoholic.

This being Rogue Machine the cast is, as always, superb. That helps because *Pocatello* is a simple, dense play. It's easy to imagine the nuance and balance of the piece being lost in lesser hands. As it is, the play leans a little too heavily on the plot device of the closing restaurant but stick with it because that's just a macguffin to look into these people's lives.

What we see is a complicated mix of nostalgia and longing for a world that no longer exists; for a town where there were more than chain restaurants; for a place where you could find a decent job, raise a family, and know who you were. Mr. Hunter's *Pocatello* captures a particular sense of loss and displacement. He's not writing a political play in a traditional sense but he's touching on the fear and loss that's animating our presidential politics. He's writing to an America we don't see on stage, characters who's next best job hope might be working at McDonald's and who wonder how the hell they got here. What happened to the dream?

In committing to Mr. Hunter's plays and to these extraordinary actors who have brought them to life, Rogue Machine is building a deep repertoire with real resonance. Ignore the Olive Garden but don't ignore this play.

Pocatello plays at Rogue Machine Theatre in Hollywood through April 10.

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Running time: 90 minutes without an intermission.

Photo: John Perrin Flynn