

Rest

South Coast Repertory's Segerstrom Stage

Reviewed by Bob Verini



Lynn Milgrim and Sue Cremin

Photo by Debora Robinson/SCR

A skeleton staff and a few hanger-on residents are the last occupants of the dilapidated Northern Idaho rest home in Samuel D. Hunter's *Rest*. This hardy little band must cope with two impending catastrophes—the facility's closing and a monstrous blizzard—and a dozen or more personal bumps. The South Coast Rep design department does well by the former in the play's world premiere, but helmer Martin Benson and his fine cast have problems with the intimate travails. The playwright hasn't done much to help out.

Set designer John Iacovelli does an incisive, detailed job in crafting the institutional environment of a depressing nursing home lobby. Special kudos for the cruddy gray paint which clearly someone chose as calming, but which makes the heart sink the more one has to look at it. Donna Ruzika's lighting and Michael Roth's sound convey the growing darkness and dimensions of the snowstorm, with an amusing special effect as the sliding glass doors never open when egress is desired, but magically, periodically float apart unbidden. The latter is especially amusing during the period when a

patient goes missing: Every time the doors open, the entire cast turns as one to see whether it's this guy, come back.

That missing patient, Gerald (Richard Doyle), the Alzheimer's-afflicted hubby of Etta (Lynn Milgrim), is but one of the aforementioned crises that befall this septet; or two, if you count his mental state and disappearance. The list goes on to encompass one surrogate pregnancy, now repented; two marriages in trouble; one messy divorce; one extreme case of achluophobia (fear of darkness); one increasingly empty larder; and an across-the-board sense of dislocation as everyone, employee and resident alike, will have to pack up and ship out in a very short time.

Being locked in, out of touch with the outside world, would seem to offer a lot of opportunity for action and for reflection. Yet, when you come right down to it, how often have characters provided exciting drama while trapped by a blizzard? *The Mousetrap* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, I guess; maybe *The Shining*; but all of those involved playing cat-and-mouse murder games. Here, there's nothing much to do except poke around for the missing patient, which no one does very vigorously. The play's barely two hours but it feels double that; it becomes quite stultifying.

That leaves reflection as the main pastime. But look at how Hunter has set things up. The pregnancy is made four months advanced, taking abortion off the table. The divorce has already gone through, and the displaced patients have already arranged for new lodgings, so those are nonissues. And one member of the most at-risk marriage isn't present, so we can't get any couple discord. In other words, the playwright has deliberately placed all of his characters off the hook in terms of urgency, immediacy, and decision-making. No one has anything to decide or do, so they sit. And talk. About very, very little indeed.

Also objectionable is the shaky morality as applied to one of the characters. Without spoiling anything, suffice it to say that people's lives are unnecessarily and deliberately set at risk, and an awful crime is committed, yet the perp is given both a Get Out of Jail Free card (from the others, which seems wrong) and a moral free pass (from the author, which is even more egregious).

But the biggest problem with *Rest* is that too much is at rest. A talented cast and respectful director (perhaps too respectful; it wouldn't hurt if Benson would light a fire under these folks) simply can't perform enough CPR to keep the evening from flatlining.