

Home > Costa Mesa, Newport Beach and Irvine Entertainment

On Theater: 'Rest' overcomes rough spots



Hal Landon Jr. and Lynn Milgrim in South Coast Repertory's 2014 world premiere of "Rest" by Samuel D. Hunter. (Debora Robinson / April 2, 2014)

By Tom Titus

April 9, 2014 |

It's hard to imagine a more depressing setting for a play than a "retirement" home in Idaho that is about to be closed down and where its inhabitants are just marking time in their waning lives while waiting for the blizzard to diminish.

Yet the playwright, Samuel D. Hunter, and his director, Martin Benson — who teamed on the riveting, offbeat drama

"The Whale" last season — have combined to spin this apparent dramatic straw into theatrical gold with "Rest," now taking the stage in its world premiere at South Coast Repertory.

Born and raised in Idaho, Hunter returns to his roots for most of his dramatic inspiration, focusing on quirky yet otherwise very ordinary characters in even more unexciting situations and makes them come indelibly alive, much like Horton Foote did with his Southern creations and William Inge accomplished with America's heartland.

In "Rest," the focus is on a convalescent home, its employees and its three patients, one of whom who turns up missing midway through the first act. After intermission, the mystery is solved and an even more crucial development arises. To elaborate would require a spoiler alert.

The centerpiece of this captivating but off-center situation is Etta, an elderly resident and the wife of the missing oldster. Lynn Milgrim dominates this scenario, as she did at SCR in years past in "The Heiress," "The Trip to Bountiful," "[Death of a Salesman](#)" and others. Her richly layered performance is the top banana in a most impressive bunch.

The two junior caretakers of the establishment are nicely delineated by Libby West and Sue Cremin. West is strong as the slightly superior member of the pair, while Cremin excels as her junior partner, who is carrying West's child as a surrogate in a plot element that seems merely tacked on to the primary story. More should be developed with this subplot or it should be simply discarded, and the same goes for an offhand piece of gossip about West's husband.

As the painfully inept manager of the rest home, Rob Nagle skillfully underscores his character's inefficiency as he attempts to assert his flagging authority and unveils his more feminine side. Wyatt Fenner as the new, temporary cook — and a scarily religious fanatic — has some over-the-top moments threatening to upset the play's delicate balance.

It's always good to see SCR founding actors Richard Doyle and Hal Landon Jr. back on stage and at the top of their game even after a half-century of performances. Doyle has a brief but compelling sequence as the old fellow who goes missing, while Landon solidly enacts the taciturn patient, a retired night watchman, upon whose character the plot takes a significant turn.

The seediness of the overly used retirement home is well illustrated in its well-worn set design by John Iacovelli. Angela Balogh Calin's costumes are fitting for such a back-country atmosphere.

With "Rest," playwright Hunter further establishes himself as a theatrical voice of paramount importance. His offbeat collection of characters has found a welcome home at South Coast Repertory.

TOM TITUS reviews local theater for the Daily Pilot.

If You Go

What: "Rest"

Where: South Coast Repertory, Segerstrom Stage, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

When: 7:30 p.m. Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays; 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; weekend matinees at 2:30 p.m. until April 26

Cost: Tickets start at \$22

Information: (714) 708-5555 or <http://www.scfta.org>