

Rest: Theater Review

6:50 PM PDT 4/10/2014 by Myron Meisel



"Rest"

Seegerstrom Stage

The Bottom Line

Unmistakably the work of acclaimed young writer Samuel D. Hunter, this sturdy yet stolid entry lacks the stinging originality of his previous plays.

Venue

South Coast Repertory, Costa Mesa (runs through May 24)

Cast

Lynn Milgrim, Sue Cremin, Libby West, Rob Nagle, Wyatt Fenner, Hal Landon Jr., Richard Doyle

Playwright

Samuel D. Hunter

Director

Martin Benson

As a blizzard bears down on an about-to-close Idaho retirement home, staff and patients open up in Samuel D. Hunter's latest play at South Coast Rep.

At an expiring retirement home on the outskirts of a small town in northern Idaho, the staff prepares to relocate its few remaining residents, when a dementia-impaired nonagenarian music professor, Ken (**Richard Doyle**), goes missing off the premises as a fierce blizzard completely isolates them from any outside assistance. Ken's healthy, sardonic spouse Etta (**Lynn Milgrim**), beside herself with worry, has to speak up tartly to shield herself from the onslaught of patronizing reassurances and bumbling responses.

Already a winner of most of New York's major Off-Broadway playwriting awards, 32-year-old **Samuel D. Hunter** has staked out his own distinctive dramatic universe in his native northern Idaho, an exotic location for him to explore the vicissitudes of mundane and marginal lives that speak freshly to more universal experience. He has an especial talent for avoiding condescension, whether depicting highly intelligent academics or committed fundamentalists, all endeavoring, mostly futilely, to transcend the limitations of their circumstances and, more essentially, their own characters. Whether they are low-rung management or labor, artists or simply intractable souls endeavoring to conform, Hunter doesn't judge any of them and allows them their due.

These qualities are still evident, if not quite manifest, in his latest entry, *Rest*, at South Coast Repertory, less than a year after the company presented his *The Whale*. For all his skill within his chosen milieu, Hunter here seems short on inspiration, with over-familiar plotting and a distressing paucity of revelation, not to mention a trademark style that rather than progressing is taking on a less urgent tack.

His finest play so far seen here, *A Bright New Boise* (mounted at Rogue Machine in late 2012), went beyond the quirky to an inventive vision of haplessly insular microcosms of disparate personalities trapped by economic exigencies, foreclosed opportunities and debilitating inner demons. There is no comparable urgency to the metaphors here, despite treating with such subjects as death, disability, disintegration of personality, euthanasia, surrogacy, moral responsibility and the challenges of connecting – even, perhaps especially, in long-term relationships.

Beyond the inadequacies of the text's conceptual development, the dialogue and interchanges are often felicitous, and certainly everyone in the production endeavors to give the material its best chance to shine. The actors, all SCR veterans (including two founding artists, **Hal Landon Jr.** and **Richard Doyle**, the latter of whom has appeared in 200 company productions over 50 years) easily take the measure of their roles, with **Rob Nagle** as a hapless supervisor hilariously 180 degrees removed from his recent Macbeth at Antaeus.

Of course, the standout part is that of the complex wife, to whom Milgrim (superb in this year's *The Malcontent*, also at Antaeus) brings far more shadings than are apparent from what seems to be a less than fully written creation. **Sue Cremin** as an attendant and **Wyatt Fenner** (also in *The Whale*) as a neurotic temp best embody the now-established polar Hunter types as, respectively, the sensible helper who stumbles continually into bad choices and the neurotic Christian believer who hides his terrors behind chirpy faith.

Martin Benson, who can direct everything because he has indeed already done so, concentrates more on effective moments than on the less realized arc of the piece, and all design elements are executed by topnotch talents working within a fairly rudimentary palette.

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Cast: Lynn Milgrim, Sue Cremin, Libby West, Rob Nagle, Wyatt Fenner, Hal Landon Jr., Richard Doyle

Director: Martin Benson

Playwright: Samuel D. Hunter

Set designer: John Iacovelli

Costume designer: Angela Balogh Calin

Lighting designer: Donna Ruzika

Music & sound designer: Michael Roth