



## Rest Theatre Review – “Rest” Assured: A Poignant World Premiere

By Peter A, Balaskas



Ken (Wyatt Fenner, right) shares a story with Gerald (Richard Doyle, left) and Etta (Lynn Milgrim)

(Costa Mesa, CA) April, 2014 – When it comes to film and theatre, there is nothing like the magic of a creative collaboration. Examples include **Scorsese** and **DeNiro**, **Jim Sheridan** and **Daniel Day-Lewis**, **Elia Kazan** and **Marlon Brando**, **John Huston** and **Humphrey Bogart**, and, of course, **William Shakespeare** and **Richard Burbage**. During **South Coast Repertory's** 2012/2013 season, Artistic Director **Martin Benson** and up and coming playwright **Samuel D. Hunter** worked together to produce **The Whale**, a play about how a dangerously obese man self-destructs and affects the lives around him. Performed at **SCR's Argyros Stage**, **The Whale** was a critical and box office success. The creative chemistry between **Benson's** deft direction and **Hunter's** magical insight into character and dialogue has resulted in them collaborating once again for **Hunter's** latest work, **Rest**, which is being performed at the **Segerstrom Main Stage**. And the results for this world premiere are, as expected, extraordinary. Director **Benson**, Playwright **Hunter**, and a talented cast paint a detailed theatrical landscape full of tenderness and power.



Tom (Hal Landon, Jr.) talks about his life as Etta (Lynn Milgrim) listens

A snow storm approaches a northern Idaho retirement home, a center which has been sold and is soon to be closed down. Only three residents remain: Etta (**Lynn Milgrim**), her husband Gerald (**Richard Doyle**), and their friend Tom (**Hal Landon, Jr.**). The skeleton crew staff includes an angst supervisor Jeremy, (a hilariously hyper **Rob Nagle**), two nurses Ginny (**Libby West**) and Faye (**Sue Cremin**) and a high-strung young cook, Ken (**Wyatt Fenner**), who was hired for three days before the place is completely shut down. A somber Etta shares with various staff members how her 91-year-old husband—a tenured music professor—has been slipping into increased dementia for the past twelve years, turning both of their lives into a living hell. At the same time, Faye is pregnant, serving as a surrogate mother for Ginny and her husband. But Faye is expressing feelings of regret and fear as to where her future lies after the child is born. A divorced Jeremy is also uncertain about his future after the center closes. And Ken, a born-again Christian, is doubtful he can deal with the sterile, death-like environment that seems to haunt the retirement home. All of their feelings are intensified when the brutal snow storm finally hits the area, shutting the occupants inside the building. And worst of all, Gerald is missing, which serves as a catalyst that changes all of their lives forever.



When the power cuts out, Faye (Sue Cremin, left), Jeremy (Rob Nagle), and Ginny (Libby West, right) get warm

**Benson's** patient direction guides the pacing as though the audience was reading a lyrical poem, and placing the action on the **Seegerstrom Stage** (excellent scenic design by **John Iacovelli**) was a wise move because the smaller **Argyros Stage** would have been too claustrophobic for the story. The main stage at **SCR** opens up the action and, at key points, delicately lightens the play's mood. Playwright

**Hunter's** sense for creating “misfits”—people who don't quite fit the status quo—was very evident in **The Whale** and it definitely shows in **Rest**. Each of these emotional “misfits” shows considerable layering regarding their failed expectations and the decisions they have to make in order not to sink into total despair. **Rest** is a sad play, but not a despairing one. And **Hunter's** strong ear for dialogue and eye for character is getting stronger with each work he creates. If there was only one flaw in this character tapestry, it's Ken, who is extremely similar to **The Whale's** Elder Thomas (also played by **Fenner**). Both characters are devout when it comes to their belief systems (Thomas with Mormonism; Ken with Protestant-based Christianity), both are uptight and high-strung, and both try their best to stick with their values when certain events come into the picture. Both are basically the same characters; they just have different names and are practicing different religions. Although **Fenner** was hilarious and heartwarming as Ken, there was a great deal amount of repetitiveness in this performance. **Hunter** created the role specifically for this talented actor, but it would have been more daring to see Ken much different from Elder Thomas, thereby showcasing **Fenner's** acting range and **Hunter's** ability to pen more diverse characters. But to those who haven't seen **The Whale**, this detail is hardly noticeable and the overall play and its characters still come alive and work together well.



A moment between Gerald (Richard Doyle) and Etta (Lynn Milgrim)

**Milgrim's** Etta is the true star of this ensemble. Her ability to age physically and emotionally is a phenomenal tour-de-force. **Milgrim** reveals each facet of her character as the story progresses, showing devotion for Gerald and her pain regarding how his dementia has been disintegrating her will and her hope. **Milgrim** is also an excellent storyteller with her monologues where the pacing never drags. When she tells a story about her husband, her past or anything else, people listen. And her stage chemistry with her co-stars sparkles throughout the show. **Rest** is Etta's story and **Milgrim** captures her essence with perfection.

Watching **SCR** Founding Artists **Landon Jr.** and **Doyle** is an experience of itself, no matter what play they act in, whether separately or together. And **Rest** is no exception. **Landon Jr.'s** Tom is mostly quiet on the stage during the first act. But his presence is felt and when he does open up more in the second act, he is on fire with his wise insight and especially his dry sense of humor. A former night watchman, Tom, too, saw the slow deterioration of his spouse before her passing and **Landon Jr.'s** compassionate sympathy anchors Etta's emotional stability. **Doyle's** Gerald is a heartbreaking picture of mental and physical loss, and his ability to appear ninety-one—an unhealthy ninety-one—is brilliant where it is unfortunate that he didn't have more stage time. **West's** desperately bossy Ginny and **Cremin's** haunted Faye work beautifully with each other where their confrontations are like a well-timed tennis match and their reconciliations seem like slow jazz. They, as well as **Nagle** and **Fenner**, balance nicely with the performances of their veteran counterparts, making **Rest** an experience to behold.