



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

Poignancy and quirks invigorate 'Rest' at South Coast Rep

Excellent writing, fine acting and a touch of neurosis add sparkle to the stark facts of life in an Idaho retirement home.

By Charles McNulty, Los Angeles Times Theater Critic
April 7, 2014 | 4:15 p.m.

If the producers of the HBO series "Getting On" go to Costa Mesa to see Samuel D. Hunter's "Rest," the American theater might lose another talented playwright to television.

This prolific dramatist's latest play, which is having its world premiere at South Coast Repertory in a finely acted production directed by Martin Benson, put me in mind of the American version of the dark British television comedy in which the old and frail are tended to by caregivers who could use some urgent care themselves.

Hunter similarly mixes quirks with poignancy in a drama that elicits steady laughter by juxtaposing stark facts of mortality with existential aches and neurotic pains.

As with his previous plays produced in Southern California in the last couple of years ("A Bright New Boise," "The Whale" and "The Few"), "Rest" is set in Idaho, Hunter's native state and the locus of his ruminations on the spiritual emptiness and longing in contemporary America.

The action takes place in a retirement home that's about to shut down. Only three residents remain: the gently astringent Etta (Lynn Milgrim), her 91-year-old music professor husband, Gerald (Richard Doyle), who has severe dementia, and Tom (Hal Landon Jr.), a man of few words who doesn't seem to mind in the least that everyone mistakenly thinks he's deaf.

During a paralyzing blizzard, Gerald goes missing, and the small, anxious staff can barely contend with packing the

facility up, never mind hunting through snow drifts for a missing person. Dedicated professionals though they are, they aren't very adept at keeping their personal problems out of the workplace.

Trying unsuccessfully to keep her pregnancy quiet, Faye (Sue Cremin) has agreed to carry a baby for her colleague and longtime friend, Ginny (Libby West), but she's starting to have qualms. Tensions between them flare up on the floor like quickly moving summer storms.

Jeremy (Rob Nagle), who came to Idaho from New Mexico after a divorce, can't believe he moved to the middle of nowhere and is about to be unemployed. Ken (Wyatt Fenner), the new devoutly religious temporary cook who suffers from panic attacks, tries to assure Jeremy that God has a plan for him, but Jeremy isn't so easily persuaded.

"If God has a plan for me, then he, like, *really* hasn't thought it through very much," he says.

"Rest" works best when the question of Gerald's whereabouts remains a background issue and the characters are allowed to reveal themselves in passing colloquies, as though they were in a Lanford Wilson play. When the plot thickens, "Rest" grows more conventional.

Hunter has such a gift for capturing the fine-grained textures of daily interaction that it becomes all the more conspicuous when moments are being artificially pumped up for dramatic value. He doesn't need to bring in traumatic back-stories or

push the action into contrived corners. His characters have already captured our attention with the simple fact that they are at a crossroads, desperate to close a little of the gap between their dreams and their circumstances.

A welcome theatrical voice from the American West, Hunter, now based in New York, writes about outsiders who eat at Taco Bell while staring at majestic mountain ranges. Their immediate landscape may be marred by strip malls and one too many churches, but their vistas are graced with geological wonders.

In his plays, the uncanny runs parallel to the tacky and the mundane. At the retirement home in "Rest," the sliding electric door keeps opening on its own accord, a ghostly flourish that's brought humorously down to mechanical reality each time a character urgently needs to leave the building and can't get out.

If there's a metaphor here, Hunter allows it to speak playfully. Would that he had preserved more of the mystery of his story, which is challenging to discuss without giving away its secrets. Let's just say that the play's questions are more resonant than the overfurnished explanations.

Benson, whose accomplished staging of "The Whale" last year at SCR (featuring Fenner in the role of the Mormon visitor) was one of the season's theatrical highlights, elicits terrific ensemble work from his cast. The interrelationships are so well-inhabited that it really does feel like a cordoned-off world. (John Iacovelli's set is realistic enough to situate us yet not so real that it loses its allegorical possibility.)

Hunter genuinely seems to like (if not necessarily approve of) his characters, and he gives the actors enough suggestive detail to create living, breathing histories. As Etta, Milgrim has the most to work with and she imparts a lifetime of pungent experience in her every scene.

Standout work from Cremin, West and Nagle further flesh out the play's preoccupation with what the

poet Adrienne Rich once described as "the rush of purpose to make a life / worth living past abandonment."

Religion is an unavoidable part of the mix in these parts. Jeremy may have been raised by nonbelievers, but watch how he's coaxed into prayer. He doesn't have the words, but he has the pleading need for guidance.

It's in these almost incidental moments that "Rest" attains its dramatic heights. Hunter is still working out a playwriting method for his questing secular-spiritual vision. Let's hope that the theater can hold on to him long enough for him to figure it out.

charles.mcNulty@latimes.com

'Rest'

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

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. (No evening performance Sunday, April 27.) Ends April 27.

Tickets: \$22-\$72

Contact: (714) 708-5555 or <http://www.scr.org>

Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes