

REST

STAGEsceneLA WOW!

Native Idahoan Samuel D. Hunter once again turns the lives of ordinary folk into world-class drama in his latest play, *Rest*, being given an all-around superb World Premiere production at South Coast Repertory under Martin Benson's inspired direction.



Like Hunter's *The Few, The Whale* (another SCR winner), and *A Bright New Boise*, three of the finest plays I've had the pleasure of discovering over the past year and a half, *Rest* transports us to small-town Idaho, this time to Pine Manor Assisted Living, a rundown retirement home just three days away from closing its doors forever.

With employees now outnumbering residents four to three, 82-year-old Etta (Lynn Milgrim), her now senile 91-year-old husband Gerald (Richard Doyle), and nearly deaf 80something Tom (Hal Landon Jr.) leave little for the Pine Manor staff to do but await its final shutdown.



Before long, however, a more pressing matter grabs the attention of staff members Jeremy (Rob Nagle), Faye (Sue Cremin), Ginny (Libby West), and just-arrived Ken (Wyatt Fenner). Gerald has gone missing, and with a winter storm threatening to shut down all surrounding roads, finding the retirement home's most elderly resident would appear to be a matter of life and death.

Still, there's little the staff can do short of setting out on foot in the freezing cold, leaving them plenty of time to await word from police search units doing their best under difficult weather conditions, time during which playwright Hunter allows us to become acquainted with the remaining six.



Faye is four months pregnant with the child she is carrying for high school best friend Ginny, unable to conceive on her own and hoping that a newborn will be just what the doctor ordered for a marriage on the rocks. Meanwhile, recently divorced Jeremy wonders what on earth he's going to do without a job (or job prospects) since "if God has a plan for me, then he like *really* hasn't thought it through very much." 20ish born-again Ken sees the several days he'll be working at Pine Manor as a chance to spend time with "people who are about to be reunited with God." As for Tom, well the octogenarian can't hear what anyone around him is saying so what he's thinking is anybody's guess.

Not all that much "happens" in Rest's first act. We learn that Etta was the first person to be erased from Gerald's memory rather than the last, as might normally have been expected, a phenomenon doctors called "medically fascinating." Faye expresses guilt about an accident that took the life of someone near and dear, then gives voice to second thoughts about being Ginny's surrogate. Jeremy lets slip a self-loathing that occasionally threatens to overpower him. Ken frets about "God's plan" for his life. And the retirement home's sliding entry/exit doors keep opening and shutting for no apparent reason ... except when they should.

Then comes the bombshell that ends Act One with a bang, allowing what follows to take Rest up to the level of playwright Hunter's best in addition to giving the entire South Coast Rep cast to strut their dramatic stuff to powerful effect.

It's hard to imagine a finer ensemble than the Southern California-based actors assembled by director Benson and casting whiz Joanne DeNaut, CSA.



SCR audiences can rejoice in seeing Founding Artists Doyle and Landon doing their usual impressive work five decades into their careers. L.A. theater treasures Nagle and West are as splendid as ever, the latter vanishing to perfection inside Jeremy's awkward, uncomfortable skin, with West equally marvelous at revealing the cracks in an already damaged marriage. Cremin makes a terrific South Coast Rep debut as a young woman paying penance for a life-changing moment she can't help blaming herself for. Best of all are Milgrim, fierce and fabulous as the initially mild and meek Etta, and the always brilliant Fenner (for whom I'm told the part of Ken was written) in a heartrending star turn as a young man battling inner demons that have sent him in search of a higher power.

Scenic designer John Iacovelli has created a retirement home set that appears to have aged no more gracefully than many of its previous residents.



Costume designer extraordinaire Angela

Balogh Calin eschews the eye-catching finery of her *A Noise Within* confections to give us the kind of everyday garb you'd expect Rest's cast to have pulled out of their closets this morning. Donna Ruzika's lighting design could not be more subtle or superb. Michael Roth's original music and "soundscape" further enhance Rest, incorporating excerpts from Arvo Pärt's chamber piece "Für Alina," a favorite of former music professor Gerald.

John M. Baker is dramaturg, Jackie S. Hill is production manager, Sue Karutz stage manager, and Jamie A. Tucker assistant stage manager. Supporting the directorial-design team are assistant director Travis Donnelly, assistant scenic designers Travis Kerr and Christina McCollam-Martinez, assistant to the costume designer Lalena Vigil Hutton, and assistant sound designer Melanie Chen.

Samuel D. Hunter's latest stands on its own as a particularly fine example of 21st-century playwriting. Taken together with the playwright's previous works, Rest provides further evidence that those in search of a contemporary Arthur Miller may well have found him in Sam Hunter.

South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. Through April 27. Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7:30, Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00. Saturdays and Sundays at 2:30 and 7:30. (No evening performance on Sunday April 27.) Tickets: 714 708-5555

www.scr.org

—Steven Stanley

April 10, 2014

Photos: Debora Robinson/SCR