



Hal Landon Jr., Rob Nagle, Lynn Milgrim, Libby West, Sue Cremin and Wyatt Fenner in Samuel D. Hunter's *Rest* at South Coast Repertory / *Debra Robinson*

Diminishment

Seven characters – three over 80 and the rest under 40 – are snowbound in a senior care facility. Those with years ahead of them tend to the others as the facility itself is in its final days. Martin Benson directs the commissioned, South Coast Repertory premiere (through April 27), as he did Hunter's *The Whale* (review) a year ago.

While the psychological implosion of *The Whale*'s central character held the other characters in orbit, that gravitational pull is missing from the core of *Rest*. We are again in Hunter's place of origin, Northern Idaho. The script suggests a dutiful sense of capturing his homeland zeitgeist. But for those of us who don't know or care about it, something feels absent. The characters float in their own self-interest without the investment in anything to create much conflict or dramatic engagement.

This may be part of a motif Hunter signals in references to modern Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, whose music, which approached the eternal through minimal "tintinnabulation" (bell-like tones) and use of silent space, is heard on two occasions. Pärt's body of work inspired one reviewer to write, "How we live depends on our relationship with death; how we make music depends on our relationship with silence."

One of the title's meanings is the musical *rest*, or silence. It is mentioned in the eighth and final scene, which, like an octave scale reaching its apex cycles back to opening tone, reunites two characters to repeat a line of dialogue they shared. When one of them says "I can't hear the music," the play reaches its end.

Resident Etta (Lynn Milgrim) has for 12 years held fast to her husband, Dr. Gerald Erikson (Richard Doyle) through his spiraling slide into dementia. Tom (Hal Landon Jr.), a widower with a calm stoicism regarding his circumstances, is the only other patient out of the 70 who lived there until recently, when it was sold. In the second scene we learn that Gerald again has wandered off, but this time he could die in the cold. Roads have closed and no emergency vehicles can help. Here where death is just another resident, staff are concerned but not alarmed enough to go outside and look for him.

With Gerald's disappearance, the play's most interesting character (even in dementia) is gone and our focus shifts to the less-compelling staff. There is the bumbling chief administrator, Jeremy (Rob Nagle), who took over two years ago after fleeing New Mexico when divorce ended eight-month Match.com marriage. Just-hired cook Ken (Wyatt Fenner), a mildly evangelical Christian, is hysterically afraid of both death and the dark. Ande nurses Ginny (Libby West) and Faye (Sue Cremin), friends from high school, are four months into a surrogacy arrangement they are each secretly questioning. The quartet adds their respective themes to the piece: career

REST

by SAMUEL D. HUNTER
directed by MARTIN BENSON

SOUTH COAST REPERTORY

April 10-September 30, 2012
Opened 6/29, rev'd 4/13m

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



Richard Doyle / *Robinson*

PRODUCTION Ralph Funicello, set; Deirdre Clancy, costumes; Alan Burrett, lights; Lindsay Jones, sound; Shaun Davey, music; Steve Rankin, fights; Elan McMahan, music direction; Christine Adaire, vocal/dialect; Bret Torbeck, stage management

competency, motherhood, marriage, and religious faith.

It's best not to spoil what happens. Suffice to say, the effects are strangely muted in a play that seems to proceed at such an even keel. Benson has done the right thing in not pushing for dramatic emphasis. True to the theater's age-old tenets, it lets the writing do its work.

They have a great ally in Milgrim, whose Etta is worn by years of painfully pointless interaction with the shell of her husband, yet continues to offer him kindness and encouragement. That mix of optimism and weariness carries into her conversation with the staff, where the weariness generally wins out. Landon's Tom is another treat. Weathered by loss, he stands as dominant sage when the others need to focus on what's important. Yet, he is childlike and dependent when awaiting his dinner.

Nagle works a little too hard to make Jeremy the comic relief. In fairness, it's in the script and given the play's generally planar topography, it must have seemed a good idea. Fenner, who served a similar function as the mildly evangelical Mormon missionary in *The Whale*, is such a perfect fit here that it's likely Hunter wrote it with him in mind. West and Cremin are fine actors who do their best to make the younger women interesting.

John Iacavelli creates a set with the right institutional lack of imagination. We feel the encroachment of neglect as the facility is in the final stages of its life. Angela Calin Balogh gives the play costumes that are remarkably unremarkable. Milgrim and Landon's old-folkswear is hauntingly familiar. Donna Ruzika is expert at just the right levels to make the lighting feel fluorescent without it being so, or candle-powered when we shift to a scene during a power outage. And, with a play with a quiet, if considered compositional component, Michael Roth serves the production well.

Finally, it is Doyle, with the least amount of stage time, who gives the play its footing. The root of a musical scale is where we land for resolution, where a passage finds resolution during the lifelike cycles of tension and release. Even *in absentia*, his part is the heart of the play's message of the tragedy of this kind of loss. He and Milgrim give *Rest* its resonance.