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[HOME](#) » [THEATRE REVIEWS](#) » LIFE IS HARD IN GLOOMY POCATELLO

Life is Hard in Gloomy Pocatello

By Patrick Hurley

Depression is the main course being served in *Pocatello*, the new play by Samuel D. Hunter, presented by Rogue Machine Theatre Company, and playing now at the Met Theatre. Set in a famous Italian restaurant franchise in Pocatello, Idaho, a town that seems to have been hit hard in the lingering recession. The Manager Eddie (Matthew Elkins), a perpetual people pleaser, has just found out that the restaurant is about to be shut down. He withholds this information from his staff, as he desperately tries to figure out a way to save the place from ruin. His staff includes apathetic Isabelle (Jen Pollono), recovering drug addict Max (Trevor Peterson) and middle-aged Troy (Justin Okin), who has just separated from his very depressed wife Tammy (Tracie Lockwood). Also in the mix is Troy and Tammy's daughter Becky (Eden Brolin), a depressed seventeen-year old vegan, who is obsessed with fair trade, and the darker parts of humanity. After being suspended from school for a week because she shares graphic photos of genocide with her history class, she comes to work as a busser for Eddie.



PHOTO BY JOHN PERRIN FLYNN

Not only does Eddie have to deal with a group of employees who are all going through their own crises, but his successful realtor brother Nick (Rob Nagle) is in town with his wife Kelly (Rebecca Larson) who both come to the restaurant with Eddie's mother Doris (Anne Gee Byrd) in what turns out to be an awkward and uncomfortable situation. Eddie is a gay man. A point that is somewhat integral to the plot, but not really. It does come into focus when he and Doris have a confrontation, and it seems to be a source of negativity to Nick, who is very angry with Eddie for staying in Pocatello, a town that doesn't really have anything to offer him. A town that killed their father—a subplot point that hangs over the characters but is never fully explored. The play has quite a few character arcs to get through, and somewhat struggles to find its footing in all of them.

Writer Samuel D. Hunter knows how to write characters in isolated loneliness. *The Whale* is perhaps one of the best mainstream examples of desperate loneliness and the overwhelming need for human connection of the last decade.

This play lacks the focus of Mr. Hunter's former work, and instead veers off to subplots too many times. And everyone seems to be dealing with depression. It's either the psychological aspects of a character or the fact that the economic depression of the previous decade is still lingering. And so we have characters in a tough social situation, dealing with tough personal issues. It is not an easy feat for a playwright to have to weave together so many dysfunctional characters into one narrative. Mr. Hunter has attempted to create a sort of *August: Osage County*, but has really just removed the intimate and isolated world he usually creates for one that attempts melodramatic hyper-realism, and the result, not surprisingly, is a mixed bag.

The set, designed by Stephanie Kerley Schwartz is wonderfully authentic. You feel as if you're looking in on an actual restaurant. It heightens the realism of the piece, and creates a familiar and universal tone. We know where we are, and the attention to detail is spot on. Director John Perrin Flynn, doesn't quite know how to make the space feel hyper-realistic, however. The actors move a bit too restricted through the space, they seem to be always positioned, almost choreographed, so there's no natural fluidity. This gives the impression of theatrical staging, which lessens the naturalism, which causes two styles to clash. Which ultimately pulls the audience out. The only design flaw in the set is that the tables of the restaurant are all on the same plane, so we have long moments where scenes are flatly staged with everyone on the same line. This is not an interesting stage picture, nor does it resonate as genuine, it feels completely staged instead of authentic. One of the tenets of naturalism in contemporary theatre is the beauty in which some productions are able to suspend our disbelief more than ever before.



PHOTO BY JOHN PERRIN FLYNN

Heightening the "realistic" feel of a production actually heightens the theatricality of it. It requires a delicate balance of directing and acting that must exist inside of this "real" seeming world for that overwhelming sense of authenticity, and this production, most specifically the direction, just falls a little short of making that authenticity happen.

The cast of this production is quite impressive. All across the board. Eden Brodin, in particular, is wonderful as moody teenage Becky. She is able to have the most satisfying character arc because the actress infuses the role with honesty, rather than broad or easy choices. Tracie Lockwood as highly depressed Tammy has some really strong moments as well. Jen Pollono's Isabelle is constantly stealing moments with her apathetic demeanor and great comic timing, and Anne Gee Byrd is beautifully unlikeable and harsh- until she isn't. She takes on a tough role and delivers a surprisingly poignant catharsis. Matthew Elkins creates a timid, highly empathetic Eddie. We can easily follow him through this journey because he is so easy to like. The character gets a bit lost amidst the histrionics of his surrounding ensemble, but he stays stolid and congenial, giving a nice contrast to those around him.

In the end, the thematic development of this play feels a bit underdeveloped. It tackles issues of family, identity, community, loss, and depression, but it does so in a way that leaves us with more questions than answers. And maybe that's the point. Maybe as a reflection of life, this play wants to show that things don't always have an answer, that things don't always go the way you'd imagine. If that's the case, there were still too many missed opportunities in the script to call this a home run, it just simply doesn't resonate as much as some of Hunter's previous work was able to.

Rogue Machine Theatre Presents

Pocatello

By Samuel D. Hunter

Directed by John Perrin Flynn

February 20-April 10

Fri & Sat 830PM

Sun 3PM

The Met Theatre

1089 N. Oxford Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90029

Tickets: \$34.99

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