

Samuel Hunter's *Rest* Probes a Life More Ordinary

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published: April 17, 2014

Debora Robinson/SCR



They're just there

Details:

Rest at South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Dr., Costa Mesa, (714) 708-5555; www.scr.org. Tues.-Wed., 7:30 p.m.; Thurs.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2:30 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 & 7:30 p.m. Through April 27. \$22-\$72.

Playwright Samuel Hunter's characters are ordinary people with ordinary problems: mortality, illness, loneliness, figuring out how to get from Point A to Point C with no idea where Point B is. But Hunter raises the ordinariness of his characters to extraordinary status. That's both a testament to his dramatic skill as well as the latest evidence that the stories we tell ourselves about Americans don't have to be confined—as so many of Hunter's predecessors and peers do—to cultured, articulate, big-city types who whine and fret about their respective angst or to the bizarre and eccentric.

No, Hunter talks about the ignored, overlooked common people. They live in the margins of society, where most of us live. And his ability to make his characters' struggles and challenges resonate as true as those of kings, Ivy League professors, whores and drug addicts makes his voice unusual indeed.

In *The Whale*, Hunter's 2013 play, that ordinary person was a former high-school creative-writing teacher mired in grief over the death of his lover and basically eating himself to

death. In his new play, *Rest*, commissioned by South Coast Repertory, the ordinary people are three elderly patients in a nursing home and the small staff taking care of them in the final three days before the home closes. As with *The Whale*, questions of impending death loom large; also, as with that earlier play, *Rest*'s structure is straightforward and the plot simple. But don't be misled: There is nothing easy or obvious about Hunter's characters.

A nursing home in a small town in Idaho is closing. Only three residents, two staff members and the director remain. A 20-year-old born-again Christian has just been hired to serve as cook for those last three days. Everyone is struggling with life in the short and long term. Moving into another home. Finding a new job. Deteriorating marriages. Serving as a surrogate for a baby. Social anxiety disorders. And while there is one highly dramatic event, none of their struggles is huge and epic, and none of these people is particularly strong or weak. They're just there. Which makes the cohesiveness and power of Hunter's play all the more impressive and stirring.

There is one extraordinary person in the mix: Gerald (played by SCR founding artist Richard Doyle). He is—or, actually, was—a music professor, possessed of a towering intellect, but, as his wife, Etta (a wonderfully textured Lynn Milgrim), relates, he's not the most skilled people-person. But Gerald, pushing 90, is in the throes of late-stage dementia, and the fact that the smartest guy in the room no longer lives in his own body is the play's dramatic impetus.

Disappearance is a through line, both on the play's surface and its deeper layers. Gerald's being gone in the midst of a terrible blizzard is the obvious one. But most of the characters, with the exception of fellow patient Tom (SCR founding artist Hal Landon Jr.), either fear disappearing or yearn for it. Ginny (Libby West) is afraid of vanishing into her foundering marriage. Her best friend, Faye (Sue Cremin), is in fear of disappearing into grief. Jeremy (Rob Nagle) doesn't want to disappear into an empty, purposeless life. Conversely, Etta yearns to reinvent her life by moving to her hometown. And Ken (Wyatt Fenner) wants to lose himself in the rapture of religion.

But while the characters fear they may or want to disappear, Hunter masterfully lays out his play in that they actually discover one another. They may not understand one another or themselves any better at play's end, but the realization that their private slings and arrows are shared by others, regardless of age or situation, offers some kind of redemption.

Director Martin Benson understands the rhythms and multiple currents of Hunter's play, but one wishes he had restrained Fenner's youthful exuberance a bit. The rest of the cast is solid, with Doyle and Landon providing excellent work in small but pivotal roles, and Milgrim offers a towering performance as the play's most complicated character. Nagle also provides much-needed comic relief in a play that, in lesser hands, could have been a major downer.

No one ends this play graced with insight or courage. They're the same people they began it as, and it's clear from the repetition of the words "not sure" (when asked by two characters to each other how they're feeling) and "we'll see what happens next," the next step in their respective journeys is anything but clear. But whatever comes next from this quite unordinary playwright is something to look forward to.