

Pasta in 'Pocatello,' anyone?

By Don Shirley | February 23, 2016 9:42 PM



"Pocatello." Photo by John Perrin Flynn.

Two plays named after cities: "Barcelona" at the Geffen Playhouse and Rogue Machine's production of "Pocatello" (in case that doesn't ring a bell, its namesake is the fifth largest city in Idaho.)

Which theatrical destination sounds more inviting?

Well, "Barcelona" isn't bad. But "Pocatello" pops.

Produced by Rogue Machine, "Pocatello" is by Samuel D. Hunter. His "A Bright New Boise" and "A Permanent Image," two of Rogue Machine's greatest hits, were also set in Idaho -- Hunter's original home state.

"Pocatello" is the first mainstage production in Rogue Machine's supposedly temporary home at the Met Theatre, a block southeast of the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Western Avenue. The new neighborhood is not likely to conjure thoughts of Idaho.

Yet "Pocatello" looks as if it could be set just about anywhere in the United

States. It takes place entirely within the doomed Pocatello outpost of a downscale Italian restaurant chain - the sort of eating establishment that looks more or less the same in Pocatello, Pittsburgh or Pomona.

Until I saw "Pocatello," I'm not sure I had ever thought about how a play set in a branch of a national or international commercial chain has a natural advantage in the quest to quickly establish at least a superficial sense of universality.

At the same time, the struggling characters in "Pocatello" appear to have fewer options than they might have in Pittsburgh or Pomona. In Pocatello, with only 55,000 people, good jobs are scarce, judging from what we hear. Much of the play is about the conflicts people feel when their home-town roots are under duress. This isn't a play that the Pocatello Chamber of Commerce is likely to endorse.

Hunter's ability to find that bittersweet spot between laughter and tears has never felt sharper than in John Perrin Flynn's staging. All 10 characters are dimensional, and a magnificent cast is led by Matthew Elkins as the restaurant manager (he was also golden in the leading role of Rogue's "Bright New Boise.") I try to avoid saying that plays are "Chekhovian," a standard to which many plays aspire - and "Pocatello" is more streamlined than most of the good doctor's seminal works. But with just the one set (by Stephanie Kerley Schwartz) and only 90 intermission-free minutes, Hunter manages to excavate private and public wells of surprising depth.

Hunter is a writer on "Baskets", the new FX TV series with similarities in tone (and Zach Galifianakis) but with commercial interruptions (and concessions?) "Baskets" is set mostly in Bakersfield, much closer to LA, and the Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce is probably glad that it's not titled "Bakersfield."

Bess Wohl's "Barcelona" has a more limited scope than "Pocatello." It's about an older Spanish man (from Madrid, not Barcelona) and a younger American woman who turn a one-night stand into a long session of soul-searching. The setting in Barcelona appears to be decorative more than thematic. The city is such a picturesque tourist destination that the title might draw in some theatergoers who might otherwise find the subject matter somewhat depressing. It's as if Hunter's play were called "Yellowstone" instead of "Pocatello."