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Critic's Choice In 'Pocatello,' Americans struggle to smile through the heartbreak



In Rogue Machine's "Pocatello," a family and a restaurant staff struggle through another day. Foreground, from left, Mark L. Taylor, Eden Brolin and Tracie Lockwood. Background, from left, Justin Okin, Jen Pollono and Trevor Peterson. (John Perrin Flynn)



By **Daryl H. Miller** · Contact Reporter

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Playwright Samuel D. Hunter hears Middle America's quiet desperation, the low moan of people who have lost their connection to the past, to loved ones, to the lives they thought they'd lead. Many of them are living on the margins, losing ground.

These are the inhabitants of his resonant, often ruefully funny plays. Something vital has gone missing in their lives, yet they struggle on, trying to piece at least some small part of themselves back together.

Another chapter in the canon has reached Los Angeles in Hunter's "Pocatello," presented by Rogue Machine, the company that delivered riveting renditions of his "A Permanent Image" and "A Bright New Boise."

The Idaho-raised playwright tends to use his home state as his canvas. His setting this time is the midsize city of Pocatello, where a restaurant manager makes a stand, valiantly trying to hold families together, keep people employed and retain at least some semblance of the city's former shared identity and civic pride.

The site of this heroic holdout is not a beloved mom-and-pop eatery, but the faltering outlet of a national restaurant chain — virtually the only game in town after yesteryear's big employers shuttered and family-owned businesses were displaced by corporate behemoths. In Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's set design, this is an oppressively generic place, from the Tuscan-tan walls to the decorative clusters of plastic grapes.

Eddie (Matthew Elkins), the restaurant manager, is one of life's good guys, and in Elkins' resilient portrayal, he keeps a smile on his face, even when it barely masks heartbreak.

He's trying to salvage three families. One is his own: his sharp-edged mother (Anne Gee Byrd), his jumpy brother (Rob Nagle) visiting from out of town and his sister-in-law (Rebecca Larsen), caught in the middle. Another is the family of a conscientious waiter (Justin Okin): his dad (Mark L. Taylor), who's slipping into dementia; his hyper-intelligent but moody daughter (Eden Brolin) and his wife (Tracie Lockwood), who's sinking into despair.

And then there's the restaurant staff — a squabbling family unto itself — threatened with dissolution by the struggling restaurant's imminent closure. Its members are rounded out by a sullen waitress (Jen Pollono at the reviewed performance) and an earnest but messed-up waiter (Trevor Peterson).

Hunter, still in his mid-30s, writes with preternatural insight into people of all ages and wildly differing circumstances, as he has in such other plays as "The Whale" and "Rest."

John Perrin Flynn directs this production — "Pocatello's" West Coast premiere and Rogue Machine's first presentation in a new location, the Met — with the quiet empathy and sharp attention to detail he brought to Rogue Machine's stagings of "Permanent Image" and "Boise." Likewise, many in the excellent cast are veterans of Hunter's plays.

The playwright is in good hands, and the audience in his. He, like Eddie, fights to keep people connected in a society increasingly devoid of the old glues.

"Pocatello"

Where: Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford Ave., Los Angeles

When: 8:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends April 10.

Tickets: \$34.99

Info: (855) 585-5185 and www.roguemachinetheater.com