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“Pocatello” at Rogue Machine Theatre



The cast of Rogue Machine Theatre's *Pocatello* by Samuel D. Hunter — (l. to r.) Rebecca Larsen, Justin Okin, Rob Nagle, Jen Pollono, Matthew Elkins, Eden Brolin, Anne Gee Byrd, Trevor Peterson, Tracie Lockwood, and Mark Taylor — now playing through April 10 at The Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford Ave. in Los Angeles. Photo: John Perrin Flynn

Like Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing*, Samuel D. Hunter's *Pocatello* reveals overarching themes in an intimate family drama. Set in an Italian-styled, chain-restaurant in the Idaho town of fifty-thousand-plus citizens, two woefully unhappy families play out their understandable angst in ninety minutes of keenly acted strife. At the center of the maelstrom, Eddie (the superb **Matthew Elkins**), is the

restaurant manager burdened with the knowledge that corporate headquarters has determined to shut the place down. He has no real friends. His brother, Nick (**Rob Nagle**), and mother, Doris (**Anne Gee Byrd**), are distant both emotionally and physically. Eddie longs for meaningful human contact, especially with what remains of a family shattered by his father's untimely demise. Nick visits from Minnesota with his wife, Kelly (**Rebecca Larsen**), while the brusque Doris lives in town maintaining a reserved distance from her younger son.

Eddie's head waiter, Troy (**Justin Okin**), has a stormy relationship with his wife, Tammy (**Tracie Lockwood**), an on-again, off-again alcoholic, while struggling to raise his tart-tongued, teenage daughter Becky. Becky (spot-on **Eden Brolin**) is mired in gloom over such worldly woes as pesticide-poisoned foods raised by low-wage, third world peons, as well as the terrible, historical tragedy of the Nanking massacre. She rejects all attempts of parental attention. To complete the family stew, add in Eddie's father, Cole (**Mark L. Taylor**), a grumpy Korean War veteran with incipient Alzheimer's who exists in a Community Care home.



(l. to r.) Tracie Lockwood (Tammy), Eden Brolin (Becky) and Justin Okin (Troy) in Rogue Machine's *Pocatello* by Samuel D. Hunter, now playing through April 10 at The Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford Ave. in Los Angeles. Photo: John Perrin Flynn

Rounding out the restaurant staff, sympathetically sardonic Isabelle (**Melissa Paladino**) is resigned to her economic slot in life, while Max (**Trevor Peterson**), a convicted drug abuser, is grateful just to have a job.

In a deft bit of writing, directing and acting, the opening scene places the two family groups stage left and right introducing their characters in competing, overlapping verbal displays. An audience will get a snatch of dialogue here, a bit there with manager Eddie dealing with his folks stage left, while head waiter Troy attempts the same stage right. The words are not as important as the snapshots one gets of the characters, their manners and temperaments. It's as if one were inside the restaurant at another table across the room.

Pocatello takes place against the background of the invasive, homogenizing influence of a corporate America that stamps out local businesses and erects logo-laden buildings of cookie-cutter sameness. One sees identical Applebee's, Home Depots and CVSs everywhere, while the local diners, building suppliers, and drug stores evaporate, dampening down the uniqueness of American cities and towns. The play reveals on a very personal level the emotional carnage that business closures rain down upon individuals as businesses, factories and saw mills that paid decent wages disappear leaving a plethora of minimum wage jobs to take their place.



Matthew Elkins and Anne Gee Byrd in Rogue Machine's *Pocatello* by Samuel D. Hunter, now playing through April 10 at The Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford Ave. in Los Angeles. Photo: John Perrin Flynn

Like *Odets*, Samuel D. Hunter creates in *Pocatello* a searing, utterly absorbing drama that instills a mounting feeling of dread for the fates of the characters; not a dread of physical harm, but rather one of emotional fear, like peering over a precipice before stepping back to a modicum of safety. Under the savvy direction of **John Perrin Flynn**, this outstanding ensemble displays unerring emotional truth and not a second of falseness. The terrific unit set by **Stephanie Kerley Schwartz**, lit by **Ric Zimmerman**, makes a realistic representation of the restaurant with its Roman arches, tiled floor, and tan tones. The kitchen with its serving window can be seen upstage. The sound design by **Christopher Moscatiello** is splendid with familiar, typically Italian music playing between scenes in cheerful counterpoint to the emotions on stage. Costuming by **Elizabeth A. Cox** is ideal for time, place and character. And special kudos for property master **Bethany Tucker** who keeps the realism going with endless food, wine and water coming out of the kitchen.

Apropos of nothing, *Pocatello* sounds Italian, doesn't it?

Pocatello runs through April 10 at The Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford Ave. in Los Angeles.



Published by

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