

BWW Reviews: Funny and Touching REST Makes World Premiere at South Coast Rep

 by Michael L. Quintos April 17

During his wait time, Taco Bell-trained Ken also meets Etta's 91-year-old husband Gerald (SCR founding artist [Richard Doyle](#)) who wanders into the common room very dazed and very confused. It's sadly obvious that the once prominent music professor is now suffering from late-stage dementia. Etta, ever the doting wife, tries her best to calm her husband down, even though he doesn't even recognize her.

"He has some good days," Etta explains, matter-of-factly. "Well, *had*. Good days are behind us at this point."

Ken, understandably, finds this heartbreaking. And, yes, so does the audience.

"It's hard to watch someone you love slowly disappear."



The following day, the home's staff is in crisis mode: overnight, Gerald has suddenly gone missing. What's worse, a powerful snow storm is growing stronger outside, making the search effort more difficult. And it doesn't help matters that the front automatic sliding glass doors keep opening and closing on their own (though admittedly, for the audience, this becomes a reliably hilarious running gag).

We are soon introduced to friendly co-workers---and long-time BFFs---Ginny (Libby West) and Faye ([Sue Cremin](#)), who are trying to keep calm but also busy by continuing to pack up and, of course, look after the needs of Etta and the home's other remaining resident Tom (SCR founding artist [Hal Landon Jr.](#)), a man of very few words (the staffers suspect he's mostly deaf; in reality, Tom prefers not to contribute to the drama, even though he proves to be highly observant nonetheless).

Later, we learn a not-so-hidden secret: that Faye is actually pregnant, and that she is a surrogate on behalf of Ginny and her husband. Faye's trepidation of people knowing about their arrangement opens up a whole other can of worms that the two

argue about constantly in uneasy, whispered tones.

Meanwhile, their boss Jeremy (the wonderfully nebbishy [Rob Nagle](#)) is slowly coming apart on the inside as the closure of the facility begins to inch closer and closer to fruition. Gerald's recent disappearance certainly doesn't help with his nerves, causing him to question his choice of moving from sunny New Mexico to blizzard-pummeled Northern Idaho two years earlier after getting a divorce. Now unemployed, he must now figure out what to do next.

"I think God has a plan for you," Ken offers with genuine sincerity. *Awkward pause.*

Tensions continue to mount as Gerald remains missing while a powerful winter storm builds up outside, blanketing the isolated retirement home in impassable piles of snow. Will they find Gerald in time or has he succumbed to the harshness of mother nature?

More so here than in *THE WHALE*, Hunter really knows how to mine humor out of the silliness of everyday actions and odd, awkward situations---and, most importantly---the wacky (albeit intriguing) people that such situations embody. Even the sad, emotional tones that surround the play can often give way to humor in a very natural, non-manipulative way. In doing so, we are able to laugh at the characters and their foibles, easing our ability to find a human connection with them. And, similarly, feeling empathy for the characters is not difficult at all when you become this invested in such layered, well-formed characters.

All this, natch, is helped tremendously by *REST*'s impressive cast. *SCR* veterans Landon Jr and Doyle bring humor and *gravitas* to their mini roles, while Cremin and West provide ample emotional support. Fenner, Hunter's muse of sorts, is such an intriguing actor to watch every time he takes the stage (Hunter specifically wrote the role of Ken for him after such impressive work in last year's *THE WHALE*). From his subtle speech nuances to his overt mannerisms, this young actor continues to be a welcome presence at *SCR*. Nagle, for his part, displays impeccable comic timing and nails every awkward pause and exasperated heave to hilarious results (I found myself laughing out loud every single time he cursed for some reason).

Of course, *REST*---pardon the pun---*rests* squarely on the sweater-swathed shoulders of Etta, played with great dignity and emotional power by Milgrim. There are times when the pain on her face is just too palpable for Etta to conceal, and to witness her feelings proves to be quite heartbreaking and devastating. But we also smile in delight whenever she allows her cantankerous musings to fly out (the gal certainly knows how to throw shade).

As expected, such close-knit relationships often tests the limits of what one can do for (and tolerate about) people thrown together---by chance or by circumstance---inside a self-contained environment. That familiar scenario of "trapping" a diverse set of people in an environment with no exit (particularly, one that is shut-off from civilization due to a blizzard) forces everyone to interact, deal with common problems, and maybe even divulge a bit of personal information with one another in the process.

This has always been a useful tool to provide a dramatic jump-off point, and in this play, it is no exception. *REST* uses such a scenario to expose secrets and inner longings for each of the characters (although, I must admit, my sole gripe with the play is that I do wish some of Ginny and Faye's drawn-out conversations would have been trimmed a bit more, only because their conflict feels, frankly, a bit forced). Additionally, [John Iacovelli](#)'s incredibly-detailed and authentically-aged lobby set is itself a living character of its own, mirroring the effects of advanced years its own residents must endure. It's a cheeky presence too, particularly its unruly sliding door---constantly opening for no one, yet wickedly uncooperative when someone really needs it to.



And if there's one thing we've gleaned from watching decades of workplace dramas and comedies, it's that they often reveal something quite natural about human interactions: the eventual development of an ad-hoc family. More often than not, co-workers fight, care about, argue with, hurt, celebrate and even rescue each other so comfortably that they almost become just as important to our lives as those that actually share DNA with us, if not more.

The fact that REST takes place in a nursing home only gives solid evidence to this very notion of workplace-created "families." Within the weathered walls of a facility whose very purpose is to provide food, shelter and human caring---in this case, for the elderly---well, the creation of family-like relationships seems fairly inevitable (even if one of them literally just walked in the door the day before as an awkward, high-strung temp).



Watching this "family" care for one another during a crisis is perhaps why the play is so very relatable. It also explains, too, why by the time a big revelation is unveiled to close out the first act (a predictable, yet still gasp-inducing "cliffhanger" which I will dare not spoil for you), the audience has already become so invested in the various troubles of this "family" that it's not hard to be enticed to see how the *rest* of REST plays out.

And, believe me, you'll want to stay for *all* of it, particularly the final heartbreaking scene that will make you want to call your grandparents right away.

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Photos by Debora Robinson/SCR. From top: The staff tries to calm Etta ([Lynn Milgrim](#)) after her husband goes missing; Etta shares her story with new hire Ken ([Wyatt Fenner](#)); Tom (Hal Landon Jr) talks with Etta; the staff ([Sue Cremin](#), [Rob Nagle](#), Libby West) try to keep warm; Etta kisses her husband Gerald ([Richard Doyle](#)) goodnight.

Performances of the world premiere of REST continue at [South Coast Repertory](#) through April 27, 2014. Tickets can be purchased online at www.scr.org, by phone at (714) 708-5555 or by visiting the box office at 655 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa.