



ENTERTAINMENT

'Rest' has trouble balancing life and death

South Coast Repertory's new play in Costa Mesa about end-of-life issues is poignant, promising but needs work.

BY PAUL HODGINS / THEATER CRITIC

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DEBORA ROBINSON, DEBORA ROBINSON

'REST'

Where: Segerstrom Stage, South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

When: Through April 27. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays (no evening performance April 27).

Playwright Samuel Hunter uses Idaho like Woody Allen uses Manhattan. The place of Hunter's birth gives him a familiar canvas for his stories and a template for the temperaments of the people that populate them. It is also, of course, a silent but constant character of its own.

In "Rest," Hunter's latest play, the northern Idaho setting is so bleak and menacing that the script almost sinks under its cumbersome weight. South Coast Repertory's world-premiere production, directed by the theater's cofounder Martin Benson, is well cast and full of the poignancy and poetry that the playwright finds in quotidian events and mundane conversations. But like the play's characters – residents and staff trapped in a dumpy retirement home during an epic January snowstorm – you might end up feeling a little claustrophobic by the Bergman-esque grimness of it all.

How much: \$11-\$72

Tickets: 714-708-5555

Online: scr.org

The rest home looks forlorn and forgotten for a reason (scenic designer John Iacovelli achieves that effect almost too well). It's about to close; its new owners want to redevelop the property. Only three residents remain: Etta (Lynn Milgrim), a sharp-tongued and sharp-minded woman in her early 80s; Tom (Hal Landon Jr.), a quiet man around her age; and Gerald (Richard Doyle), Etta's husband, almost a decade older and in the last stages of dementia.

Gerald was a professor of musicology at the state university, but his formerly brilliant mind has deteriorated. He spends his time shuffling around the rest home, muttering about faceless people standing at the foot of his bed, and listening to his favorite music, the sacred works of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. He no longer recognizes his wife.

Etta has borne this hardship with stoicism, and she doesn't take kindly to words of compassion. "The way you all express sympathy and concern, it's very annoying," she announces to the staff.

In Etta's defense, they're not exactly la crème de la crème of their profession. Jeremy (Rob Nagle), a transplant from another state, is clearly out of his depth as the facility's manager. He can't even figure out how to keep the building's automated sliding front doors from opening and closing on their own.

Ginny and Faye (Libby West and Sue Cremin), the only two permanent workers left, are dispirited and distracted. That's not surprising: Like Jeremy, they're about to lose their jobs when the facility closes. A devout young Christian named Ken (Wyatt Fenner) has been hired to cook, but his ability to improve the terrible chow doesn't seem promising. When Etta asks him if he has experience, he replies, "I worked at Taco Bell in high school."

Everyone spends much of the first act searching for Gerald, who has apparently wandered off into the storm when nobody was looking. Then the play turns on a sudden revelation at the end of the first act, ♦ la "Proof," and suddenly "Rest" becomes a more intriguing, if morally opaque, tale.

The main pleasure to be derived from this production is watching gifted veterans like Milgrim, Doyle and Landon work their magic. They never overplay the inherent pathos of their characters' circumstances, yet each performer brings honesty and deep compassion to the portrayal.

West and Cremin are plausible playing two old friends who share a secret. As Jeremy, Nagle finds a way to make a shallow, self-absorbed man the object of our sympathy. Fenner never lets us forget there's a hot mess of anxiety beneath Ken's chipper surface.

"Rest" is more ambitious yet less successful than "The Whale," Hunter's beautifully crafted tragedy about a man eating himself to death, which was seen last season at South Coast Rep. "The Whale" was a tightly focused, single-theme play. In "Rest," Hunter tackles several thorny issues, and the two main story arcs juxtapose matters of birth and death too obviously. And the last one-third of the play meanders as it searches and fails to find a suitable ending.

"Rest" is still one or two revisions away from a finished product. If Hunter listens to his

well-drawn characters, they'll help him tie up their story strands more artfully.

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