



Matthew Elkins and Anne Gee Byrd in Samuel D. Hunter's *Pocatello* (photo by John Perrin Flynn)

Pocatello

Reviewed by Deborah Klugman

Rogue Machine at The Met

Through April 10

RECOMMENDED

If you google the town of Pocatello in Southwest Idaho, you'll get images of dusty hills and a downtown whose architecture might have served as nostalgic backdrop for *The Last Picture Show*. The place is changing though; look long enough and you'll see a shot of a Ross store as well, and signs of a bland commercial culture metastasizing across the landscape.

Pocatello is the setting for Samuel D. Hunter's play of the same name and, as in some other works of his, the pivotal character is a lost soul seeking to connect and/or be redeemed.

That sort of gentle persona is once again wonderfully assumed by Matthew Elkins, who played the lead in *Rogue Machine's* moving production of Hunter's *A Bright New Boise*, directed by John Perrin

Flynn in 2012.

In the company's current production, also consummately directed by Flynn, Elkins portrays Eddie, the manager of a chain restaurant, a sort of shoddy Olive Garden whose imminent closing he conceals from his employees.

They're a likable if motley bunch: Troy (Justin Okin), a responsible guy with marital problems, Max (Trevor Peterson), a bisexual (or so he claims!) flake with drug issues, and Isabelle (Jen Pollono, alternating with Melissa Paladino), a gal whose parents died in a car crash when she was 12.

Eddie hasn't informed them about the shuttering, not because he wants to deceive these people but because he's hoping against hope that something miraculous will happen to forestall it. In the meantime, he's decided to launch a "family week," inviting the families of staff to dine for free. His main motivation is the reunion he seeks with his own prickly mom, Doris (Anne Gee Byrd), and his brother Nick (Rob Nagle), in town from Minneapolis where he's a successful real estate agent. Like many others, Nick had fled Pocatello years before; now he's driven once again to get out of the dying community as speedily as possible.

So no matter how much Eddie pleads with Nick to stay a little longer, his brother demurs. The refusal, hurtful as it is, is not nearly as devastating to Eddie as the attitude of his mother, who bitchily demands gluten-free pasta and creates every opportunity to make the hopefully accommodating Eddie feel as small, as incompetent and as unwanted as humanly possible. He isn't sure why she behaves that way but, when questioned by Max and Isabelle, Eddie admits it may be because he is "one of those." No one ever uses the word gay.

Eddie's story isn't the only compelling one on the stage. We're also privy to the humor-decked sorrows of Troy's wife Tammy (Tracie Lockwood), the food-obsessed neuroses of their daughter Becky (Eden Brolin) and the dementia-fueled anger of his dad Cole (Mark L. Taylor), a man desperate, like the much younger Eddie, to regain his bearings in a place he no longer recognizes as home.

Pocatello isn't a perfect play; even with the back story, it's hard to grasp why Nick and Doris are so very cruel, and Hunter's efforts to explain that away and resolve things happily in the end come off as artificial and unsatisfying.

But the pluses here far outweigh the negatives. Hunter invests each of these characters with funny, forgivable humanity; guided by Flynn, the ensemble splendidly exploits the pathos and the humor.

The Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford Ave., E. Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat. 8:30 p.m.; Sun. 3 p.m.; through April 10. (855) 585-5185, roguemachinetheatre.com. Running time: one hour and 30 minutes with no intermission.