

## POCATELLO

### STAGEsceneLA WOW!

Small lives matter in Pocatello, just as they do in all of Samuel D. Hunter's "Idaho plays," the latest of which now gets an impressive West Coast Premiere by the theater company that gave L.A. audiences Hunter's equally memorable *A Bright New Boise* and *A Permanent Image*.

Hunter plunges you smack dab in the middle of the evening shift at the Italian chain restaurant managed by 30something Eddie (Matthew Elkins), whose older brother Nick (Rob Nagle) has arrived in town for a rare visit, accompanied for dinner tonight by his wife Kelly (Rebecca Larsen) and Nick and Eddie's still-in-Pocatello mom Doris (Anne Gee Bird).



Across the room at another table sit the family of waiter Troy (Justin Okin)—his wife Tammy (Tracie Lockwood), their teenage daughter Becky (Eden Brolin), and Troy's dad Cole (Mark L. Taylor), the latter out for an evening away from the assisted living facility he now calls home.

With two sets of dueling conversations taking place simultaneously, it may take you a while to figure out just who is who but it soon becomes clear that Nick and Tammy once dated, that Troy and Tammy aren't doing all that well, that their daughter is going through a rebellious phase, that Doris is a bit of a crabapple, and perhaps most importantly, that Nick wants to get out of Pocatello and back to St. Paul asap.



Completing Hunter's dramatis personae are Troy's fellow servers, 20somethings Max (Trevor Peterson) and Isabelle (Melissa Paladino at the performance reviewed), none of the three yet aware that corporate has told Eddie to close his failing franchise at the end of next week.

Small these lives may seem compared to the "more important" one we Angelinos may secretly (or not so secretly) believe are part and parcel of big-city Southern California life, but clearly they are not without their conflicts, and it is playwright Hunter's gift to make us see in them the humanity we all share, even as we recognize the particular challenges they confront in a dying Red State town. (Some of Hunter's characters feel trapped, others have escaped to more progressive climes, and one of them remains single and alone because he can't imagine finding another gay man to date, let alone partner with, in Pocatello.)

At the same time, many of the problems they face—painful adolescences, marriages in

crisis, strained family relationships, and recovery from addiction—are no different from those experienced in Santa Monica, or Burbank, or Hollywood, where Rogue Machine Theatre has set up shop in their new digs upstairs at The Met.

Samuel D. Hunter ranks high on my list of favorite contemporary playwrights, a modern cross between Arthur Miller and William Inge, and his latest play could not be in more expert hands.



Under John Perrin Flynn's incisive

direction, a superb Elkins anchors Pocatello with a performance combining warmth, loneliness, and obstinate hope. Nagle's desperate-to-split Nick, Peterson's sexy, shaggy bad boy Max, and Paladino's hard-edged but gentle-hearted Isabelle are all three terrific. Troy and Tammy's marriage in crisis gives Okin and Lockwood ample opportunities to shine, and Larsen is lovely in her brief scenes as Kelly. Brolin captures the angry, rebellious teen years to perfection just as Taylor does the challenges of Alzheimer's. As for Bird, the L.A. theater treasure is once again brilliant as a woman whose cranky exterior may just hide a mother's caring heart.



Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's pitch-perfect Olive Garden-esque restaurant set, Bethany Tucker's just-right props, and Elizabeth A. Cox's spot-on costumes are all three beautifully lit by Ric Zimmerman, with sound designer Christopher Moscatiello's blend of deliberately generic Italian-American pop and assorted sound effects completing a grade-A production design.

Pocatello is produced by Flynn and Elina de Santos. Tracy Silver and Frank Weidner are assistant directors.

Ramón Valdez is stage manager, Amanda Mauer is production manager, and David A. Mauer is technical director. Hazel Kang is assistant scenic designer.

Casting is by Victoria Hoffman. Understudies Shad Willingham and Michaela Slezak cover the roles of Nick and Becky. Jen Pollono alternates in the role of Isabelle.

Pocatello lives may seem small compared to ours, but they are given substance and significance in the latest from Samuel D. Hunter and Rogue Machine, a match made in Idaho-meets-Hollywood heaven.

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—Steven Stanley  
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Photos: John Perrin Flynn