



Actors Grace Kelly, of Springfield, and Joe Wilcox, of Westfield, play two Hobby Lobby TV pitchmen in the HCC Theater Department's fall production of "A Bright New Boise" by Samuel D. Hunter. (PHOTO COURTESY HCC)

#### HOLYOKE

## HCC fall theater production explores break room culture

In 2016, Holyoke Community College theater professor Tim Cochran directed "The Whale" for HCC's spring production. That show won an ensemble award at the New England Region Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival.

Since then, the play, about a morbidly obese man trying to reconcile with his estranged daughter, was adapted into a feature film that earned three Academy Awards in 2023, including one for lead actor Brendan Fraser.

Cochran hasn't yet seen the movie, but the Oscar buzz inspired him to return to the work of the playwright, Samuel D. Hunter.

"It reminded me how much I liked working on 'The Whale,'" he said. "Samuel D. Hunter writes plays that are really intimate and really put the acting front and center. You really feel like you're sneaking a peak at somebody's life unfolding before you."

The play that Cochran picked for the HCC Theater Department's fall 2023 production is Hunter's "A Bright New Boise," which, while lesser known now, debuted first and won an Obie Award in 2011.

The HCC show runs today through Saturday with performances at 7:30 p.m. and a 2 p.m. matinee on Saturday. Friday's show will be ASL interpreted. All performances will be held in the Leslie Phillips Theater on the second floor of the college's Fine & Performing Arts building.

Like "The Whale" — and Hunter's other plays — "A Bright New Boise" is set in Idaho, the playwright's home state. But Cochran, citing Hunter himself, says the

#### IF YOU GO

**Event:** "A Bright New Boise"

**When:** Thu.-Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.

**Where:** Leslie Phillips Theater, Holyoke Community College

**Tickets:** \$5 (HCC students, staff, and faculty); \$10 (general admission); \$8 (seniors). Available one hour before each show at the Leslie Phillips Box Office, or call 413-552-2528 to reserve.

location is not necessarily significant to the play's themes and insights.

"He's not really saying anything about Idaho as much as saying something about the world that he knows," said Cochran. "I think Samuel D. Hunter seems to be saying that conversations people are having in Idaho are the same as conversations we're having everywhere in America. So it really doesn't matter where it's set. There's a universality to it."

What is significant, though, is the location of individual scenes. Aside from a few set in a parking lot near an interstate highway, the rest of the "action," such as it is, takes place in the break room of a Hobby Lobby retail store. That, by its very nature, invites commentary about religion, consumerism, and capitalism.

"I had a lot of retail jobs growing up," said Cochran. "I mean a lot, like 23 by the time I was 23. There's a whole culture that goes on in any break room, and the cultures in every break room I've ever been part of in retail are so different."

Inside the Hobby Lobby break room of Hunter's "A Bright New Boise," we meet new employee Will (played by student-actor Matthew Haughton of Springfield), a deeply religious man trying to reconnect with the son he gave up for adoption; Pauline (Caterina Guerin of Belchertown), the foul-mouthed store manager; Ama (Nyasia Aguirre of Springfield), a new employee who can't hold a job; Alex (Tora Mateo of Holyoke), an angry, dispirited teenager; and Leroy (Zoë Fydenkevez of Chicopee), a college art student who wears provocative — and often obscene — shirts.

As the characters move in and out of the break room, a video monitor behind them continuously plays "Hobby Lobby TV," a closed circuit broadcast featuring two corporate pitchmen (Grace Kelly of Springfield and Joe Wilcox of Westfield) that is intermittently interrupted by footage from a medical operating room.

"It's really a play about people in confrontation with others who are not like them," said Cochran. "How do we negotiate extreme points of view in everyday life?"

Even though the play debuted in 2011, Cochran says it makes even more sense today, given the political climate and how divided American society has become.

"It's serio-comic, or what some people call a dramedy," said Cochran. "It's funny, but it's also really powerful and heavy at times. If people like 'The Whale,' if they liked the movie, this is going to be a great play to see."