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HCC fall theater explores break room culture

HOLYOKE – 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,’” Cochran 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 Nov. 16-18 with performances at 7:30 p.m. and a 2 p.m. matinee on Sat., Nov. 18. The Friday, Nov. 17, show will be ASL-interpreted. All performances will be held in the Leslie Phillips Theater on the second floor of HCC’s Fine & Performing Arts building. Tickets will be \$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. Due to language and situa-



Student-actors Tora Mateo of Holyoke, left, and Matthew Haughton of Springfield review cash register receipts in the Hobby Lobby break room in a rehearsal scene from the HCC Theater Department’s fall 2023 production of “A Bright New Boise” by Samuel D. Hunter.

Submitted photo

tions, this play is not recommended for viewers under the age of 13.

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

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.

“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 seriocomic, 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.”