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MOVIE REVIEW

Having a gay old time

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With an unassuming casualness that is doubtless more apparent than real, first-time filmmaker Thomas Bezucha sustains an air of low-key, warm-hearted whimsy throughout "Big Eden," an engaging and generous-spirited romantic comedy that playfully upends movie clichés about lovelorn introverts and intolerant small-towners.

It's harder than it looks to keep a soufflé? this light and sweet from collapsing into a treacly puddle. But Bezucha, who smoothly directed from his own witty screenplay, never lets the effort show, and only occasionally allows the pace to flag.

Ayre Gross strikes the right balance of wistful longing and whiny neurosis in his amusing portrayal of Henry Hart, a Manhattan-based artist on the verge of a critical and commercial breakthrough. On the eve of a major gallery exhibition, Henry flies back to Big Eden, his rustic hometown in northwestern Montana, to care for Sam (George Coe), the ailing grandfather who raised him.

Henry is gay, a fact he dearly -- if not guiltily -- wishes to hide from Sam. The thing is, Sam almost certainly isn't as oblivious as Henry hopes. And just about everyone else in town accepts the not-entirely-surprising news with a nonchalance that is rendered as a sly running gag.

At first, Widow Thayer (Nan Martin), Big Eden's resident busybody, tries to interest Henry in some unattached local women at a gathering in her home. When she realizes the pointlessness of her enterprise, she scarcely pauses for breath before organizing another mixer, to attach Henry to some interested local man.

Even so, despite the widow's best efforts, Henry only has eyes for Dean (Tim DeKay), his best friend from high school, who has long been the object of his unrequited love. Henry's hopes are raised when he learns the newly divorced Dean is available and, perhaps, responsive. But even as he dares to dream that Dean's flirtations will lead to something, Henry remains almost willfully blind to the timid, tentative romantic overtures of another former classmate.

Pike Dexter (Eric Schweig), a tall and taciturn Native American, operates a general store where locals can enjoy espresso and cappuccino, and the local good ol' boys congregate to gossip all day long. The boys have much to talk about when Pike begins to



Ayre Gross and Tim DeKay star in the romance "Big Eden"

thumb through "The Joy of Cooking" in search of recipes for gourmet dishes he can prepare for the convalescing Sam -- and, of course, for Sam's grandson.

But don't be too quick to assume that Pike's customers disapprove of this cuisine-based courtship. In the world according to "Big Eden," a place where never is heard a homophobic word, a good ol' boy might be just as eager as a widowed busybody to play matchmaker for a lonely fellow in search of Mr. Right.

It's easy to dismiss "Big Eden," a best-case scenario of unconditional love and acceptance, as gay-skewing fantasy fulfillment. But, then again, you could similarly dismiss most mainstream romantic comedies as equally unreal, straight-skewing fluff.

Bezucha and his fine cast -- including Louise Fletcher as a matronly schoolteacher, Veanne Cox as a very pregnant art-gallery owner and O'Neal Compton as the best-intentioned of the good ol' boys -- do a first-rate job of defusing your cynicism, and make you want to believe that things everywhere could be (because they should be) more or less like they are in this little corner of Montana.

The place is not exactly unfamiliar territory: With its tangy flavor of pixilated drollery and its bemused embrace of eccentricity, "Big Eden" often recalls Bill Forsythe's "Local Hero" and TV's "Northern Exposure." But that is an observation, not a criticism. Whether you're gay, straight, flexible or undecided, "Big Eden" is the best date movie around right now.