

'BIG EDEN' A GARDEN OF COMIC DELIGHTS

By JONATHAN FOREMAN

Rating: ☆☆☆

Charming romantic comedy about a New York artist who finds love in Montana. Running time: 118 minutes. Rated PG-13 (language, adult situations). At the Quad Cinema, West 13th Street.

ONE of the year's best date movies, "Big Eden" has won awards at several festivals.

But it's more than a crowd-pleaser shot at spectacular Rocky mountain locations - it's almost revolutionary.

First time filmmaker Thomas Bezucha has made a gay romantic comedy that's genuinely funny and moving, without a single cloying moment.

And unlike all those awful "gaysploitation" flicks, it doesn't expect an audience to put up with bad writing or performances in return for dealing with queer themes.

Even more amazing, it depicts a gay romance without referring to gay-bashing or AIDS deaths.

And it not only imagines a world of gay people living outside the big coastal cities in a rural western setting, it doesn't assume their neighbors are bigots and homophobes.

Henry (Arye Gross) is a successful but lonely Manhattan artist who has to return to his small hometown of Big Eden, Mon., to look after Sam (George Coe), the ailing grandfather who raised him.

Once there, he is disturbed to find that Dean (Tim Dekay), his best friend from high school, is also back in town, divorced, with two kids.

Henry is gay; Dean is not, and it was Henry's desperate, unrequited passion for Dean that drove him to flee to New York 20 years before.

Meanwhile, another former schoolmate, Pike (Eric Schweig), a quiet, tall Native American who works in the town general store, has developed a quiet crush on Harry that he expresses by secretly making gourmet meals for him and his grandfather.



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

Henry is too uptight to admit to the dying Sam that he's gay, and too self-involved to see that Pike has fallen for him.

But Sam and almost everyone else in town - including the old cowboys who hang around the store - are rooting for Henry and Pike to get together.

The film has been criticized for its unrealistically sunny depiction of the way Big Eden embraces its gay citizens, and this is unfair - romantic comedies are supposed to take place in an improved fantasy world.