

'BIG EDEN': A little ROMANCE and a lot of CHARM

By Arthur Salm
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The title should be something of a giveaway: Writer and director Thomas Bezucha has fashioned a gentle, affecting fantasy that takes place in a universe very much like our own. A sad undertone -- at first only dimly perceived, but growing slowly into a gnawing thrum -- lies in the realization that no such place, as yet, exists.

New York artist Henry Hart (Arye Gross) bails on the opening of an exhibition of his work to return to his boyhood home of Big Eden, Mont., where his grandfather (George Coe) has taken ill. Almost 20 years ago, Henry traded Big Sky for Big Apple after his heart was broken by Dean (Tim DeKay); now, upon arriving, he learns from the nurturing elementary school teacher, Grace (Louise Fletcher), that Dean, newly divorced and with two kids, is back in town.

While Henry is busy being unnerved by his old flame (who doesn't help matters by affecting obliviousness), Pike (Eric Schweig), the shy American Indian owner of the general store, is unhinged by the presence of Henry (who, in turn, is genuinely oblivious). Schweig's Pike is something to see; when Henry is around we sense a lifetime of frustration and unrequited passion in almost imperceptible tics in Pike's face, in suddenly awkward lurches (from a big man who glides like a big cat), in the way he finds he has no place to put his hands.

The Widow Thayer (Nan Martin), something of a past master at obliviousness herself, arranges a social gathering for Henry, at which he has the opportunity to meet eligible young ladies. That doesn't go too well, to the surprise of no one except the Widow, as people call her -- and when she catches on, she promptly arranges another gathering at which Henry has the opportunity to meet some eligible young men.

Meantime, Henry has arranged for the Widow to prepare meals for him and his grandfather (Henry doesn't cook) and for Pike to deliver them, which he does -- deeply embarrassed at every encounter, actually seeming to back away while standing still. Still, he has sublimated his desire by channeling his energies into becoming an outstanding chef, secretly replacing the Widow's artery-choking grub with the haute cuisine more to Henry's SoHo taste.

"I just want things to be nice for him," Pike explains to the good ol' boys who sit around his store -- who, in their turn, may be conspiring to bring Henry and Pike together.



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

At which point, you have to sit back, crunch on some of the ice left in your cup and assess things: In a small Montana town, all the citizens -- all of them -- not only welcome a gay man from New York City, and implore him to stay, but scratch their heads over how to fix him up with their obviously (though maybe not to him) gay Indian friend. And there's actually a character called "the Widow"? Oh, come now.

So there's your choice. Take "Big Eden" as a straight (you should pardon the expression) tale, and, fine performances and beautiful scenery notwithstanding, it becomes increasingly preposterous. But watch it as a fable and it casts a kind of mild, dreamy spell; it's a love story in a land of enchantment, all the more affecting because everything looks like this place and this time.

Of course, there is no "Big Eden" . . . but there could be. And as Hemingway so neatly summed it up in the last line of "The Sun Also Rises" -- isn't it pretty to think so?