

# ENTERTAINMENT

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## This Costco offers more than what's in store

West Coast premiere of 'Clarkston' explores two lost souls who are navigating life's turns.

**CHARLES McNULTY**  
THEATER CRITIC

The work of Samuel D. Hunter might feel like a throwback, but his principal dramatic subject is a timeless one — human relationships.

His plays track the myriad ways people reconfigure one another, at work, at home and in the local community. The malleability of identity is depicted in provincial settings in the American West, where there often isn't a full menu of lifestyle possibilities and the passageway between religious conformity and stigmatized outcast status can be exceedingly narrow.



**ECHO THEATER'S** "Clarkston," with Sean Luc Rogers, left, and Michael Sturgis, navigates themes of identity and relationships in a small town in Washington.

Hunter is clearly interested in more than the catalytic effect of divergent psychologies. In plays such as "The Whale," "Pocatello" and "A Permanent Image," he closely examines the sociological landscape, the way economics and culture constrict and magnify, imprison and potentially liberate this thing we call the self.

"Clarkston," now having its West Coast premiere in an Echo Theater Company production directed by Chris Fields at Atwater Village Theatre, is about two co-workers at Costco whose wounds speak to each other more profoundly than their stark superficial differences. Chris (newcomer Sean Luc Rogers, making a memorable first impression) has been working at the Clarkston, Wash., store for a while. He grew up just over the border in Lewiston, Idaho. (Hunter wrote "Clarkston" [See 'Clarkston,' E3])

COOPER BATES





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**"CLARKSTON"** with Michael Sturgis, left, Tasha Ames and Sean Luc Rogers, from Echo Theater Company.

## An unlikely place to find tenderness

['Clarkston,' from EI] to be part of a double bill with "Lewiston," another compact drama, though they're standalone plays and don't need to be seen together.)

Chris is more or less at home in that he knows the land and its history, even if he can't figure out his place in either. Jake (Michael Sturgis), a recent hire who is still learning the ropes, is a fish out of water. A graduate of Bennington College, who majored in postcolonial gender studies, Jake is openly gay and from Connecticut. How did this hardcore East Coast liberal arts major end up in this backwater working at a Costco? The question baffles Chris, who went to community college and is dreaming about applying to a prestigious graduate writing program at the University of Iowa.

Jake isn't shy about sharing his story. He drove across the country after his boyfriend dumped him. Jake has a progressive neurological disease that causes involuntary movements. His prognosis is grim. He doesn't think he'll be alive in eight years. His boyfriend ended their relationship because he didn't see a future together. Jake ended up in Clarkston by accident, after his uncontrolled body movements forced him off the road.

Staying in a hotel right across the street from Costco, he thought why not apply for a job and stick around for a bit. A distant descendant of William Clark of Lewis and Clark, Jake was intrigued to go out West and follow their trail to the Pa-

cific. Settling in the Lewiston-Clarkston area, thus, feels to him like fate.

"It's a terrible time to be alive," he says to Chris, in a moment of aborted sexual intimacy between them. "There's just nothing left to discover."

That may be true of uncharted frontier, but it doesn't hold for other people. Jake and Chris are for each other undiscovered countries. Who knew, for instance, that Chris was gay? He's selectively out, which is itself pretty bold in a town that isn't a bastion of LGBTQ+ tolerance. But this is only one facet of his identity. He's also a writer with a penchant for scary stories and the son of a woman grappling with a meth addiction.

Trisha (Tasha Ames), Chris' mother, is the play's third character. Her recovery struggle is real, but her lack of emotional sobriety alone tells you all you need to know about Chris' traumatic upbringing. He became a writer, no doubt in part, out of this early suffering. And his acute sensitivity to Jake, who's beset with an overwhelming health problem, is also a legacy of his past.

Caretaking is familiar to Chris. He covers for Jake's trouble lifting heavy objects and general unsteadiness. As privileged as he is self-deprecating, not to say self-sabotaging, Jake accepts the kindness with a casual bemusement. He can't quite believe that a guy like Chris is putting up with all the trouble he's causing at work. But on another level, he knows that he's bringing a new horizon to the life of a

### 'Clarkston'

**Where:** Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Ave., L.A.

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday, Monday, 4 p.m. Sunday. Ends Oct. 21.

**Tickets:** \$38; pay-what-you-want Mondays

**Contact:** (747) 350-8066 or [echotheatercompany.com](http://echotheatercompany.com)

**Running time:** 1 hour, 40 minutes

co-worker who has never seen the ocean even though it's only a few hundred miles away.

Although not technically a two-hander, "Clarkston" has some of the contrivances inherent in that form. Cordoned-off dialogue has to do a lot of narrative heavy-lifting. Sometimes Hunter's impeccable realism buckles under the weight. But the context of the characters' interaction — a big-box store world of limited economic mobility and unlimited snacks — is eloquent.

Field's unfussy production keeps the focus tightly on the actors. There's only one distracting misstep — the intrusion of different versions of the song "4 + 20" between scene changes. The lyrics may resonate, but they compete with a play that needs more breathing room.

Rogers allows Chris to be quietly himself. Although it's the actor's professional stage debut, there's a matura-

city to the performance. He gives his character definition while allowing him to withhold what he's not yet ready to declare.

Sturgis, so adept at playing flamboyant eccentrics (he was marvelous as an office wild card in the Echo production of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' "Gloria"), has the showier comic performance. There's a slight stridency to the character that would benefit from a touch more stillness. It sometimes feels as if Sturgis' Jake doesn't give Chris the chance to experience what's beneath the hectic, defensive, motormouth veneer. Even his suicidal thoughts are boisterous.

His portrayal, however, does honor the protective intuition that allows Jake to call out the selfish demands Chris' mother is placing on her son. (Ames is especially powerful when revealing the rage beneath Trisha's rehabilitation.) If Jake doesn't always see that he's placing a similar strain on Chris, it may be because he's still to an extent in denial about the severity of his illness. And perhaps because he knows that there will be plenty of time later for stoicism and solitude.

To have a lasting effect on another person doesn't necessarily mean to attach oneself permanently. "Clarkston" hints that some of our most instructive relationships may be the most transitory. That's one of the beautiful discoveries in Hunter's small, absorbing and ultimately uplifting play — a work that isn't half as old-fashioned as it might seem.