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A Loving Community Embraces Its Sons in Expansive 'Big Eden'

Movie Review

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Thomas Bezucha's irresistible "Big Eden," the closing night attraction of Outfest 2000, at last returns for a regular run and seems even more touching the second time around.

Writer-director Bezucha's debut feature is an accomplished heart-tugger, a serious romantic comedy that tackles two dilemmas with honesty and compassion: that of the gay man with an unrequited love for a straight man, and a gay man too shy and inarticulate to declare his love for another gay man. These individuals experience a longing for love that transcends sexual orientation, and "Big Eden" extends a warm embrace to straights and gays alike. While a hit on the gay festival circuit, "Big Eden" has crossed over to such events as the 2001 Cleveland International Film Festival, where it won the audience award.

Arye Gross stars as Henry, a successful New York painter who returns to his small Montana hometown to care for his ailing grandfather Sam (George Coe). Determined to care for Sam through his recuperation, Henry is confronted unexpectedly with the return of Dean (Tim DeKay), the love of his life, who is recovering from a divorce. When Henry realized that he had fallen in love with Dean while they were in high school, he coped with his feelings by fleeing to New York.

Henry now has examples of his art hanging in the Whitney, but he never did find Mr. Right. Now in his mid-30s, Henry discovers to his chagrin that, if anything, his undeclared love for Dean has only grown deeper. The irony is that Henry so swiftly becomes preoccupied with his infatuation with Dean that he is completely oblivious to the fact that Pike (Eric Schweig), the handsome but profoundly shy and tongue-tied proprietor of the local general store, is falling hard for him.

Increasingly self-absorbed, Henry cannot fully comprehend how surrounded he is by loving people concerned with his happiness. Such a stigma is attached to homosexual feelings in mainstream American society that not only do Henry and Pike feel uncomfortable about expressing their emotions, but those in the community are inhibited in telling Henry and Pike they know they're gay and that that's all right.



Arye Gross right, portrays a New York artist who returns to his Montana hometown and tangled feelings for Tim DeKay in "Big Eden."

In addition to Louise Fletcher's Grace, the local schoolteacher and the individual in Big Eden who knows Henry best, there are any number of others concerned about him, including a longtime widow (Nan Martin, in a stellar comic performance), a garrulous busybody neighbor whose awful meals for Henry and Sam are secretly substituted with tasty dishes prepared by Pike, who is serving as the widow's delivery man.

Bezucha writes terrific parts for his actors and then guides them to equally terrific performances. Gross, DeKay and Schweig all excel in carefully shaded, emotionally complex roles.

In his well-crafted film, Bezucha imagines with humor and affection a community so perceptive, caring and enlightened that it's capable of quietly nudging everyone in the right direction. Bezucha also suggests that a man like Henry, while not conventionally handsome, can nonetheless be attractive to others, and that a straight man can love a gay man while not being sexually drawn to him. These notions are not so self-evident as they might seem, even in gay-themed films. With its wonderful ensemble cast, "Big Eden" is a fine example of the cinema of possibilities.

• *MPAA rating: PG-13, for some mature thematic material. Times guidelines: adult themes but treated in a way that is acceptable for mature adolescents.*

'Big Eden'

Arye Gross.....Henry Hart
Eric Schweig.....Pike Dexter
Tim DeKay.....Dean Stewart
Louise Fletcher.....Grace Cornwell

A Jour de Fête and Chaiken Films presentation.

Writer-director Thomas Bezucha. Producer Jennifer Chaiken. Co-Producer John D. Vaughan. Cinematographer Rob Sweeney. Editor Andrew London. Music Joseph Conlan. Costumes Sam Hamilton and Rene Holguin. Production designer Stephanie Carroll. Art director Joe Warson. Running time: 1 hour, 58 minutes.

Exclusively at the Sunset 5, 8000 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, (323) 848-3500; the Playhouse 7, 673 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, (626) 844-6500; and the University, Campus Drive opposite UC Irvine, (949) 854-8811.