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MOVIE REVIEW

'BIG EDEN'

By Joe Williams

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(PG-13; 1:58)

Imagine a small town in Montana where the cowboy-hatted whittlers who sit around the cracker barrel at the general store are so tolerant of alternative lifestyles that they play matchmaker to a visiting gay painter from New York City. No, a place like "Big Eden" doesn't really exist, but in the film of the same name, this humane fantasy is so compellingly realized that we immerse ourselves in it.

Henry (Arye Gross) is a successful abstract expressionist from Manhattan. When he learns that the grandfather who raised him (George Coe) has had a stroke in his Montana hometown, Henry walks away from a big exhibit and hurries back to Big Sky country.

Soon after he arrives to tend to his grandfather, Henry learns of another recent returnee: Dean (Tim DeKay), the heterosexual man whom Henry has adored since high school. Dean and his children are recovering from a divorce, and although he is thrilled to see his old chum Henry, he hides from the underlying implications of their friendship.

At the same time, Henry is ignorant of the attentions of Pike (Eric Schweig), a shy American Indian who runs the general store. To be close to Henry, Pike teaches himself to cook and delivers the food to the ailing grandfather. But Henry thinks the fine cuisine is from a busybody neighbor (Nan Martin), and eventually the locals have to intercede to nudge both Pike and Henry toward the truths they are denying.

The gently comic "Big Eden" plays like a big-screen "Northern Exposure," with a mopey gay painter at the center of the story. But the likable Gross never lapses far enough into self-pity to repel us, and he is surrounded by an excellent supporting cast. Coe is especially strong as the grandfather. (In one scene, he practically begs Henry to come clean about his sexual identity. "Did I teach you shame?" he asks.) Martin as the meddling neighbor, Louise Fletcher as a caretaking teacher and Veanne Cox as Henry's long-suffering agent are also very good. Most compelling, if maddeningly meek, is Schweig as the gentle giant Pike. But the movie is stolen by "Big Eden" itself, the kind of make-believe mountain idyll where the close-knit community knows and accepts us better than we do ourselves.



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