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## THE MOVIE PAGE

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**BIG EDEN:** Romance. Starring Arye Gross, Eric Schweig. Directed and written by Thomas Bezucha. (Not rated. 117 minutes. At the Embarcadero.)

The term "gay cinema" usually conjures ripped abs on dewy young men. But what about gay guys with receding hairlines and little patience for gym workouts or body waxing? For them, and for everybody else, there's "Big Eden."

A big, warm embrace of a picture, "Big Eden" is as much about family and community as it is about romance. Winner of the Audience Award at last year's San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, the movie centers on Henry (Arye Gross from TV's "Ellen"), a successful New York artist who returns to Big Eden, Mont., after his beloved grandfather suffers a stroke.

Once home, he encounters two romantic prospects -- the high school buddy with whom he's still obsessed (Tim DeKay) and the town's taciturn general-store owner (Eric Schweig, "Last of the Mohicans").

Writer-director Thomas Bezucha creates a real sense of place -- the sweeping mountain vistas, the pine-paneled living rooms -- and of a tight-knit community. In this little town, it's a given that the storekeeper, Pike, would help deliver meals to Henry's grandfather or that everybody would pitch in to build Henry a studio.

Much of the romantic stuff is predictable, but Bezucha throws in some twists. The high school best friend, for example, is a real person instead of just a straight-guy villain toying with Henry's heart. Now a divorced father of two boys, he truly loves Henry but has trouble with the gay part. DeKay gets across his character's anguish at Henry's escalating demands.

Gross fully inhabits the emotionally stunted Henry, and he's heartbreaking in a scene in which Henry cannot come out to his grandfather (George Coe, in a fine performance), even though the old guy is practically begging him to.

The movie belongs to Schweig, though. An actor of enormous grace, he takes a character teetering on caricature -- the stoic American Indian -- and makes him original. Schweig puts his physicality to good use, stammering and sometimes appearing to swoon as unexpected feelings overwhelm Pike in Henry's presence. He's especially charming in a scene in which Henry invites Pike to dinner and the big man rushes to change into a nicer shirt -- a red cowboy number -- for his date.



Eric Schweig (left) and Arye Gross star in the romance "Big Eden"

Seeing middle-aged, regular fellas get so worked up over each other is a treat, and the good intentions of the story override the movie's overdose of folksiness. For instance, in Big Eden, Adam and Steve are just as welcome as Adam and Eve. It's unlikely that the whole cowboy town would really applaud all the queer goings-on, but it's a lovely sentiment in a lovely movie.

-- Carla Meyer