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THEATER AND DANCE

Antaeus's 'Picnic' Is The Hottest Show Of The Summer (Literally)

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[Ryan David McRee](#) | July 30, 2015 | 5:37 p.m. PDT
Theater and Dance Editor

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When theatergoing veterans think of “immersive theatre,” we often think of something highly experimental—something along the lines of the work of Peter Brook, something highly site-specific or avant-garde. However, Antaeus’s latest production of “Picnic,” by William Inge, shows that theatre can still be a highly immersive in a more traditional, proscenium-style arrangement. This manifestation of the canonized, Pulitzer Prize-winning play under the direction of Cameron Watson is an absolute must-see this summer.

The play centers around the Owens family and their friends and neighbors as they prepare for a Labor Day picnic, completely unaware that the dramatic explosion they’ve been waiting for all their lives is waiting just around the corner. When the mysterious, rugged Hal () comes into town, Flo Owens, the mother of the beautiful and much sought-after Madge and the artistic, misunderstood Millie, sees his arrival as a threat to all of the plans she has set up for her children, including Madge’s engagement to Alan Seymour, Hal’s former college roommate. Instant sensual chemistry between Madge and Hal spark controversy and contempt in a small town unaccustomed to scandal.

From the moment one walks into the intimate theatre one can tell that this “Picnic” is fully realized. Robert Selander’s scenic design is extraordinarily elaborate, transforming the theatre floor into the grass and soil of Kansas suburbia. Entering the space is surreal as the temperature, air quality and smell are marvelously reminiscent of the setting, truly engrossing the spectator in the world of the play. The houses are rustic and worn, much like the older women that provided the question around which Inge wrote “Picnic.” How do they live? What pitfalls of love and loss had these women endured in their youth, and how did they carry on without them? Dynamic angles create a three-dimensional arena for the action to unfold. Gorgeous lighting design by Jared A. Sayeg creates an elegant night-day cycle as we are taken through 24 hours in the lives of our characters as well as providing poetic highlights for particularly poignant moments.

But the pride and joy of Antaeus’s work is its policy of partner-casting their shows, which for “Picnic” works delightfully well. Shannon Holt and Gigi Bermingham have remarkably different but equally potent interpretations of Rosemary Sidney, an aging



"Deviled Eggs" cast in "Picnic" at Antaeus. Photo by Geoffrey Wade.

schoolteacher grasping at one last shot at romance before entering the twilight years of her life. Because of extenuating circumstances I was unfortunately unable to see John DeMita, Associate Professor of Theatre Practice at USC, as Howard Bevans, but this allowed me the thrill of seeing Josh Clark interact with both of the Rosemarys. Clark is a highlight of the acting ensemble all on his own, but seeing him meld his interpretation of Howard to match each Rosemary with the most gentle of improvisations and changes in energy exchange was an eye-opening way to watch a veteran actor work. Sarah Halford and Jordan Monaghan, who play Madge in opposite casts, also have very unique and contrasting “types,” giving Madge’s character a fullness of potential and emphasizing an important theme in the text; “beauty,” in Inge’s argument, is not an umbrella term. There are numerous ways to be beautiful, as especially suggested by an outstanding performance of Millie by Jackie Preciado.



"Stuffed Peppers" cast in "Picnic" at Antaeus. Photo by Karianne Flaathen.

While both casts are excellent, the “Deviled Eggs” cast has a rare chemistry, particularly in the Madge-Millie-Hal dynamic. Jason Dechert as Hal gracefully demonstrates the many levels and nuances of the character, from his addictive charm to his crippling self-doubt. The cast also features Neon Tommy’s very own Maureen Lee Lenker as Christine Schoenwalder, a young schoolteacher who tags along with some of the older ladies.

Incredible, immersive production value combined with inspired direction of an immensely talented cast make this “Picnic” a bold and prolific chapter in Antaeus’s history. Fortunately, an extension of performances through the end of August means there are plenty of shows left to see, and attending may be one of the more worthwhile experiences of the summer. Both long-time Inge fans and newcomers to his body of work will be touched, and this production is of a rare breed that serves as

a truly ample introduction to one of America’s greatest playwrights.

"Picnic" runs through Aug. 30th at the Antaeus Theatre Company (5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, Los Angeles). Tickets are \$30-34. For more information, please visit antaeus.org.

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