

1 week ago

review - PICNIC



Jason Dechert, Rhonda Aldrich, Sarah Halford, Matthew Gallenstein
photo by Geoffrey Wade

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CRITIC'S PICK**Picnic**

by William Inge

directed by Cameron Watson

Antaeus Theatre Company

through August 16

William Inge's Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Picnic* depicting a small Kansas town in 1952, its strict code of morality and the inner longings of its people to break away, is perhaps his finest. Now in a stunning production at Antaeus directed ever so lovingly by Cameron Watson and boasting a superlative ensemble - actually three alternating casts: "Deviled Eggs", "Stuffed Peppers" and "Pork Chops", *Picnic* still holds up some 60 years later, proving the omnipotence of human fragility. My visit was with the "Deviled Eggs" cast.

The music, the clothes, the hairstyles, and the cars are distinctly 50s, but goals, motivations and emotions remain the same. For those unfamiliar with the play or the uber popular 1955 film *Picnic* starring William Holden and Kim Novak, let's recap the plot briefly.



Jason Dechert, Matthew Gallenstein
photo by Geoffrey Wade

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When drifter Hal (Jason Dechert) arrives in town, he creates quite a stir, first with Helen Potts (Janellen Steinger) who offers him breakfast in exchange for work around her property. Her mother is an invalid and a man's presence has been sorely missing. She encourages him to take off his shirt in the yard, creating an uproar with neighbors Flo Owens (Rhonda Aldrich), her daughters Millie (Jackie Preciado) and Madge (Sarah Halford) and boarder old-maid school teacher Rosemary Sydney (Shannon Holt). Flo and Rosemary berate his indecency as they just stare, gloat and practically eat him alive. Millie, the bright tomboy, is curious but older sister Madge is instantly attracted. Madge is quite the looker herself, gaining attention from every man in town, including Rosemary's older boyfriend Howard Bevans (Josh Clark) and Bomber (Jake Borelli), the precocious teenage paper boy. Flo encourages Madge's relationship with beau Alan Seymour (Matthew Gallenstein), because of his economic stability: his family owns a prosperous business. Madge likes him but finds him limited. It just so happens that Alan and Hal were college fraternity brothers and pals. Alan has always managed to pick up the pieces for Hal when Hal has gotten into trouble. When Helen asks Hal to take Millie to the annual Labor Day picnic that evening, Flo is furious and her fears become justified, as, in the backyard, Howard's flask passes first to Rosemary, then to Hal and finally to Millie making her sick to her stomach and causing calamity, even before anyone has left for the park.



Shannon Holt, Josh Clark

photo by Geoffrey Wade

[\[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-8bj20a6tKX4/VY8iBvznmol/AAAAAAAAAWTI/PbK2nYJFAY/s1600/Picnic_Deviled%2BEggs_7.jpg\]](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-8bj20a6tKX4/VY8iBvznmol/AAAAAAAAAWTI/PbK2nYJFAY/s1600/Picnic_Deviled%2BEggs_7.jpg)

It is the erotic dance in Act II between Hal and Madge that starts a frenzy. First and foremost, it is a passionate, alluring conjoining of two people - who are clearly meant for one another, with just the right chemistry. In each others arms, they click, creating unforeseen romantic magic, which obviously angers Alan to no end. What happens next is totally unexpected. Rosemary takes a swig of Howard's booze and refusing to be thought of as "over the hill" breaks up the dance between Madge and Hal, in order to have her way with him. She not only does a vulgar dance turn, baring all the men's legs, but tells Hal off, berating him for his improper, lurid behavior - making a complete fool of herself. This is only the beginning. As Millie recovers, the others go on to the park, including the inebriated Rosemary and Howard, fawning all over each other. Instead of going with Alan, Madge goes off with Hal, avoiding the picnic altogether.

In the aftermath of a night of unbridled passion, Hal and Madge are deeply in love, but their plans for the future are thwarted not only by Flo, but also by Alan. Hal took his car without permission, so Alan calls the police. Hal has a record, so must hop the next freight and get quickly out of town. Madge decides to take a bus and go to him. After their night of carousing, Rosemary pleads with Howard to marry her. It's her last chance for happiness.



Shannon Holt, Josh Clark, Sarah Halford, Jason Dechert, Jackie Preciado

photo by Geoffrey Wade

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Inge has cautiously and brilliantly written the play to show the parallels between newfound love and a rather casual longtime companionship. It does not matter whether the affair is new or old; the priority is to be with someone who cares, not to struggle on alone. Take a chance, a great risk; your happiness may depend on it! Every character in the play is clearly drawn by Inge, and we get to know them intimately in this lovely production, where the female voice exercises the most control. Like Tennessee Williams, Inge, surely ahead of his time, was not afraid to paint strong, opinionated, domineering women. Both playwrights were openly gay men and could appreciate and understand the excessively emotional female psyche.

Antaeus is known for its risk-taking, and under Watson's superlative hand, sparks fly. The entire ensemble ignite a fire of engrossing proportions. Dechert makes Hal charming, charismatic and a sensitive braggart; Halford is beautiful, wise and caring as Madge. Holt is breathtakingly real as the pitiable Rosemary, tearing her guts out to escape loneliness. Preciado is just wonderfully complex yet appealing as Millie, smart, sensitive and winningly awkward. Aldrich's Flo is as staunch and forthright in her insecurity as Steininger's Helen is, in her indefatigable desire for change. Gallenstein is amiable as Alan and Clark adds a subtle touch of humor to Howard's plight. This is a true ensemble piece where everyone shines, and it is to Watson's credit that the pacing and tone are pitch perfect. Robert Selender's scenic design of the yard is incredible down to the green grass and tree stump. So vibrant and so real, you can almost smell the grass! Terri A. Lewis' costumes are period perfect, particularly Madge's pretty dresses and Rosemary's and the other teachers' stylish suits and hats. No such thing as a small part, Rosemary's two comrades Irma (Dylan Jones) and Christine (Jill Maglione) are definite stand outs in their quest for attention. A big shout out also to Jared A. Sayeg for a superior exterior and interior lighting design.

You should partake of this *Picnic* ; it is one for the books. Inge would be satiated and proud!

5 out of 5 stars



Janelle Steininger, Maureen Lee Lenker, Shannon Holt,
Jackie Preciado, Dylan Jones, Rhonda Aldrich, Sarah Halford
photo by Geoffrey Wade

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