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## Picnic (Antaeus)



William Inge's 1953 Pulitzer-winning romantic drama dealt with his issues of loneliness. *Picnic* has no gay characters (Inge was gay), but his exploration of young lust and mature love details how his characters are all essentially lonely and single and how the act of hooking-up and sharing oneself is always fraught with dangers.

His play itself is infinitely better than the 1955 film version, in that Inge was able to touch more strongly on sexuality than the Hayes Office allowed at the time. His play certainly has held up over time.

In their double-casting, as is their wont, the two casts were noticeably different, most unusual for Antaeus. The two companies, labeled "The Deviled Eggs" and "Stuffed Peppers," were rehearsed simultaneously (the actors aren't assigned into the different camps until dress-rehearsal day) but slightly different contrasts appeared by the reviewed nights of both productions.

In Inge's plot, Flo Owens, a widow with two teen daughters, lives in a quiet, "normal" town in Kansas. Her backdoor abuts her neighbor Helen Potts, another widow. Potts has taken in a young, hunky vagrant, Hal, who remains shirtless for most of the play. This overt sexuality (bold for its time) has a strong effect on the women in the play, especially 18-year-old Madge, and 15-year-old Millie, albeit from different directions.

Flo, very aware of Hal's aura of the forbidden, is more concerned with Madge's engagement with one of the town's rich kids, Alan, who was a college-mate of Hal's. In order to keep her finances straight, Flo takes in an older border, Rosemary, a frustrated and uptight school teacher, who has a beau, Howard, also in his 50s, reluctant to marry her. Hal then becomes the fulcrum for heavy changes in this tight community, mostly dramatic, some of it funny (at least to us 60+ years on).

Director **Cameron Watson** has a firm hand on the subtext of the characters' needs, and has staged it well on **Robert Selander's** fine set (check out the massive tree audience right). Watson's eye is finely tuned, but why "The Deviled Eggs" cast came off better than "The Stuffed Peppers" cast is a conundrum. Most of the two casts are experienced, working actors, so perhaps it was due to the latter cast being caught on their second night that might have contributed to its slowness.

Of the 22 actors seen (both companies), **Janelle Steininger** as Helen, **Connor Kelly-Eiding** as coltish Millie, **Sarah Halford** as sexy Madge, **Rhonda Aldrich's** frustrated Flo, and the embittered Rosemary of **Shannon Holt**, stood out. Equally good, however, from both casts, were **Josh Clark** and **John DeMita** as skittish Howard, **Matthew Gallenstein** and **Ross Phillips** as loving Alan, as how well the two studs, **Jason Dechert** and **Daniel Bess**, who both touched on Hal's insecurities and bluster, playing him with honesty and keeping them intriguing.

It's terrific that Antaeus continues to add post WWII classics to its list of quality plays for us to savor. Getting back to basics, they have an *Uncle Vanya* upcoming for the fall. As well as an unannounced spring lineup, culminating in their move to a brand-new theatre in Glendale late next year. I am so looking forward to their future. But *Picnic* is a quality production for their last season in this quaint but crowded 49-seat house.

*Picnic* plays through August 9th, 2015, at the Antaeus Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood, CA 91610. Tickets: 818.506.1983 or at [www.antaeus.org](http://www.antaeus.org).

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