

Critic's Choice William Inge's 'Picnic' finds the universal in a small Kansas town

By **DAVID C. NICHOLS**

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The intimacy of small-town life and its stifling limitations permeate “Picnic,” which the thoughtfully representative staging at Antaeus Theater Company underscores without telegraphing.

William Inge’s 1953 Pulitzer-winning study of one eventful Labor Day in Eisenhower-era Kansas receives a solid, well-appointed revival, courtesy of director Cameron Watson, some smart designers and an excellent cast.

On designer Robert Salander’s detailed set, the doings between two dovetailed back porches unfold with poetic realism, wry humor and a surging erotic charge. That last is key, since Inge’s narrative turns on sexuality, repressed or otherwise, and, though quaint by present-day standards, it still informs the play (and 1955 film starring William Holden and Kim Novak).

For the record

July 1, 2:35 p.m.: An earlier version of this review misspelled Robert Salander's name as Selender.

Watson locates subtle grace notes and spatial placements that quietly illuminate the characters’ motivations. Jeff Gardner’s sound design evokes a passing freight train and early morning nature with equal panache, Jared A. Sayeg’s lighting plot brings us from dawn to dusk and back without seams and Terri A. Lewis’ costume parade resembles actual clothing these folk would wear.

As swaggering drifter Hal and town beauty Madge, Daniel Bess and Jordan Monaghan have the physical appeal and tacit chemistry to convince us, their wordless dance the production’s ignition point. Eve Gordon digs deep into Flo, Madge’s protective mother, while Kitty Swink finds fresh shadings in sympathetic neighbor Helen.

Connor Kelly-Eiding is particularly fine as bookworm younger sister Millie, suggesting deeper conflicts beneath the surface. Ross Philips brings a jovial touch of bromance to Alan, Hal’s former frat buddy and Madge’s well-to-do suitor. Gigi Bermingham and John DeMita go for understated broke

as spinster schoolteacher Rosemary and boyfriend Howard, superb in their post-picnic face-off. Ben Horwitz, Tamara Krinsky and Maureen Lee Lenker round out an accomplished ensemble.

Antaeus' practice of partner-casting shows means that every performance will have its own variables, and compressing Inge's three acts into two makes for a long first half, the early scenes leisurely to a fault.

Nonetheless, as someone who grew up in Coffeyville, the Kansas township adjacent to Inge's Independence, this observer can attest to the veracity of tone this intelligently gripping "Picnic" achieves.

"Picnic," Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Dark on Saturday. Ends Aug. 16. \$30-\$34. (818) 506-1983 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours.

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