

🕒 Friday, 03 July 2015 08:32

Picnic

👤 Written by Radomir Vojtech Luza - Theatre Critic



Tamara Krinsky, John DeMita, Gigi Bermingham, Ross Phillips

Photo Credit Karianne Flaathen

If you are interested in a play about a forbidden romance in 1950's Kansas, look no further than the Antaeus Theatre Company's revival of William Inge's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama "Picnic" running at the Antaeus Theatre in the NoHo Arts District through August 16th.

This is the story of a family coming apart at the seams.

Pretending all is fine, it slowly dies on the inside because appearances are no longer motivated or true.

Set in the Midwest, where very little happens, neither coast has influence and the emptiness and unbearable heaviness of being find the three female members of the Owens family sinking further and further down their own private rabbit holes, Inge's Shakespeare-tinged drama builds into a cacophony of fallen voices screaming for redemption that never comes.

A philosophically, socially and psychologically tenuous tug of war between restraint and desire, the play shines a light on the forbidden passions and dreams that haunt and make us human.

The language of this American tragedy draws marrow from each moment, each Owens family member's

personal purgatory and private circumstance.

It leaves nothing to chance while bending the broken branches of bitterness and following the forlorn fingers of fear.

Inge, who along with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, was one of the three most important playwrights in the American Theater of the 1950's with Broadway successes such as "Come Back, Little Sheba" (1950), "Bus Stop" (1955) and "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" (1957), captures the anxieties and realities of not only Kansas in 1952, but the human experience with dignity, integrity and great detail. The latter often the most difficult aspect of play writing or creative writing.

The words here are more important than the characters. They take on a life of their own while adding to the momentum and significance of the moment.

"Picnic" was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1953 as well as the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

"Picnic" was also adapted into a motion picture in 1955, starring William Holden and Kim Novak. It was revived on Broadway in 1994, and again in 2013.

Inge's first screenplay, "Splendor in the Grass" (1960), earned him the Academy Award for Best Screenplay.

He returned to teaching in 1968, and wrote two novels, "Good Luck, Miss Wycoff" (1970) and "My Son is a Splendid Driver" (1971) before increasing depression led him to commit suicide in 1973.

Cameron Watson's direction follows the beats and rhythms of Inge's language. Watson also understands the Independence, Kansas born playwright's themes of love destroyed, broken and lost.

Watson lets Inge be Inge. The characters are horribly flawed, the town empty of tolerance, charm or charisma and the picnic never seen.

He does not let the characters get in the way of the dialogue. The direction compliments the play's sad and tragic truths in a way that only makes this revival, set on a balmy Labor Day, that much more beautiful and real.

Watson surrounds himself with a stellar cast that does not disappoint.

Stand outs in the traditionally partnered cast of the Stuffed Peppers include:

John DeMita (Howard Bevans) who gives a convincing turn. Both parts spontaneous and studious, DeMita does not let ego get in the way of performance, or drama in the way of truth.

Ross Philips (Alan Seymour) displays such compassion and goodness, especially in Act One, that it makes this portrayal, which turns darker in Act Two, hard to forget. Recently seen as Tom Long on the CW's "Hart of Dixie," Philips' understanding of his character's place and time comes across unhaltingly and openly.

Daniel Bess (Hal Carter) almost walks away with the play in a characterization true and tormented. Bess leaves not an ounce of his talent behind in portraying the insecure drifter who this play revolves around.

The Antaeus regular and signed singer/songwriter adds emotion, energy and presence to the role.

Bess does not merely rely on sex appeal, but plays the character as a searching, leaping yearling learning about himself and the world around him.

It is the substance and honesty that Bess brings to this role that differentiates it from what one might expect from the character.

The film regular ("Munich," "Constellation," "Not Another Teen Movie") brings a vision and feeling to the part that fill Inge's world of foiled anticipation, lost idealism and slow death perfectly.

But it is Connor Kelly-Eiding (Millie Owens) who runs away with the play. Showcasing a staggering spontaneity with an overpowering ability to mimic, Kelly-Eiding is a lightning bolt of improvisation, fire and feeling.

It is in her face, but more so body, that the entire makeup of the play is revealed.

The Los Angeles theatre veteran's performance is one that stands the test of time not only at Antaeus, but in the history of theatre in Los Angeles.

The University of Southern California BFA and Antaeus A2 company member does with her heart, soul, body and mind what many actresses cannot. She fully commits.

Hers is one of the most highly motivated performances this critic has ever seen on a stage in North Hollywood or Los Angeles, where she will hopefully appear again soon.

Furthering the message of the play are Robert Selander's scenic design, Jeff Gardner's sound design, Jared A. Sayeg's lighting design and Terri A. Lewis' costume design.



Daniel Bess, Jordan Monaghan

photo by Karianne Flaathen

In the end, "Picnic," then, the second production of the 2015 season, does the unthinkable: it moves and touches with a story not really meant for moving and touching, but rather merely being.

This is a master work by a brilliant playwright who is mapping-out his view of America's heartland, and, really, America itself, in a new revival that asks as many questions as it answers.

These are not easy questions, but queries that must be addressed by humanity if it is to continue and prosper .

How is a broken man fixed?

How is loneliness lived with?

Why is love avoided?

Why are we afraid of pain, heartbreak and suffering?

Inge, the master of turning reality into art, asks each of these questions at one time or another, and expects us each to at least consider an answer.

Antaeus does so with a production both parts genuine and authentic.

Not one false moment is had. Not one false move made.

This play proves once more that Antaeus is not only the preeminent classical theatre company in the city, but one of the most important classical ensembles in the country.

All appears just fine on Lankershim Boulevard. This "Picnic" a pregnant path to popular polarization.

Showtimes:

Thursdays and Fridays at 8pm

Saturdays at 2pm and 8pm

Sundays at 2pm

Talk back Thursdays begin July 2: stay after the performance and discuss the play with the cast.

Ticket Prices:

Thursdays and Fridays: \$30

Saturdays and Sundays: \$34

Information/Admission: (818) 506-1983

WHERE:**ANTAEUS THEATRE COMPANY,**

5112 Lankershim Blvd.,

North Hollywood, CA 91601

(One-and-a-half blocks South of Magnolia)

PARKING:

\$8 in the lot at 5125 Lankershim Blvd. (west side of the street), just south of Magnolia.

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