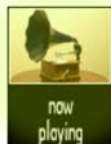


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June 29, 2015:

Picnic reviewed by Rob Stevens

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

William Inge was one of the major American playwrights of the 1950s, along with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. He had a string of hits starting with *Come Back, Little Sheba* which won Tony Awards for its leading actors Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer. In 1953 *Picnic* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a Tony Award for its director Joshua Logan. *Bus Stop* and *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* received Tony nominations for Best Play. All four were made into successful films with major stars such as William Holden, Kim Novak, Burt Lancaster, Rosalind Russell, Robert Preston, Angela Lansbury, Marilyn Monroe and won Booth an Academy Award. Inge himself won an Oscar for his original screenplay for *Splendor in the Grass* but his career was mostly in decline by the 1960s and he committed suicide in 1973. His plays are rarely performed these days. The MET Theatre made their reputation in 1973 & 1974 by opening with *Bus Stop* followed by *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* and finally *Picnic* which featured a then unknown Nick Nolte in a leading role. Now Antaeus Theatre Company has mounted a stellar and a not-to-be-missed revival of *Picnic*.

Shannon Holt, Josh Clark, Sarah Halford, Jason Dechert, Jackie Preciado
photo by Geoffrey Wade

The production is so well presented it's not like you enter a theatre to see a play but rather you take a ride in a time machine back to small town Kansas in 1952. Robert Selander's back yard setting, Terri A. Lewis' perfect costumes, and Jared A. Sayeg's painterly lighting design make you almost feel like you can smell the freshly mown grass, taste the freshly baked cake. The entire cast (in the usual manner of Antaeus partner casting) is faultless and director Cameron Watson has so finely tuned their performances and brought out every bit of nuance and subtext in Inge's writing. *Picnic* is set in the shared back yard of the Owens and Potts' families. Helen Potts (Janellen Steininger) is an unmarried woman of a certain age who is known as Mrs. Potts even though the invalidated mother she now devotes her life to had her marriage annulled. Helen has a habit of feeding itinerant young men in exchange for some yard work, much to the consternation of her uptight neighbors. Her latest rescue is Hal (Jason Dechert), a former college football star who claims to be a friend of Alan Seymour (Matthew Gallenstein), from one of the town's wealthiest families. Luck would have it that Alan is currently dating Madge (Sarah Halford) who lives next door. Also under the all-female Owens' roof is her disappointed, bitter mother Flo (Rhonda Aldrich) who has big dreams for her pretty daughter, Madge's younger, smarter tomboy sister Millie (Jackie Preciado) and self-proclaimed spinster schoolteacher Rosemary (Shannon Holt). The site of the shirtless Hal raking leaves causes the sexual tensions and frustrations in all

these women to reach the boiling point. It's a very memorable 24 hours. We never do see the Labor Day Picnic everyone is talking about; all the fireworks take place in that backyard.



Sarah Halford and Jason Dechert

photo by Geoffrey Wade

The sexual chemistry between Dechert and Halford is palpable and as hot and sweaty as the perspiration on Hal's bare chest. Yet this is the most vulnerable Hal I have ever seen. Halford's Madge, who is tired of always being called pretty, wanting to know who she really is, connects with Hal's bragging, strutting, boot-wearing stud because she knows there is a lost little boy under that veneer that she can build a life with. When these two slow dance the world seems to slow down to their speed and when they kiss you swear there are fireworks overhead. Aldrich objects to their attraction because she fell victim to such a curse herself, losing her husband to drink and other women. She is a furious mother she-wolf fighting for her dreams through her daughter. Preciado's awkward girl at the first budding of womanhood is also a heartfelt and heartbreaking performance. When she sees her "date" Hal dancing with her sister, her dreams also come crashing down. Gallenstein's Seymour is another finely tuned role, showing his bewilderment that the prettiest girl in town deigns to date him and yet still feeling second best to the unrefined Hal. Steinger gives a lively performance as Mrs. Potts, living vicariously through the younger people she likes to surround herself with.



Josh Clark, Shannon Holt

photo by Geoffrey Wade

For all of the youthful romantic passion of Hal and Madge's quick attraction, Inge has created the bone wearing loneliness of schoolteacher Rosemary. Holt conveys a devastating look at 1950s womanhood, yearning for independence but longing for the security of a man. Her gut-wrenching declaration to her long time beau, Howard (an understated and befuddled Josh Clark), that he "must marry her" is one of the show's many high points. Even though clothed, Holt has stripped Rosemary of everything to attain a marriage proposal. It's a performance that will be hard to forget. This *Picnic* may not actually contain all the usual festive goodies the term implies, but it feeds you a hearty amount of food for the heart and soul.



Antaeus Theatre Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood. Ends Aug. 16. 818-506-1983 or www.antaeus.org

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