

## Picnic

Michael Van Duzer [Reviews - Theater](#)



Dechert, Gallenstein. Photo by Geoffrey Wade.

During the 1950's, the plays of William Inge were ranked with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller as the gold standard in American playwrighting. By the 60's, his star began to wane and his works became less popular. Sadly, he committed suicide in 1973. While his plays continued to be produced, they appeared to have less staying power than those of his contemporaries. Perhaps his characters seemed somehow prosaic when compared with Williams' flamboyant Southern eccentrics and Miller's morally ambiguous protagonists. After all, Inge wrote about the people who lived next door.

Inge's most popular play, *Picnic* is now playing in a richly detailed revival by Antaeus Theatre Company which belies any notion that his talent was a fluke of the times. Maybe the real problem is that recent directors have been satisfied with a surface interpretation from their actors. Certainly that is not the case with Cameron Watson, who expertly guides his cast to delve deep and completely inhabit the characters they portray. The production is funny, sexy, moving, and filled with life.

From the moment you encounter Robert Selander's intricately realistic backyard setting, you know you are in good hands. This background is subtly aided by Jared A. Sayeg's intuitive lighting design, while Jeff Gardner's soundscape allows a passing train to actually rumble the floor beneath your feet. And all of this is before anyone makes an entrance.

Once they do enter, we are quickly introduced to five women who live in two adjoining houses in a small Kansas town. Their precarious equilibrium is completely upended when Mrs. Potts (Janellen Steininger) welcomes Hal Carter (Jason Dechert) into their world. Hal is a lively and unapologetically masculine drifter who has come to town seeking help from his fraternity buddy, Alan (Matthew Gallenstein). Emotions, which are typically kept hidden, begin to surface under the almost hypnotic influence of Hal's shirtless torso.

Like Hal, Madge Owens (Jordan Monaghan) is aware that she can sail through life on her looks. But she's discontented with her life and ambivalent about a relationship with Alan. Millie (Jackie Preciado) is the smart younger sister who's hurt by, and envious of Madge's easy popularity with the boys she's just beginning to notice. Their mother, Flo (Rhonda Aldrich), sees in Hal the dangers of choosing passion over prudence—dangers she knows all too well. For Mrs. Potts, Hal is a reminder of youth and the husband she has lived without for so many years. For the Owens' spinster border Rosemary (Shannon Holt), Hal is the unwitting catalyst for releasing the yearning and frustration simmering just below her surface, feelings she hasn't dared to share with longtime beau, Howard (Josh Clark).

Dechert's Hal is an engaging man-boy whose bragging and show-off tendencies are defenses masking the hurt inside. I have never seen a Hal so visibly wounded, and it adds true depth to the character. It also makes Madge's sudden passion for him more understandable. Monaghan's Madge starts slowly, playing to our expectations that she is simply pretty and rather vapid. But she is full of surprises, and convincingly grows into a determined woman during the play's 24 hours. Their chemistry is also believably slow to ignite, but by the time they start their impromptu dance, Hal's twitching hips and Madge's ease in following his steps threaten to ignite the porch, if not the neighborhood.

Rosemary has always been showy role, but Holt doesn't grandstand. She ably plays the genial jokester of the first act, careful to keep up her guard while not always hiding her true feelings. But she is fearless in portraying Rosemary's vengeful fury when she feels spurned by Hal and, ultimately, her desperation in begging Howard to marry her. Clark's Howard is stronger than usual, and his libido is far from shut down.

Gallenstein's Alan is the careful, nice guy who hero-worships Hal, living vicariously through his stories. He is angry and humiliated when Hal seduces Madge away, though there is a hint that he may care more for Hal than Madge. Preciado is a convincingly tomboyish Millie, who really does want guys like Alan to notice her. Aldrich is a mother doing her best to protect and advise her very different daughters,

while Steininger brings an innate warmth and a natural sensitivity to Mrs. Potts.

As with all Antaeus productions, all the roles are shared by two actors.

Inge's original ending for *Picnic* has Madge stay in town, rather than running off with Hal. He always preferred his original ending, feeling that it was more realistic. Late in life he revised *Picnic* as *Summer Brave*, including the "unhappy" ending. But watching Madge set out after Hal with her suitcase and gloves in the final moments of *Picnic*, one is only too aware that this ending is merely happy-for-now.

*Antaeus Theatre Company* June 25 – August 16, 2015 [www.antaeus.org](http://www.antaeus.org)