



Photo by Geoffrey Wade



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Through Aug. 16.**RECOMMENDED:**

About 15 minutes into *Picnic*, William Inge's 1953 play about desire and repression in a small Kansas town, Hal (Jason Dechert), a free-spirited drifter wearing no shirt and glistening with sweat, struts over to a disapproving neighbor and her two virginal daughters, and asks, "Is it all right if I light a fire?"

The palpating females' answer to that question turns out to be pretty much what you'd expect. Like a train steaming across the prairie, you can see this plot coming five miles away.

That doesn't make it any less enjoyable, however. If the goings-on in *Picnic* feel well trodden, it's because we've seen similar dynamics before in 1950s movies like *The Long, Hot Summer* (which, like *Picnic* on Broadway, also starred a young Paul Newman as a dangerous heartthrob) and even *State Fair*, where wistful females sighed from porches, waiting for a man to come change their lives.

Directed by Cameron Watson, this Antaeus Company revival feels particularly well timed for the season with its portrayal of languid Midwestern life disrupted, on the cusp of fall, by a stranger who brings into sharp relief all the residents' simmering ambitions, dreams, and disappointments. (Like all Antaeus productions, this one is double-cast; all performers noted here are from the Deviled Eggs cast.)

Lovely Madge Owens (Sarah Halford) is a younger version of *Mad Men*'s Betty Draper: universally regarded as a beauty and groomed to be a housewife, she works at a dime store and shares a tepid romance with Alan (Matthew Gallenstein), a country club college boy whom her mother (Rhonda Aldrich) hopes she will marry. Her gangly, spunky sister Millie (Jackie Preciado) sneaks cigarettes and plans for a career post-graduation as a writer in New York. When Hal, Alan's former fraternity brother, turns up looking for work, he throws Madge's life, and the town, into turmoil.

One of this production's strengths lies in its grasp of the currents of desire, and how they always threaten to overflow its socially accepted channels. Because it's not just Madge who's undone by Hal's masculine good looks: The kindly Mrs. Potts (Janellen Steininger), a drudge caring for her elderly mother, directs her feminine longing into motherly attentions, which Steininger captures with equal parts humor and pathos. In a remarkable transformation by Shannon Holt, Rosemary, a maiden school teacher who boards with the Owens family, finds her proud independence dissolved, building to one of the play's most devastating scenes with her beau, Howard (Josh Clark). And there is a suggestion, in the homoerotic horseplay between Hal and Alan, that perhaps neither man will do Madge any good.

The production is also canny about the relationship between sisters. In the long run, we might put our money on Millie, whose tomboy awkwardness reflects an authenticity that will stand her in good stead. But authenticity can be lonely. Preciado beautifully balances Millie's struggle between awe and

secretary.

Time has done a disservice to the play, in some respects. From a modern vantage point, it can be exasperating to dwell on how universally the female characters are defined by the men in their lives -- in the play as well as in the era depicted. Mrs. Owens's great tragedy, captured by Aldrich in a fleeting but powerful exchange, lies in the emptiness of her former marriage. In spite of this, Halford and Dechert bring texture to their roles as the young lovers. Halford shows us the disquiet brewing beneath Madge's placid exterior. And one of the play's most interesting ideas is that Hal, far from being a self-determining male, is nearly as cornered as Madge by circumstances of birth and opportunity in a rigid society. It's that classist exploration that keeps *Picnic* feeling fresh, beyond its search for love and fulfillment.

***The Antaeus Company*, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; through Aug. 16; Thurs.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (no perf July 4); through Aug. 16. (818) 506-5436; <http://antaeus.org>**



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