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## [OPENING THE CURTAIN](#)



It's in the Air

Have you ever been trapped by a Midwestern summer, where the stale heat seems to stop time, the limitless sky is only juxtaposed by the prison of your space and the confines of expectation? Where the air stifles you with an electric desperation. It's that air that the Antaeus Theatre Company captures in William Inge's *Picnic*.

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Jun 30, 2015

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### FROM THIS EPISODE

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA theater for KCRW.

I don't know if you've ever been trapped by a Midwestern summer? One where the stale heat seems to stop time? Where the limitless sky is only juxtaposed by the prison of your space and the confines of expectation. Where the air itself stifles you with an electric desperation.

It's that air that William Inge was trying to capture in his classic *Picnic*, now being produced by [Antaeus Theatre Company](#).

Part of the alchemy of stage acting is trying to bring the air to life. To somehow open a script about a different time or a different place and recreate, or reanimate, not just the words but the air itself: the very gravity that ties the characters to place.

Inge's air is particularly magical and brutal in *Picnic*. Not only does he capture a distinctly mid-western sense of isolation, he writes a chorus of women who dissect and play out the expectations and confinement of gender and beauty. Given the play's power today, it's hard to imagine how devastating it must have been in 1953 when it premiered.

Now, Antaeus is without doubt one of Los Angeles' finest acting companies so when a great production misses it's not for lack of effort or talent. As a

company they have such an embarrassment of acting riches that they field two entire casts for each play. On alternating nights you can see the same play, the same production with different actors.

Couple that with the company's mission to do the classics and you have a very particular puzzle for both the director and artistic directors. Not only are you taking a script off the shelf that brings with it the baggage of time and expectation, you're trying to reanimate that text not just with the particular idiosyncrasies of a single set of actors but across two casts. A director cannot rely on the particular charisma of a single actor, tailoring the production to fit those strengths or weaknesses. Instead, the artistic answer has to be more profound, more deeply connected to the text itself. For me, it always places a microscope on the very reason for doing the play in the first place: why do we need to hear this play, right now?

And as much as some of us grouse about Antaeus' double casts, one cannot deny the noble project and its unique challenge.

In *Picnic*, for me it comes down to that air. What's connecting all these characters? There's a particular desperation and pain that's missing from Antaeus' production. Said more simply, while there's some lovely individual acting the cast is largely acting past one another: the bitter arrows either missing their target or else coming from nowhere. Absent is the particular gravity that unites Inge's world and makes the character's struggles so devastating.

Now, if you've never seen a production of *Picnic*, go . . . but I might wait a week or two until these particular actors have a chance to find each other.

*Picnic* plays at the Antaeus Theater Company in North Hollywood through August 16.

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA theater for KCRW.

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Running time: 2 hours and 15 minutes with one intermission.

Photo: Gigi Bermingham, Jordan Monaghan, Ross Philips and Eve Gordon in the Antaeus Theatre Company's production of *Picnic* (Karianne Flaathen)



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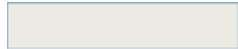
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