

# Will-O-Way cast offers strong drama in 'Picnic'

By Helen Zucker  
special writer

The Will-O-Way Repertory Theatre production of "Picnic" is smoothly directed by Celia Merrill Turner. It's absorbing entertainment. An even, well-rehearsed cast turns William Inge's play about a sexy drifter who makes off with the prettiest girl in town into a surprisingly poignant experience.

"Picnic" runs through May 16 at Will-O-Way Apprentice Theatre in Bloomfield Township. Inge's plays all have, at their center, loners surrounded by stock characters. I've no idea why his plays work so well on stage, but when well done, they work beautifully. Inge uses all the clichés in the American imagination, and he gets away with it. The Will-O-Way cast understands this play completely. It's a pleasure to

see such competent work.

EILEEN T. WEISS turns in a strong performance as Madge Owens, the small-town Kansas beauty who works in the dime store and doesn't feel "real." Madge relives her middle-aged man's youth, and we haven't much doubt she's going to wind up the same way.

But for the brief Labor Day weekend during which Madge dumps her jewel of a boyfriend and runs off intoxicated after Hal Carter, we relive her sexual awakening and don't think much about the aftermath.

Ms. Weiss is an assured actress, and she gives the role lots of nice touches. Her affection and frustration with her college-bound sister, the ambivalence of her feelings toward the "smart Millie" who needs her nails painted, is deftly rendered.

Anita Barone looks so charming the one time she shows up in a dress and hair ribbons, it's a bit hard to believe anyone thinks she's the "plain, smart sister." Eyeglasses don't necessarily mean you're homely.

But, as I said, Inge gets away with stuff like this. "Picnic" is such a good script, we ride right past the fact that Ms. Barone happens to be cute as heck, even in her jeans, sneakers, cap, boy's shirt and pigtail.

MS. BARONE is a live wire, and she

## review

turns in an expressive performance. We hope she works up with Alan, the jilted boyfriend, as the ending suggests.

George Timothy Hall is excellent as preppy Alan Seymour, who just happens to be a really nice guy. No one ever explains what the son of the town's richest man is doing in the town's poorest back yard, or why he's so chummy and comfortable with Helen Potts, a sweet, deserted wife who shares the yard with the Owens. Madge is afraid she won't like "charge accounts, the country club and all that." I never figured out when Seymour had any time to go to the country club, between college and his life at the Owens.

Nor did Hall look as if he would stuff a charge account down anyone's unwilling pocket. He seems to have spent much of his college life getting his friend Hal Carter out of scrapes. Hall is very touching in his pain when he wakes up at the finale, punches Carter and tells him, "You're no friend of mine. You saw a pretty girl and had to have her." Then Hall turns around, dazed, regards Madge's window, and says, "Did I think I could

spend the rest of my life looking at her?"

HE'S BEEN taken for a ride by both Madge and Carter. Yet neither of them means him any harm.

Inge catches at some kind of truth about the American class system for a moment. Madge doesn't feel good enough for "charge accounts and that stuff." She wants to be needed by someone who has even less than she does.

And Carter comes to town looking for the only stable person he has ever known, Alan Seymour.

Gary Clason turns in a restless, prowling, twitchy performance as Hal Carter, ex-football hero and present bum. Clason comes on stage asking, "Do you mind if I light a fire?"

He's talking about Mrs. Potts' leaves, but the symbolism is obvious. Carter lights a fire under Madge Owens the moment they see each other.

CLASON HAS a purposeful stare. He prowls the stage like a caged leopard. He's physical energy with nowhere to go.

"A man of the house needs a pair of boots," Clason says, talking of Carter's dead father. His pa has died drunk on the sidewalk. We're supposed to feel shocked that his mother left him in a reformatory for a year when he stole a motorcycle at age 14. We're not. Someone gave Carter a football

scholarship at some point; he never used it. Like Madge, he only feels alive when he "kicked that thing over the goalpost."

Physical action is where it's at. Like Hal, Madge is ready to throw her life away. "Because you know how to dance." Oh well, she's 18, and Mama keeps bugging her to get married.

Elaine Keinert is particularly good as Flo Owens, the mother of "beautiful Madge" and "poor Millie." ("Poor Millie" draws well, reads a Carson McCullers novel in an afternoon — "Ballad of the Sad Cafe," a sort of comment on the people in this play — never cooks, manages to get the hot bath water, and is going off on a scholarship.)

INGE HAS got his priorities a bit confused here. Ms. Keinert gives us a ma who is instantly suspicious of "Alan's friend!" She parts with Madge, at the finale, letting us know that experience alone can teach her daughter the harsh lessons she has learned.

In her limited way, Flo Owens is a loving mother, and Ms. Keinert does a bang-up job in giving us this woman.

Bonnie Weinrob is fine as the lonely, deserted Helen Potts, the neighbor with a heart as big as the yard. Her mother has annulled her marriage out of sheer selfishness.



Bloomfield Hills resident Eileen Weiss and Berkley resident Gary Clason co-star as the lovers, Madge Owens and Hal Carter, in "Picnic" at Will-O-Way Repertory Theatre.

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