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'Picnic' cast confidently explores small-town life

If one of the measures of a classic is durability, the power to say something moving and true to generation after generation, "Picnic" is a classic. Some of its language and attitudes hail from an earlier time, but William Inge's examination of human passion and the drive to escape one's past remains as fresh and provocative as when it first appeared on Broadway more than 50 years ago.

The current production at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Salisbury Theatre celebrates the 50th anniversary of the school's drama department, and it does so in splendid fashion. The cast is strong across the board and director Lee Salisbury, after whom the theater is named, knows how to build on the work's structural integrity, delivering a fully realized world. That realization is helped by an evocative set with suggestive backdrop.

As Salisbury observes in his notes to the production, this depiction of small-town life



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mostly concerns women: their dreams, fears and resignations. The young women look forward with anticipation while the older women look back with regret. What struck me was how convincingly the largely young group of players managed to negotiate both perspectives with assurance.

This is especially true of Anna Gagne-Hawes' depiction of the school teacher Rosemary. This spinster feels each tick of her biological clock winding down. At first Gagne-Hawes literally plays Rosemary for laughs — her guffaws end with annoying snorts. By the show's last act, however, Gagne-Hawes reveals the not-so-quiet desperation lying at Rosemary's heart. Incidentally, Gagne-Hawes talents have garnered her Theatre UAF's outstanding student award.

Hadassah R. Nelson is convincingly weary, wary and maternal as Flo Owens, a single mother who rents out rooms and wants something better for her two teenage daughters: the pretty but not-so-bright Madge, and Millie, a budding intellectual who is clueless around boys.

As the daughters, Jey Johnson captures Madge's poignancy of being ornamental while yearning for something deeper. For her part, Jesse A. Hobbs is a spunky Millie, a cerebral duckling who becomes a swan.

Janet Bradner, the most senior cast member, has perhaps the sweetest role in the production; she does a wonderful job. Helen Potts is a woman who saw her dreams of marriage cut short by her mother. Now, years later, as she nurses that invalid mother, she's the only woman able to keep her emotional balance when Hal Carter rolls into town.

As countless commentators have pointed out, Inge's play captures the desultory air of small-town life, the aimless atmosphere that can explode when an unstable element is introduced. Hal Carter is that element: tall, athletic, good-looking, with a penchant for working without a shirt.

Levi Rion Ben-Isreal does a terrific job displaying Hal's conflicted nature. The product of what today we'd call a very dysfunctional family, Hal has dreams of something grand without the skills or intelligence to pull it off. He is a drifter with a pocketful of tales that may or may not be true. He mirrors Madge in many ways, and although she's betrothed to the socially superior Allen (nicely played by Brian Lyke), it is fatefully obvious Hal and Madge will emotionally and physically collide.

This inevitability is another classic element in "Picnic."
Characters behave as they must.
Howard Bevins, a store owner, knows by play's end marrying the school teacher Rosemary will be a mistake, but powers beyond him seem to direct his future. Spencer Morrison, as Bevins, is perfectly perplexed as he sees events taking unexpected turns.

Theatre UAF's production is a tribute to a once-celebrated playwright who has all but disappeared from public view. It is also a fitting capstone to 50 years of service by the university. Many fine actors and performers working in our area and others who have fanned out across the country started at UAF. (Some of them are returning to their alma mater to give workshops on Friday afternoon.) Also, by bringing back the department's founder, Lee Salisbury, for this production, the faculty is celebrating its own notable contributions to the rich and considerable history of dramatic arts. I wish them success as they look toward another 50 years of service.