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Regional Reviews: Phoenix

Picnic

Mesa Community College

Review by [Gil Benbrook](#) | [Season Schedule](#)Also see Gil's reviews of [Pete, or the Return of Peter Pan](#), and [Bring It On](#)

William Inge's Pulitzer Prize winning play *Picnic* centers on several life-changing events over a 24 hour period in 1950s Kansas. Clear casting and specific direction of this classic drama are crucial to ensure that the somewhat nostalgic situations in the play are handled expertly and that the turn of events don't come across as too melodramatic for a 21st century audience. The good news for Mesa Community College's recent production, which just ended this past weekend, is that the casting, especially of the three main females who are all strong-willed women determined to make it on their own, couldn't have been better and the solid direction kept things centered and specific to the period.



**Cedar Eileen Cody, Dolores Mendoza, Brandon Caraco,
Samantha Hanna, and Andrew Blahak**

Photo by Tom J. McCoy / Mesa Community College

Picnic is set on Labor Day in the shared backyard of two houses in a small town in Kansas with the action taking place mainly on the back porches of those two houses. Flo Owens is a single mother raising her two teenage daughters, Madge and Millie. Flo lives next door to Helen Potts who cares for her home bound elderly mother. Flo also rents out a room in her house to Rosemary, a single, somewhat older, schoolteacher. Flo, Helen, and Rosemary are women who have to make it on their own with no men in their lives. However, one Labor Day, Helen hires a young man named Hal to do some work around her house in exchange for breakfast. Hal is an old college friend of Madge's boyfriend Alan and has the physique and charisma to turn the heads of all of the women who live in the two houses. The impact of Hal's arrival on these two houses and the women who reside in them, and what transpires over the next 24 hours, is the entire context of *Picnic*.

While it may seem like not much really happens during the majority of the play, except for the arrival of Hal and the growing attraction between him and Madge and how that plays out, there is actually a lot that happens in this 24 hour period. Almost all of the characters go through major changes over the course of this one single day, which is a major compliment both to Inge and his ability to not only write complex characters and to Kevin Dressler's casting and succinct direction, as all of the actors delivered rich portrayals with their characters growing and naturally ending up in a different place than when they began.

Flo, Rosemary, and Helen are all strong and dominant women, forced it seems into taking on these typical male characteristics of the 1950s since all three of them don't have husbands to shoulder the burdens of raising children or dealing with the daily chores that were generally set aside for the man of the house to handle. As those three women, Cedar Eileen Cody, Samantha Hanna, and Dolores Mendoza were nothing short of spectacular. Each actress found a way to clearly get across the strength of each character, but also their weaknesses as well. Cody perfectly instilled Flo with the good intentions of a mother who rarely raises her voice and only wants the best for her two daughters. She exhibited such strength and determination, and yes even fear, in her portrayal of a woman forced to deal with the changing times while trying to hold things together.

Rosemary is the woman who at first glance has it all; she has no responsibilities beyond her job and frequently talks about being able to do whatever she wants because she is an "old maid." Samantha Hanna was completely in control of this character who is also at a crossroads in her life. When it quickly becomes apparent that Rosemary isn't getting any younger, Hanna expertly showed the nuance of this woman and the fear and desperation that is slowly burning under the facade she puts on. While Mendoza had the least to do in the role of Helen, she still found a way to portray the feistiness of the character, the pain of dealing with an elderly parent, and the simple joy that Helen has for life.

Sean Peteet's muscular physique and stamina worked well for the part of Hal and, even though this was his first stage role, Peteet exhibited the right amount of confidence within the desperation of Hal's predicament. Kaidi Phillips and Gina Hoyt were winning as Flo's daughters Madge and Millie. While they are basically complete opposites, with Phillip's Madge being beautiful and Hoyt's Millie being tom-boy handsome, the two came across as sisters who get on each other's nerves but also look out for each other's best interests. Phillips was astute in her portrayal of this quiet and reserved girl, and quite effectively showed us how Madge is really just a naive, pretty girl who just wants to be loved, but is not sure who is the right person for her. Hoyt joyously got across the rambunctious and carefree spirit of Mille but also clearly showed how concerned she is about what others think of her. Andrew Blahak played Rosemary's boyfriend Howard, and the scenes the two of them shared were sweet and full of care, while Brandon Caraco displayed hurt and pain as Madge's boyfriend Alan.

Technical credits were sublime for the production, with a lovely set design by Kara E. Thompson full of realistic touches, and perfect period-specific costumes from Cheyenne Vande Krol-Phillips and Ashley Dietrich-Sharp. Anthony Jannuzzi's lighting managed to compose some lovely set pictures with his

sunsets and sunrise effects quite effective in portraying both the evening of the picnic and the early morning the day after.

While *Picnic* is set in the time period that it first appeared on Broadway, seeing it today brings an added nostalgic element by viewing the way people lived sixty years ago but also having a clearer understanding of what obstacles they faced. It also centers on normal, simple characters in a more simple time. These are the kinds of people who go about their normal daily activities and get excited about a new dress or the Labor Day picnic. Since Inge's characters are much like the average theatregoer, the characters and events of the play are still relatable even though sixty years have passed. With such a wonderful cast and lovely technical designs, MCC's production of *Picnic* was a rewarding journey to the past.

The Mesa Community College production of *Picnic* ran through April 22nd through April 30th, 2016, with performances at the MCC Southern & Dobson Campus at 1833 W. Southern Avenue in Mesa.

Information for upcoming productions can be found at www.mesacc.edu/departments/communication-theatre-film-arts/theatre-film-arts

Written by William Inge

Directed by Kevin Dressler

Scenic Design: Kara E. Thompson

Lighting Design: Anthony Jannuzzi

Costume Design: Cheyenne Vande Krol-Phillips & Ashley Dietrich-Sharp

Sound Design: Jeffrey Parulski

Cast:

Hal Carter: Sean Peteet

Madge Owens: Kaidi Phillips

Millie Owens: Gina Hoyt

Flo Owens: Cedar Eileen Cody

Rosemary Sydney: Samantha Hanna

Howard Bevans: Andrew Blahak

Alan Seymour: Brandon Caraco

Helen Potts: Dolores Mendoza

Voice: Colleen Cottrell

Christine Schoenwalder: Brittany May

Irma Kronkite: Jacqueline Rippon

Bomber: Chance Bond

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