

ReAct Theatre Presents Timeless Themes in 1950s-Set ‘Picnic’

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It’s a time of many anniversaries at The Repertory Actor’s Theatre (ReAct Theatre) — the only intentionally multiethnic philanthropic theatre company in the Seattle area.

ReAct opens its 20th anniversary year of production with William Inge’s play “Picnic,” which itself is now celebrating its 60th anniversary.

Director David Hsieh reports being excited to finally work on this play.

“I’m actually an Inge-directing virgin,” he says. “‘Picnic’ has always been a show I thought would be fun to work on. I first read it in high school and first saw a production in college.”

The confluence of anniversaries seemed to be at the right time.

“Rarely produced, this timeless American classic also got some recent buzz with the Broadway revival that played in New York earlier this year,” says Hsieh.

Inge and “Picnic” are firsts for many of the actors in the performance as well.

Actors Alexa Oo, who plays Madge, and Will Poole, who plays Hal, report that the humanity and seeming simplicity of the characters have drawn them in.

“Because of the time and location — 1953 in Kansas — it is a culture and time period that differs so much from my own,” Alexa Oo says. “But because the play revolves around relationships, it is one that can be understood by anyone who has experienced love and the pursuit of one’s dreams.”

Will Poole has had a similar experience in rehearsal.

“It is simple: A guy loves a girl. And she loves him. But they can’t. They just can’t,” Poole explains. “And the conflict doesn’t end there. Everyone wants something that they can’t have. And that makes for a compelling story.”

Hsieh agrees that the 1950s setting will pose no barrier to the audience’s enjoyment. “It’s these issues that help make the play timeless,” he says. “In the show, we see the constraints of gender, the superficiality of beauty, and the innocence of youth.” While a lot has changed since the 1950s, Hsieh notes that “the basic human struggles presented in the play are still universally relatable today. Themes of love, aging, societal pressures, sibling rivalry and broken dreams are things that most of us can relate to.”

And yet, the audience can expect some surprises.

“The characters are not what they appear to be,” says Alexa Oo. “Madge, for example, may appear to be superficial.”

But Oo warns us to watch carefully.

“Madge is much more complex and more of a deep thinker than other people make her out to be, as is Hal,” says Oo. “Even as I read the play, I initially had made assumptions about each character, but throughout the rehearsal process, I continually uncover new layers.”

The layers peel away as beauty becomes more than skin-deep. In the play, Madge is happy to be complimented on her physical beauty, but she also yearns for the same recognition of her intellect.

As Poole describes: “‘Picnic’ asks, what does beauty mean? Beauty is defined superficially in the world of the play, but there is a discomfort with the implications of being physically beautiful.”

Hsieh looks forward to sharing the universal social implications of “Picnic” with audiences this summer.

“Part of its appeal is that pseudo-nostalgic look back at a more innocent era of the American dream,” he says. “The action of ‘Picnic’ could still happen in any small rural American town today, even without cellphones and Twitter. Young people still dream and fall in love, parents still struggle to understand their kids and make the best for them, and people still deal with the complications and conundrums that life brings.”

And this “Picnic” still leaves plenty for audiences to chew on.

“I think the strength of the play,” Poole says, “is not in the statements that are made, but in the questions that are raised. Those are the questions that the audience will have to answer for themselves.”

“Picnic” runs July 6 – August 3, at Richard Hugo House on 1634 Eleventh Avenue in Seattle. Lear more at www.reacttheatre.org/box.html.