



Denver Center
Theatre Company

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Picnic

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MADGE: Oh, Mom, what can you do with the love you feel? Where is there you can take it?"

— Picnic

In the sun-drenched front yard of two modest houses in a small Kansas town during the 1950s, Flo Owens, a single mother, and her two teenage daughters prepare for the annual Labor Day picnic. The beautiful Madge is adored by the son of the wealthiest man in town, yet weary of her life as a lovely ornament. Her younger sister, Millie, 16, is intelligent and feisty, “the plain one,” a fact she knows and resents. When their neighbor, Mrs. Potts, hires the boastful, muscle-bound young drifter, Hal Carter, to do odd jobs around her house, the primeval force of his presence affects everyone. Each woman responds to his physical appeal in different ways, as memories, desires and repressed emotions are unleashed. Within 24 hours, Hal changes the course of their lives and his own.

A memory of women, all sorts of women—beautiful, bitter, harsh, loving, young, old, frustrated, happy—sitting on a front porch on a summer evening....

—William Inge, interview about *Picnic* in *The New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1953.

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The Playwright

A play should be admired for the experience it gives, not for the idea a playgoer comes away remembering. He should feel richer within himself, more responsive, more aware.

– William Inge in an interview in *Vogue*, May 1, 1954.

William Motter Inge was born May 3, 1913, in Independence, Kansas, and was the youngest of five children. His father was a traveling salesman, his mother kept a boarding house, renting only to women. His taste for theatre was developed early, when his boy scout troupe held its meetings in the Civic Center and the boys were often invited to watch the shows traveling through from Kansas City, Missouri to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Inge attended the University of Kansas at Lawrence where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Speech and Drama in 1935. After a brief attempt at graduate studies, he worked a number of jobs, including as a highway laborer, news announcer and high school teacher, before returning to school and earning a Master of Arts degree in English from the George Peabody College for Teachers in 1943.

Inge moved to St. Louis, landing a job as the drama and music critic for the *St. Louis Times*. It was during his years at the *Times* that Inge came into contact with Tennessee Williams who invited the young critic to attend a production of *The Glass Menagerie* with him. Inge was so inspired by Williams' play that he decided to try his hand as a playwright. After completing his first script, *Farther Off from Heaven* (1947), Inge sent a copy to Williams who recommended it to Margo Jones in Dallas, Texas and she produced it for her inaugural season at her theatre '47 resident theatre company.

His next literary effort, *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950) was produced on Broadway and earned him the title of “most promising playwright of the 1950 Broadway season.” He followed this success with *Picnic* (1952), which won the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award and the Theatre Club Award. Next came *Bus Stop* (1955), later adapted by George Axelrod into a film starring Marilyn Monroe. Two years later, a reworking of his first play premiered on Broadway as

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (1957), a semi-autobiographical drama. Inge described it as his “first cautious attempt to look at the past, with an effort to find order and meaning in experiences that were once too close to be seen clearly.”

Critics were now hailing Inge as another Tennessee Williams but his later works would not fulfill that promise. The success of *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* was followed by a string of box office failures including *A Loss of Roses* (1960), *Natural Affection* (1963), *Where's Daddy?* (1966), and *The Last Pad* (1970). Inge took the stings of his failures and fled New York for Florida and then Los Angeles, where he began writing screenplays. The result was *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), which won an Academy Award for Best Screenplay. The artistic compromises involved in writing for Hollywood plagued him and he fell into a deep depression, a condition that he suffered throughout his life. He was so dissatisfied with his last screenplay *Bus Riley's Back in Town*, that he had his name removed from the credits. Convinced that he could no longer write, his depression got the better of him and on June 10, 1973, William Inge died, as a suicide, from carbon monoxide poisoning at his home in the Hollywood Hills.

I lost my audience and I haven't been able to get it back.

–William Inge in an interview with Dennis Brown in 1971 in *Shoptalk*, New York: Newmarket Press, 1992.

Playwright of the Heartland

In an introduction to *The Plains States*, a *Time-Life* book, William Inge expressed some of his feeling for his native region.

“Violence on the plain exists more in nature than in man,” he said when he wrote of the extremes of weather.¹ Blizzards, tornadoes, dust storms, floods, drought and steaming heat were events he experienced in his childhood. “Men here look at the sky each morning as soon as they get out of bed to see what kind of day is indicated.”² A season’s crops can be destroyed in a few hours if the sky is threatening.

When a New York friend remarked that people in Kansas are genuinely sweet, Inge responded, “Perhaps this sweetness of character becomes instilled in a group of people who are more dependent upon the elements than are those in other parts of the country.”³

On the Midwestern plains, people often deal with forces beyond their control and they can have a very philosophical quality that comes with the knowledge that man is not all-powerful. The small town of Independence, Kansas, had a profound influence on Inge and he attributed his understanding of human behavior to growing up in this environment.

“I’ve often wondered how people raised in our great cities ever develop any knowledge of humankind. People who grow up in small towns get to know each other so much more closely than they do in cities.”⁴

Inge did not like the adjective “flat” as applied to the land in the Plains States. “When we speak of anything as *flat* we imply that it holds no content or interest.”⁴ He preferred the word *level* because it was synonymous with the honesty and truth of the land. In keeping with that truthfulness, Josh Logan, the director of the film *Picnic*, moved cast and crew to Kansas. Thus, the fictional town of Salinson consisted of the authentic backgrounds of Salina, Hutchinson, Halstead, Sterling and Nickerson.

Inge creates characters full of honesty and truthfulness. His plays often deal with these characters trying to apply these traits to themselves. Certainly, Flo and Mrs. Potts have endured the rigors of a rough life when they lost their men, while Rosemary has spent her life single and teaching school. Like the landscape around them, they have uncomplicated features, but they are not uncomplicated people. “Midwesterners like Inge have a tendency to see themselves as the champions of American virtue and to look askance at the forces they feel are corrupting other sections of the nation.”⁵

Maybe we find beauty only in what we know. Mountains have never intrigued me. They have none of the mystery of the prairie, where one can always feel close to some truth concerning man and his place in the universe.

– William Inge

The Fifties

It was the decade of President Eisenhower, the baseball player, Willie Mays, hula hoops, Elvis Presley, American Bandstand, barbecues, and Marilyn Monroe. People turned on the television to watch “I Love Lucy,” “Father Knows Best,” and “Leave It to Beaver.”¹

The 1950s were a time of great change in every aspect of American life. The end of World War II (1945) brought scores of young men back to the States in search of a new life. They were finding new jobs, buying houses, purchasing goods, raising families while industry was booming. In addition to economic growth, America experienced a sharp increase in the rate of births thus launching the Baby Boom Era. For the first time in history, the average American family was able to afford an automobile, a house (largely owing to the development of suburbs), a television set (the new preferred form of entertainment), and new home appliances such as the electric can opener, modern refrigerators, washing machines and dishwashers.

However, life in the 50s did not prove idyllic. The new American lifestyle brought to the surface the need for a redefinition of family roles and values. Many of Inge's works focused on the challenges of family life or, in the case of *Picnic*, a family without a father.

“I think the American male is in a tragic position because he has no real mode of expression,” Inge stated in a 1967 interview.² The idealized father figure represented on television in the guise of Ozzie Nelson or Ward Cleaver wasn't necessarily the reality. Alfred Kinsey's report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, appeared in 1950, challenging the myth of the stereotypical American male. Kinsey's report included statistics that revealed 80% of businessmen engaged in extramarital affairs and approximately 10% of males were homosexual. Inge tackled the stereotype of the American male in *Picnic* through the theme of loneliness.

Alan seems to have it all as the son of a wealthy man, but he needs Madge, the trophy wife, to complete the picture. Hal possess the muscular bravado of the All-American stud, yet he is confused and alienated: a show-off and braggart on the one hand, a helpless child/man on the other. When he meets Madge, he sees his salvation in her love, but his prickly past leaves us wondering if their summer romance can result in something more. Howard also suffers from loneliness, but is reluctant to give up his wandering ways until he is forced to commit to Rosemary.

Likewise, Inge concerned himself with the American woman of the 1950s. “Women who could not walk the

fine line (of) nurturing motherhood – or who had trouble adjusting to ‘creative homemaking’ – were labeled neurotic, perverted or schizophrenic.”³ Despite the popular opinion, the 1950s were a precursor of the feminist movement of the 1960s. With pioneers such as Margaret Sanger and her fight for the legalization of and further research into birth control; Betty Friedan and her study on *The Feminine Mystique* about the disillusionment of housewives, and the publishing of Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place*, the country realized women were approaching the forefront of activism. Women in the 1950s... frequently could not serve on juries, own property, make contracts or take out department store charge cards in their own name. After the conclusion of World War II, working women were often the target of verbal attacks by academics, professionals and politicians. The image of the single woman was the most dismal. Benign characterizations portrayed her as incomplete, deficient, pitiable and slightly ridiculous in women's magazines, movies, television and advertising. To this extent, Inge's point of view was that “social determinism creates the situations within which people must function, and situations are far from perfect—or even desirable.”⁴

In *Picnic* and other plays, “Inge explores the relationships and challenges of romantic love and about the hurdles that have to be met and crossed.”⁵ For Inge, lasting love was hard to find and harder to hold. Compromise was essential. In *Picnic*, Madge goes off to an uncertain future; Rosemary enters a loveless marriage, Flo and Mrs. Potts remain on the front porch. Only Millie is the promise for a different tomorrow.

Inge's Women

We poets would die of loneliness
but for women, and we choose
our men friends that we may have
somebody to talk about women
with.

– William Butler Yeats. *The Letters of William
Butler Yeats*, 1936.

In November 1958 Robert Brustein wrote an article for *Harper's* titled “The Men-Taming Women of William Inge.” In it he called *Picnic* “a satyr play glorifying the phallic male” and that “before the heroine can give herself to him, he must sacrifice his sexual and muscular bravado and admit he is a liar and a bum.”¹ He continued: “Marriage demands a sacrifice of the hero's image while he must give up his aggressiveness—and admit he is lost in the world and needs help.”² In addition, Brustein asserts that “women have the pivotal roles and Inge concentrates on the pathos of [their] suffering to issue in triumph.”³ Finally, he called Inge “a spokesman for matriarchal America” and his plays a “preachy endorsement of family life.”⁴

Inge was hurt by these assertions, but decided to do nothing publicly about them. Privately, he phoned Brustein but received no apology. It was left to his biographers to come to his defense. In his book, *William Inge*, R. Baird Shuman notes that women were not in charge of their destinies in the 1950s and found it difficult to change their situations. In Rosemary's case, she is a teacher in a small town who is “expected to be a paragon of virtue, uphold the code of middle class morality... and conform to the demands of society.”⁵ If women “tamed” men, maybe the men needed it; surely Hal's *braggadoccio* and manners could benefit from some moderate domestication. Even Howard admits marriage to Rosemary might help his business in that he will be considered more respectable. Finally, Inge's females show more independent spirit than subjection; Rosemary has made her own way, Madge leaves home, and Millie insists she will go to New York, write books and never marry.

In *A Life of William Inge* by Ralph F. Voss, the author says that if Brustein writes “tamed,” perhaps he doesn't realize the word also means “a willingness to seek solace or comfort in a love relationship usually associated with marriage.”⁶ If Hal is tamed, it may be “because of

his need to be loved and taken seriously.”⁷ Besides, Voss notes, the play is about the effects of loneliness, frustration and desperation in the lives of the women who have the pivotal roles. In the end, Voss writes that it is unreasonable to imply that drama is mediocre or trite if it portrays “the human need for love and reinforces the institution... of family life.”⁸ If that were the case, then

Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller dealt with clichés.

If anyone in *Picnic* set out to “tame” a man then Mrs. Potts would not say: “...[Hal] walked through the door and clomped through the tiny rooms as if he was still outdoors. There was a man in the house and it seemed good. ...And that reminded me I'm a woman. And that seemed good, too.” (*Picnic*)

Pretty Women: A Look at Looks

MILLIE: Madge is the pretty one....
MADGE: ...It's no good just to be pretty. It's no good.

– *Picnic*

Beauty. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “excelling in grace of form, charm of coloring and other qualities, which delight the eye and call forth admiration a: of the human face and figure, b: of other objects.” Although the definition of beauty can be debated, the experience of it cannot.

Beauty can stir up turmoil of emotions; pleasure, longings and envy among them.

What does beauty gain and at what price? Studies show good-looking people are given preferred treatment; they find leniency in court, cooperation from strangers and sexual partners without any trouble. In one study 75 college men were shown photographs of attractive women and they all agreed to volunteer to do anything for them except loan them money.¹ However, feminists and social scholars are ambivalent about good looks: “they see it as a source of strength and as a source of weakness and enslavement, something that blinds others to our deep nature.”² Some women in particular want to be recognized as “more than a pretty face” as Madge implies, but who hasn’t heard other women remark: “I would kill to look like (insert name of your choice!).”

People like to pretend that looks don’t matter, but even the revered Eleanor Roosevelt regretted she wasn’t pretty.³ If looks are irrelevant, then how do we explain the amounts of money spent on cosmetics, plastic surgery, diet and exercise products? The truth is: “we face a world where lookism... is pervasive.”⁴

But can we blame this idea on evolution and history? For centuries people believed that the human face forecast character; Sappho, the ancient Greek female poet, wrote that “what is beautiful is good” and Plato believed that physical beauty equated spiritual beauty. These days we know it is difficult to get a read on a person’s character, intelligence or soul just by looking at them. If that were so, “Mother Teresa would look like Miss Universe.”⁵

Sadly, beauty does give one status. Good-looking

people are more likely to get away with crimes such as shoplifting, driving over the speed limit and cheating on exams. An example: Madge is failing history until she turns her charms on Mr. Jeeter, the teacher. With a few tears, she obtains a passing grade.

If attractive people do have an advantage, it is a small one. Most studies compare the great-looking people with very unattractive people, whereas most individuals tend to hover toward the average. And good looks don’t last forever. As Flo tells Madge: “A pretty girl doesn’t have long—just a few years when she’s the equal of kings...”⁶

Finally, beautiful people aren’t necessarily the happiest people. In a study by psychologists Diener and Myers, they believe “that happiness has more to do with personal qualities such as optimism, a sense of personal control, self-esteem, ability to tolerate frustration, feelings of comfort and affection for people rather than with looks or money.”⁷

Self-image is a matter of knowing who you are and what feels right for you as a way to be and live. “Beauty comes from having my own style, living my own way and knowing my own mind... My beauty secrets are self-love and self-knowledge.”⁸

ACTIVITIES

I. We all make choices in life that affects the directions our lives take. What are some choices that you have made that have significantly changed the direction of your life?

II. Are we able to change choices that at the time seem appropriate that later we decide were not so wise?

III. When do we solicit the guidance of others to help us make decisions in life?

IV. What decisions are we expected to make on our own?

V. All of living is a process of age, of reconciling the essence of the inner self with one's outer being, with the world, and with the changing expectations for that self in the world. The teen years, when young people are perched precariously on the brink between childhood and adult responsibilities, are, of course, when the coming of age process is most obvious. It is then that most young adults are making decisions that will have tremendous influence on the shape of their lives to come.

Obviously, we need to take an active role in changing all those societal factors that impede our development, and we need to actively work with a wide variety of positive images to emulate. Identifying strong voices in children's and young adult literature is one way to present such positive images.

The following lists are stories that provide a rich variety of strong characters, both young protagonists and older adults to serve as role models at critical stages in their development.

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ACTIVITIES

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