PICNIC - HOME, Manchester
by Manchester School of Theatre
Reviewed by Matthew Dougall November 2017

Once again I find myself going to a play of which I know absolutely nothing. I had never before heard of either the play, 'Picnic', nor it's author, **William Inge**; and yet, this astounds me since I have spent my whole life within the profession, and this is a play and an author one feels one really ought to know.

An American classic (a film was made of it in the glory days of Hollywood starring William Holden) and many of his plays have seen huge success - both on stage and the silver screen the other side of the pond. Why then, has his work not endured with the same intensity over here? I have no idea. The play was extremely Miller-esque. I could easily see similarities and themes in this play to the writings of both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. And indeed the play is set in a small Mid-American township in the 1950s and has that claustrophobic feel that both Miller and Williams were masters of.

This is a gem of a play. Superb writing, and with such sensitive and intelligent direction by **Stefan Escreet**
, the play was brought to stunning life. I laughed, I cried, I was so involved - and the acting was so close - that I wanted to join in, and that for me is something I NEVER want to do. I have always been a traditionalist in that respect and like the audience to be just that, observers of an unfolding series of tableaux before them; so for me to be so enthralled and involved in the play that I wanted to interact with them, is one hell of an admission and an incredible feat of acting from those on stage.

But of course I didn't join in, it wasn't that kind of play. In fact it was incredibly well measured and the pace and timing just right, bringing about the inevitable unhappy ending.

I have seen a good number of plays by Manchester School of Theatre over the years, but this one I think has to be the best yet. MST have a reputation for excellence but this one will definitely take some beating! The quality of the acting was second to none. In fact I would go as far as to say that this production was worthy of The Royal Exchange's main stage!

The two sisters, Madge and Millie Owens were superb. Played by **Millie Gaston** and **Zoe Villiers**
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they were the absolute embodiment of jealous siblings; one with the beauty and good looks and the other with artistic talent and brains. They sparked off each other brilliantly and were utterly believable. Playing opposite them were two young men of no lesser talent and credibility.

Robin Lyons
was Alan Seymour, the clever college chap who has a dad with some money and influence and is therefore undoubtedly a 'good catch' for Madge, despite the fact that Millie secretly has a crush on him; whilst the muscular, sporty and misfit ne'er-do-well Hal Carter, played here by
Rufus Cameron
, who is actually good and honest underneath, captures Madge's heart and she finally is able to feel alive.

The sub-plot concerns the love life and affairs of a spinster school teacher who eventually connives her long term and long suffering boyfriend to marry her. A lovely interpretation of these roles was given by **Madeleine Daly** as Rosemary and **James King-Nikol** as Howard. Special mention must also be made of the sister's mother. Playing a character well beyond her years, and playing it with such authority and assurance I never, not even for a split second, saw her as anything but a forty-something year old lady who takes in boarders, was
Megan McInerney
as Flo. Providing a little light-relief from all the sexual and actual tension were
Gabriele Woolner
as the busy-body neighbour who looks after her elderly and unseen mother, Helen Potts; and a couple of Rosemary's colleagues, Irma Krankite (
Kayley McGowan
) and Christine Schoenwalder (
Maddy Wakeling
). I especially liked McGowan here.

The set was also something to delight. Instead of the usual end-on configuration, we were treated to a traverse style of staging today with audience on the two lengthier ends of a rectangle. The other two shorter ends were set two neighbouring houses with a yard in between. Everything about the set looked and felt authentic. Even down to the milk bottle. Cleverly designed and it worked superbly (**Elizabeth Wright**). There was, however, only a couple of slight suggestions about the set which I feel I should mention. The dialogue states at the beginning of the play just exactly how hot it is, and we learn that it is September. Having been to that part of the US in September I can say with some authority that leaves don't start to die and fall from trees until much later in the year, and so I found it odd that the floor was strewn with them. I would also have liked to have seen inside the houses too. Seeing just a plain black

curtain behind the two doors was a little disappointing.

However, the lighting, the sound, the costumes, and everything else about this wonderful piece of theatre was simply astonishing. Even all the casts' accents were consistent and authentic-sounding. I was asked on my way out if I had enjoyed the play; I was so choked up that I could hardly reply.