



AMERICAN CLASSIC BACK ON BROADWAY (left to right) Sebastian Stan, Ellen Burstyn, Ben Rappaport & Maggie Grace in *Picnic*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Picnic revival: Not much to feast on here

PICNIC

Written by William Inge

Directed by Sam Gold

Through February 24, 2013

American Airlines Theatre

227 West 42nd Street

(212-239-6200), www.Roundabouttheatre.org

By David NouNou

Sitting through William Inge's mothball-ridden *Picnic*, the most perplexing question one may ponder all evening is, "Did they have men's hip-hugging designer jeans cut off way below the waist back in 1953, and were men actually chiseled and buff back then?" From what I recall of the 1953 Marlon Brando movie *The Wild Ones*, everyone wore those God-awful dungarees/blue jeans. I guess this was the director Sam Gold's and costume designer David Zinn's idea of updating this play, keeping the audience awake and riveted to the proceedings.

The proceedings, threadbare as they are, consist of: drifter Hal Carter (Sebastian Stan) comes to a small Kansas town with nothing else but his tight jeans, muscle-bound body, tall tales and not much of anything else. This makes the women in this sleepy town wake up and have their hearts skip a beat. The conquest here is the pretty one, Madge (Maggie Grace). Yes, she is pretty, but dim as a 20-watt bulb. A lot of folderol and yakking takes place. There is something about going to a picnic, dancing, and getting drunk. Hal seduces Madge, skips the picnic, and everyone is in an uproar. Hal flees town the next morning and the big question is, "Will Madge stay in this dreary town to reconcile with her beau, Alan, or will she flea to Tulsa to follow her heart?"

William Inge was a prolific playwright in the 1950s and early 1960s, and this play actually won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 for Best Play; however, his plays did not have the power, complexities or dimensions that his contemporaries Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams had. You can say he was a

distant third. His plays spelled youth and angst for their day, but by today's standards, they are dated and almost unrevivable. Having your leading man be shirtless and putting him in below-hip-hugging jeans is not reimagining a classic; it is just trashing it.

In order for *Picnic* to work you have to have heat and sizzle between your two young leading characters. After all, the setting is a hot, end-of-summer day in dusty Kansas, a place in which passion seethes and the young are restless. Remember the 1955 movie with William Holden and Kim Novak? They were way too old for their parts and even they had more chemistry and spark as Hal and Madge, respectively. In this case, with Sebastian Stan and Maggie Grace, both play up their narcissism and both of them lack acting technique and charisma. He is too busy sucking in his gut and posturing; and she is just flitting by, getting duller by the minute.

Thank God for the old folk, and I don't mean this in an insulting manner, for they are seasoned and know their way on a stage. They capture the essence of the times and bring passion to their performances. Mare Winningham is marvelous as Flo Owens, Madge's mother. Ellen Burstyn (Helen Potts), Flo's next-door neighbor; Elizabeth Marvel (Rosemary Sydney) spinster school marm and Flo's boarder; and Reed Birney (Howard Bevens), Rosemary's boyfriend, all bring needed relief and welcome performances to this heatless *Picnic*.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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