

# Lust in the Dust

***Picnic*, by William Inge. Staged by the Essex Players at Memorial Hall, Essex Center, May 13-14.**

By Nicole Curvin

**Y**ou don't have to travel to New York City to see a delightful revival of *Picnic* by William Inge. The Essex Players skillfully capture the nuances of small town life in the 1953 Pulitzer Prize-winning play about a few not-so-happy-days in the American midwest.

*Picnic* is the story of a drifter named Hal Carter (John Alexander) and the dizzying affect he has on five women one hot Labor Day weekend. It centers on Madge Owens (Kate Adams), a pretty but vacuous 18-year-old who is expected to marry her wealthy but boring boyfriend Alan Seymour — until Hal saunters into town.

Madge quickly develops the hots for Hal. And she has competition — not just from her elderly neighbor, Helen Potts. Her sister Millie, acted with just the right amount of vivacity by Kelly Rackleff, is a feisty 16-year-old tomboy who writes poetry, swears she'll never fall in love and is defiantly jealous of her older, more attractive sibling. She transforms herself from a smart-mouthed tomboy into a pretty young woman to get the young drifter's attention.

Also intrigued is Rosemary Sydney, played by Suzan Newman — an eccentric middle-aged school teacher and boarder in the Owens' house who feigns dislike of men even though she secretly wants a husband. Her bumbling businessman boy-

friend, portrayed by Will Giblin, has a serious bootleg whiskey habit that turns out to be far less appealing than Hal's.

The entire ensemble gives the

play a vitality which makes each character interesting to watch. Alexander renders Hal, the drifter who swaggers, boasts and tells outlandish tales with a southern twang, believably compelling. Rackleff brings Millie humorously to life while conveying the confusing emotions of adolescence.

Lauren Neavin lends dynamic strength to her portrayal of a 40-year-old mother fighting for the future of her daughter. Also commendable is Nathan Lisle who gives a fine performance as Alan, Madge's jilted boyfriend.

Despite its outdated themes, director Brooke Wetzel has done a good job bringing out the humor in the play via characterization. The first half moves at a brisk pace, with many funny encounters among the boisterous inhabitants of this quaint Kansas town. Problems arise in the second half of the production, however, when the actors are dragged down by melodrama.

Originally a one-act sketch of five frustrated women sitting on a porch, *Picnic* is still loaded with 1950s' values and sensibilities which seem old-fashioned today. It's hard to stomach all the fawning as well as advice like: "A pretty girl doesn't have long... Then she's the equal of kings and she can walk out of a shanty like this and live in a palace with a dotting husband who'll spend his life making her happy." Give me a *break*.

By the end of the play, these women have gone to extremes to break out of their humdrum existences. But the simple equation of fulfillment equals a man is a notion that makes the play seem stale.

But *Picnic*, a classic tale of girl meets stranger and falls in love, is still worth watching for its entertainment value. Just leave your '90s' attitudes at the door. ■