

A Fresh Take

Love and family bonds unfold in classic play

By **Bridgette M. Redman**
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Sometimes a handsome, shirtless guy can turn an entire small town upside down. So went William Inge's "Picnic" in 1953 and so goes Eric Anderson's "Back Porch," based on the Inge classic. Anderson's version, directed by Kelie McIver, is getting its world premiere at Victory Theatre Center from June 2 to July 9.

This time, however, instead of all the women adoring the sexy vagabond, it is a young man who falls in love with the handsome male stranger. It was an idea Anderson had been toying with since 2013.

"I had this idea of writing a gay 'Picnic' many years ago," Anderson said. "It happened to coincide with the playwright William Inge's 100th birthday. Inge was a closeted gay playwright of some significance. I was wondering if he lived in an-

other time and place, would he have written a gay play. It occurred to me how 'Picnic' could be transformed with a kind of funhouse mirror, where there was a homosexual relationship rather than a heterosexual relationship. From that, I got the idea of how to do it and things fell into place pretty easily."

The play takes place in a small Kansas town in 1955 where "Picnic" is being filmed. Barney Opat (Karl Maschek) is the single father of two boys: 18-year-old Gary (Isaac W. Jay), who yearns to escape small-town Kansas life for a more glamorous existence, and energetic 13-year-old Del Wayne (Cody Lemmon). The handsome stranger (Jordan Morgan) is William Holden's stunt double who arrives in town with the other all-star "Picnic" cast members. Holden played the part of Hal, the macho drifter at the center of "Picnic."

Anderson, who was born and raised in



From left, actors Jonathan Fishman, Isaac W. Jay, Cody Lemmon and Karl Maschek rehearse "Back Porch."

Kansas, remembers portions of "Picnic" being filmed a county away from his home.

"My family drove to the location one evening to take part in the 'Neewollah'

scene on the river," Anderson said. "I've been crazy about movies — and theater — ever since. With 'Back Porch,' I wanted to pay tribute to a significant American playwright who was also significantly closet-



Keira Wight/Contributor

Actors Jonathan Fishman, from left, Jordon Morgan, Isaac W. Jay, Eric Zak, Karl Maschek and Cody Lemmon prepare for the opening of "Back Porch" at The Victory Garden Center.

ed.”

The play was scheduled to open in 2020, but was shut down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three years later, it is getting its opening. Anderson hopes the classic “Picnic” appeal will provide a foundation for people’s enjoyment of “Back Porch.”

“‘Picnic’ is a good story,” Anderson said. “It’s a romance, and I think Americans like romances, no matter how cynical they become. We like stories of strangers showing up and disrupting the lives of people and hopefully making things come out for the better.”

He’s hoping that the gay version of “Picnic” will resonate with audiences who are more sophisticated and can see the irony of “Back Porch” being based on another play and reflecting it in a gay context.

Anderson described “Back Porch” as a comedy about family relations as well as a romance between two fellows.

“The single father is a widow, he’s sort of put his heart on hold as a way of grieving for his wife,” Anderson said. “Even though it’s been many years, he’s

still stuck. He has two sons and he’s been steady, but not a close father to them. The arrival of the stranger into the family shakes those relationships, and as a result, they’re all three closer to each other by the end of the play rather than driven apart.”

Anderson and McIver, who is also from Kansas, attribute the play’s power to the characters.

“Back Porch is a love letter to William Inge, and it’s also a terrific ensemble piece in which each character has an interesting and beautiful arc,” McIver said. “I love them all and want to hang out with them.”

Anderson emphasized the importance of having his characters talk like ordinary people. He wanted to put assemble a humorous cast rather than take a grim or melodramatic approach.

“I would like to make clear that it is not a parody or camp,” Anderson said. “I appreciate both of those forms of entertainment a lot, but ‘Back Porch’ is not that. It’s a rather gentle, uncynical look at romantic relationships and family relationships.” ■

“Back Porch” by Eric Anderson

WHEN: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 4 p.m. Sundays. June 2 to July 9
WHERE: The Victory Theatre Center, 3324 W. Victory Boulevard, Burbank
COST: \$25

INFO: onstage411.com/BackPorch