

From TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Back Porch



Photo by Keira Wight

Victory Theatre Center

The world premiere of *Back Porch*, Eric Anderson's loving homage to William Inge's classic tale *Picnic*, delivers a charming, sweet little gem of a play to the Victory.

Anderson grew up in rural Kansas in the early 1950s, where he developed a lifelong obsession with both Hollywood and Inge's Pulitzer-winning drama when as a child in the summer of 1955, his family journeyed to the next county to watch part of the time-honored Oscar-winning version of *Picnic* being filmed.

"I've been crazy about movies and theatre ever since," says Anderson. "I wanted to pay tribute to a significant American playwright, William Inge, who was significantly closeted. I hoped to write the kind of play that he himself might have written had he lived in another time and place."

Clearly, Anderson is correct and he has done just that. On Kenneth Klimak's simple rustic countrified porch set, a young man named Gary Opat (Isaac W. Jay) is no smoldering Kim Novak but he shares Madge Owens' frustration and anxiety coming of age stuck in a small town and missing out on the more adventurous aspects of life he only reads about happening in other more vibrant places—in Gary's case, Hollywood, a place he only dreams about lost soaking up his movie magazines.

Along comes a strapping and world-wise young urban cowboy with dubious intentions named Bill Holman (Jordan Morgan), who becomes the life-changing Hal Carter to Gary's innocence-challenged Madge. In Anderson's clever tale, it seems the guy is actually connected to Joshua Logan's film version, as he's in town working as stunt double for William Holden himself since—wouldn't you know it?—Logan's actual movie is currently being filmed right there in their overwhelmed little community.

Anderson's play is extremely promising, which is perhaps the best way to also describe this production. It's promising, not perfect. What's needed most is stronger direction from Kelie Mclver, whose staging is impressive but guidance in keeping the cast on the same page needs improvement. When there are this many one-person shows on one stage at the same time, it's the director who must help them together forge a convincing ensemble.

Particularly in the first act, the languid pace, which is surely intentional to show the boring routine of the people who inhabit the Opats' back porch, gets a little *too* languid to keep its viewers interested. This is exacerbated by most of the performances, with actors left alone to create their quirky characters but doing little to successfully communicate with and bounce off one another.

I would love to know what Jay and Morgan see when they look out front into the fourth wall; as it is, it seems instead of envisioning hills and valleys, both are making sure their most important lines and emotional moments land just above the audience's heads. We get it just hearing Anderson's evocative dialogue without being treated as though we need it to be hammered in.

In the first act, Jay has the hardest time simply because his twink-ish years are obviously a bit too far in the past. Getting to a place of Gary's late teenage angst and refreshingly angelic unsullied *golly-gee-ery* is just past his prime. By the second half, his character's newly minted maturity grows exponentially and works like gangbusters, although if tears don't come when scripted, unconvincing wailing buried in your partner's shoulder is not an alternative.

Morgan fares better as Bill, although even though his character's intentions are purposely suspect, the true nature of his attraction to Gary is still in flux in his otherwise convincing interpretation.

The best performances at this early point in the evolution of *Back Porch* are a delightfully rich turn by Jonathan Fishman as the family's lovable neighbor and constant visitor to the Opat social hub of a porch Millard Goff and particularly Karl Maschek as Gary and Del Wayne's initially milquetoast widower father Barney.

Maschek, the play's resident George Tesman of the mid-century American South, is simply the heart and soul of this production. In the first act, the character is interesting but only hints at being pivotal, but in the second half as the play's series of crises unfold, he becomes a titan. The disappointments he has suppressed in himself and the guilt about how he has managed to raise his sons as a single father after the death of his wife while giving birth to Del Wayne is simply heartbreaking—and when Barney himself breaks, Maschek is nothing short of riveting.

Erik Zac as the annoying Rosalind Russell schoolteacher-boarder character here called Myron Uhrig and Cody Lemmon as Gary's brash young outspoken younger sibling Del Wayne both have endearing moments but, in general, this cast (save Maschek) needs to stop working so hard and instead begin truly listening to and connecting with one another.

This doesn't mean such a thing won't happen here, particularly considering the potential magic inherent in Anderson's play. The performance I attending was one of the first. Give these obviously talented performers a few more performances under their belt and I truly suspect great things will begin to happen. Just please trust the playwright's evocative and well-chosen words, folks; it's all right there for you without having to hammer it all out so hard.

Unfortunately, since the late-great William Inge's shame over his repressed homosexuality and his long documented struggle with alcohol and depression led to his suicide at age 60 in 1973, creating a play dealing with a forbidden love affair between two young men discovering their attraction to one another at a bucolic smalltown family's simple country home in the repressed 1950s does somehow honor a tortured but immensely talented wordsmith who, despite his success, was never able to achieve the even greater heights of what might have been due to the societal limitations of the times he created his masterworks.

Somehow I think, if he could, Inge would be thanking Eric Anderson profusely for continuing and building upon his legacy with his lovely, lyrical *Back Porch*.

THROUGH JULY 9: Victory Theatre Center, 3324 W. Victory Blvd, Burbank.
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