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'Picnic' cast confidently explores small-town life

If one of the measures of a classic is durability, the power to say something moving and true to generation after generation, "Picnic" is a classic.

The current production at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Salisbury Theatre celebrates the 50th anniversary of the school's drama department, and it does so in splendid fashion.

As Salisbury observes in his notes to the production, this depiction of small-town life



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Robert Hannon is a Fairbanks resident who has been involved in local theater for more than 20 years.

mostly concerns women: their dreams, fears and resignations. The young women look forward with anticipation while the older women look back with regret.

This is especially true of Anna Gagne-Hawes' depiction of the school teacher Rosemary. This spinster feels each tick of her biological clock winding down.

Hadassah R. Nelson is convincingly weary, wary and maternal as Flo Owens, a single mother who rents out rooms and wants something better for her two teenage daughters: the pretty but not-so-bright Madge, and Millie, a budding intellectual who is clueless around boys.

As the daughters, Jey Johnson captures Madge's poignancy of being ornamental while yearning for something deeper. For her part, Jesse A. Hobbs is a spunky Millie, a cerebral duckling who becomes a swan.

Janet Bradner, the most senior cast member, has perhaps the sweetest role in the production; she does a wonderful job. Helen Potts is a woman who saw her dreams of marriage cut short by her mother. Now, years later, as she nurses that invalid mother, she's the only woman able to keep her emotional balance when Hal Carter rolls into town.

As countless commentators have pointed out, Inge's play

captures the desultory air of small-town life, the aimless atmosphere that can explode when an unstable element is introduced. Hal Carter is that element: tall, athletic, good-looking, with a penchant for working without a shirt.

Levi Rion Ben-Isreal does a terrific job displaying Hal's conflicted nature. The product of what today we'd call a very dysfunctional family, Hal has dreams of something grand without the skills or intelligence to pull it off. He is a drifter with a pocketful of tales that may or may not be true.

This inevitability is another classic element in "Picnic." Characters behave as they must. Howard Bevins, a store owner, knows by play's end marrying the school teacher Rosemary will be a mistake, but powers beyond him seem to direct his future.

Theatre UAF's production is a tribute to a once-celebrated playwright who has all but disappeared from public view. It is also a fitting capstone to 50 years of service by the university. Many fine actors and performers working in our area and others who have fanned out across the country started at UAF.