

UNDERSTANDING INGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER ELLENSTEIN

Education Dramaturg Ted Sod interviewed the Inge Center's Artistic Director, Peter Ellenstein, about the legacy of *Picnic* playwright William Inge.

Ted Sod: Please tell us about the mission of the Inge Center and your role there.

Peter Ellenstein: I am the Artistic Director of the Inge Center, which grew out of the William Inge Theatre Festival. The festival started in 1982 to honor the legacy of William Inge and to honor contemporary playwrights. Soon a few playwrights came out to this little town in Kansas every year and the town set up volunteer groups. It grew and grew. Now, almost every major American playwright has been to Kansas for the Inge Festival. I became Artistic Director in 2001. Partnering with Independence Community College, we expanded to become The William Inge Center for the Arts. The William Inge Festival Foundation purchased Inge's house. We began a playwrights' residency in 2002 and have hosted more than forty-five contemporary playwrights. They garner inspiration by living in Inge's house while working on their plays.

TS: What is your attraction to Inge? Sometimes it seems that he is forgotten.

PE: He was forgotten from the mid '60s on. He had four huge hits on Broadway right in a row. In the '50s, he was the most successful American playwright, more successful than Miller, Williams, or anybody at the time. He had *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *Picnic* (which won the Pulitzer), *Bus Stop*, and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. All were hits and all were turned into major motion pictures. His next three plays, *A Loss of Roses*, *Natural Affection*, and *Where's Daddy?*, were not well received. In 1961, Inge wrote the screenplay for *Splendor in the Grass*, which won the Academy Award, but he was viewed as passé by many. Almost every playwright goes through some sort of fallow period at some point in the middle of their career. Inge had a very understated way of observing human behavior; which worked up until the 60s. Albee, Pinter, and all of the experimental stuff was happening. Inge was such a phenomenal writer that I have no doubt he would have eventually adjusted to the new taste and created work that would have been popular. Several scholars have referred to him as the American Chekhov, which I don't think is an unwarranted comparison. He writes in everyday language, but roiling passions are beneath the surface. His plays, especially those first four, are meticulously constructed. I think *Picnic* may be the best written of them all. I think the thing that makes Inge unique among the great American playwrights is that he deals with empathy, compassion, and forgiveness and yet, he doesn't write villains. There are very few playwrights who write without a villain.

TS: I am curious about the genesis of *Picnic*. I read that Inge remembered as a young boy how his mother ran a boarding house and took in some school teachers. Am I correct?

PE: Yes, that's absolutely correct.

TS: Wasn't this play entitled *Front Porch* at one point?

PE: Josh Logan [who directed the original production] made him change it. Logan also made him change the ending. Inge never forgave Logan for that, even though it won a Pulitzer Prize.

— SPOILER ALERT! —

TS: You mean Madge running off with Hal?

PE: In the original version, Madge stays. Basically, Inge is saying that this woman, whose reputation is now tarnished, will stay and suffer for the rest of her life because of this one indiscretion. Inge and Logan had knock-down, drag-out fights about whether or not Madge should leave. Inge would agree to writing a new ending,



bring in new pages with changes, but Madge would still stay. Inge really respected Logan's wife, who came in during one of their arguments at Logan's apartment. Inge stopped and said, "All right, I want your opinion, what do you think? Should Madge stay or go?" Logan's wife said, "If that girl doesn't go after him, I don't want to see the play." So, Inge finally gave in and to great success. It gives a little bit of hope; the relationship is probably going to be a mess, but at least there is someone pursuing their dream as opposed to just being fallen. It works perfectly, and the end of the play is just beautiful. Inge went back and rewrote *Picnic* as *Summer Brave*, which in my opinion is a much inferior play. He turns Hal into much more of a villain and jerk. He has Madge stay and be ruined.

TS: Was Inge happy with the '55 film version of *Picnic*? It seems like William Holden, who played Hal, was too old.

PE: Holden was way too old, there's no doubt about it. I think so many playwrights from that era wrote for the stage and lived off the movies. Only a handful of writers got movie versions that were really true to the plays. Movies gave them money; most playwrights couldn't live off their plays alone. Unless you had a major hit that ran forever, then you had to be doing something else to try and make a living. You were writing for radio, film, or TV. Inge was unhappy that the film version retained the same ending as the play. He had really wanted *Picnic* to be filmed in Independence, but they ended up filming in another small town in Kansas called Hutchinson. Inge was disappointed in that. He never forgave Josh Logan, even though Logan later went on to also direct the film version of *Bus Stop*, which was a mega hit and made him an enormous amount of money.

TS: How many biographies of Inge have been written? I am only familiar with the one written by Ralph Voss.

PE: There have been several. Ralph's is the most substantial. Dan Sullivan, the critic, not the director, began one when he was writing for the Los Angeles Times but couldn't complete

it to his satisfaction.

TS: How do you feel about the biography? Do you feel it is accurate?

PE: I'm not a historian and I have not read all the letters Inge wrote, so I'm very influenced by the biography. We commissioned a play about Inge, and there was some primary research done by a playwright, Marcia Cebulka, from Kansas, that

gave me additional insight into him. One of the things that struck me is that Inge was enormously understanding and forgiving of almost everybody else's flaws, foibles, and mistakes. The only person that he didn't forgive was himself. I think that in many cases his plays are an effort to exorcise the personal demons he lived with.

TS: Are you speaking primarily of his homosexuality, which they say led to his alcoholism?

PE: Several things: homosexuality, alcoholism, pills, depression. His older brother, ten years his senior and the star of the family, died when Inge was ten. Inge was left bearing the legacy and had enormous shoes to fill. He was a sensitive child. In fact, in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, which is quite autobiographical, the character Sonny is very much like Inge. Sonny collects photos of movie stars; Inge had this enormous scrapbook of movie stars that he collected. He and his sister put on shows in their barn and church and charged either a penny or a pin to come and see it. He was really a good young actor until he got stage fright in his mid-twenties and turned to writing. It was really Tennessee Williams who turned him into a playwright. He met Tennessee when he was writing reviews in St. Louis, and they became friends. What really made him decide to be a playwright was seeing *The Glass Menagerie* in its out-of-town tryout in Chicago.

TS: Williams was very comfortable with his sexuality.

PE: They were completely different. Williams was comfortable and Inge was not. In fact, Inge kept going for cures. He went to the Menninger Institute in Kansas and also the Riggs Institute.

TS: What do you think *Picnic* is about?

PE: The play is very much about repression, dreams, and living vicariously through others. Not being actualized, in essence. This sexy guy, Hal Carter, shows up and everybody reacts in various ways: fear, jealousy, excitement. I can't even say Hal is the antagonist; he's the catalyst for all of this change. Because of Hal, everybody begins to examine their life, wants, and needs. For Madge, the obviously respectable and, in truth, practical choice is to go with Alan, who's a perfectly nice guy and clearly adores her. But she feels dumb compared to Alan. Alan, in some ways, is much better suited to her younger sister Millie, who's an intellectual. Madge thinks she wants the respectability, the money, and the prestige of being able to marry into the upper classes. Alan thinks he wants the beautiful girl who would not normally pay attention to him. They're all after different things.

TS: Do you think Madge wins by running off with Hal?

PE: I don't know if Madge wins. There's a chance. They've got this strong sexual connection that Madge has never felt with anyone. There's a chance they could potentially grow up. Whereas if she stays with Alan, she will know that she settled for something less than what she wanted and she wouldn't have escaped the small town. In small towns like this, the reputation that people develop in high school is, often, still with them for the rest of their lives.

TS: So I take it it's a very homogenous population?

PE: Fairly. The great thing about it is there's by far more volunteerism and sense of community here than I've experienced anywhere else I've ever been. If you're putting a project together, people throw in. If there's a house flood, they'll be there. They'll cook you meals and bring you food. There are some really wonderful qualities, but there's definitely parochialism as well. Strangely enough, there are a lot of people who leave and come back. I think that growing up in a town like this is a very pleasant experience until you get bored when you're older. There's a sweetness to it, a familiarity, in the best sense of the word. Here, routines are very comforting. Each year, Neewollah happens; they elect a Queen Neelah every year and the town goes crazy.

TS: That's in the movie version.

PE: Madge is crowned queen in the movie. In fact, Neewollah started in the early part of the 20th century to keep kids from doing pranks. It's Halloween spelled backwards. They stopped it during World War II. After the movie of *Picnic* came out, they started it up again in '58. It's been going on continually since then. There has to be over a thousand volunteers that do all of the different events: the chili cook off, three different parades, the queen's pageant. There's also a community theatre production produced in the 1600-seat theatre that practically sells out. It's a wild experience. And it's a homecoming. People who grew up, lived or spent part of their life here come back. Families may not come back at the holidays but they come back for Neewollah. ■

WILLIAM INGE TIMELINE

MAY 3, 1912	William Motter Inge born in Independence, Kansas.
1930	Inge attends University of Kansas (at age 17) to get his B.A in Speech and Drama.
1937	Inge teaches high school English and Drama in Columbus, Kansas.
1938	Completes M.A. at Peabody Teacher's College in Nashville
1943	Inge moves to St. Louis and works as an entertainment critic for the "Star-Times."
1944	Inge sees Tennessee Williams's <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> , which inspires him to write plays.
1947	Inge's first play, <i>Farther Off From Heaven</i> , is produced.
1950	<i>Come Back, Little Sheba</i> premieres on Broadway at the Booth Theatre.
1953	<i>Picnic</i> premieres on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre—wins the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (477 performances).
1955	<i>Bus Stop</i> premieres on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre and runs for 478 performances.
1957	<i>The Dark at the Top of the Stairs</i> premieres on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre and runs for 468 performances.
1959	<i>A Loss of Roses</i> plays 25 performances at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre.
1961	<i>Splendor in the Grass</i> wins an Academy Award.
1963	<i>Natural Affection</i> shuts at the Booth Theatre after only 36 performances.
1963	Inge, deeply troubled by receiving poor reviews on Broadway, moves to California.
1966	Inge's final Broadway show, <i>Where's Daddy?</i> , has 22 performances at the Billy Rose Theatre (now the Nederlander Theatre).
1971	<i>My Son Is a Splendid Driver</i> is published. This book is an autobiographical story about Inge's childhood and was one of his last works.
JUNE 10, 1973	After a lifelong battle with depression and substance abuse, Inge commits suicide at age 60 while living with his sister in Hollywood.
1982	The William Inge Center for the Arts is founded at Independence Community College in Inge's hometown. His legacy lives on.