



Mirror, Mirror:
The Pairing of Hal Carter and
Alan Seymour in *Picnic*

by Philip Middleton Williams, Ph.D.

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

April 23, 2010

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The unlikely friendship between two seemingly polar opposite characters is a staple of drama and literature. One does not have to look too far to find them: William Shakespeare gave us Romeo and Mercutio (and therefore Tony and Riff in *West Side Story*); John Knowles gave us Gene and Finny in *A Separate Peace*; Neil Simon gave us Felix and Oscar, and where would any movie aimed at a teenaged audience -- from Andy Hardy to *How To Train Your Dragon* -- be without the storyline of the jock and the nerd finding out that despite their differences, they really do have common goals and they need each other as friends and counterparts to fulfill their characters and complete the drama.

William Inge provides us with the classic example of these two contrasting characters in *Picnic* with the friendship of Hal Carter and Alan Seymour. These young men could not be more opposite in terms of character and physique; Inge describes Hal as “an exceedingly handsome, husky youth dressed in T-shirt, dungarees, and cowboy boots.”¹ He is unashamed of his strength and masculinity; even proud of it in a clumsy sort of way, and he radiates it in such a way that everyone notices; even his brief stand-off with Bomber, the newspaper boy, makes the point in one short reply when Bomber says, “Who’re you?” Hal says, “What’s that matter? I’m bigger’n you are.”²

In contrast, when Alan enters he is not even described by the author, but based on the dialogue between Madge and her mother, Flo, we already know all about him: he is “not like *most* boys” when he’s out on a date with Madge: “He doesn’t want to do anything he’d be sorry for.”³ So we know that when Alan makes his entrance, we will be seeing a nice young man, well-dressed, well-mannered, exceedingly polite and chivalrous toward his girlfriend.

The reunion between the two boys makes it clear how they feel about each other. Alan is overjoyed to see Hal, embracing him and climbing on his back to renew, as Inge calls it, “some intimate roughhouse greeting from their college days.”⁴ Once they are alone, Alan begs Hal to tell him, in great detail, about his adventures out in Hollywood, including his sexual encounters, which Hal is only too happy to relate. It is clear that Alan is enjoying this for vicarious reasons. It is also clear that Alan is disappointed when he discovers Hal’s real motivation for coming to Independence; he just wants to hit him up for a job, and if Alan had a day-dream of somehow reigniting whatever intimate friendship they had in the college frat house, Hal doesn’t see it that way. Nevertheless, Alan does what he can for Hal; finding him a job working on the pipeline, and even doing a bit of *Pygmalion* as he tries to help Hal fit into the society of the town, which Hal, however awkwardly, is so eager to do as he earnestly tries to charm the people that he meets, including Howard and Rosemary, by promising to become a model citizen by joining the bowling team and attending the bible study classes.

But it is doomed from the outset — Hal cannot literally fit into Alan’s clothes — and Alan’s disappointment turns to jealousy when he sees Hal flirting with Madge, and it turns to blind rage the next morning when he discovers that Hal has seduced her. He calls the cops out on him for car theft, and the inevitable fist-fight that completely destroys their friendship is the only way that Alan can express his true feelings. Instead, Inge turns to Rosemary, herself a reflection and projection of both Hal’s braggadocio and Alan’s repression, and she is the one who calls Hal out as a fraud: “You think just ‘cause you’re strong you can show your muscles and nobody’ll know what a pitiful specimen you are. But you won’t stay young forever, didja ever thinka that? What’ll become of

you then? You'll end your life in the gutter and it'll serve you right, 'cause the gutter's where you came from and the gutter's where you belong."⁵ At the end, when Hal runs off one step ahead of the police with Madge following after him, Alan remains behind, devastated and alone, knowing that the one person he cared about is gone, and it's not the girl carrying the suitcase.

The relationship between the two boys is a part of a theme that permeates much of Inge's writing: there are no happy endings, and hiding your true feelings about someone because of the perceived and self-imposed taboos of the local social structure is a powerfully destructive force, but so is giving in to them: the people who flaunt the social mores are punished and miserable.

We see this in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, where Doc stands outside of Marie's room where he knows that she is in bed with Turk, and his agony isn't because she's having pre-marital sex; it's because he wishes that it was him. Lola too has her dream world brought to life by the radio drama "Taboo." It's not that either of them is destined to betray each other -- Lola truly does love Doc -- but forbidden lust and fantasy, even if it's just admiring the biceps of the milkman, are thrilling because they are against the expectations of the world she lives in.

None of the people in *Picnic* are truly matched with their soul mates; they are either abandoned or torn apart from them: Flo's husband has run off, and Mrs. Potts's brief moment of bliss was destroyed long ago by her mother who now torments her every waking moment. They are forced by circumstance or desperation to accept what comes along; Rosemary and Howard's marriage is doomed from the outset as she has basically trapped him into marrying him -- an ironic foreshadow of Madge and Hal's future -- and

even Millie, the romantic who dreams of leaving the small town and becoming famous, is reading Carson McCullers *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, itself a portrait of lonely people in a small town. At the end of the play she declares that she'll be so great and famous that she'll never have to fall in love.

If that was all there was to the message of the unlikely friendship between two opposites, it would be enough to make a powerful dramatic statement, and indeed, *Picnic* has done so for nearly sixty years. But if we look a deeper into the background of this play and how it came to be, we can see that not only is the connection between Hal and Alan a demonstration of dramatic tension, so too is the way that the play itself came to be and how the relationship between the playwright and the director of the original Broadway production made the play the way it is.

It is very intriguing to compare *Picnic* and the relationship between Hal and Alan to *Summer Brave*, the play that Inge considered to be his original intention and, as he wrote in the forward to it, "more humorously true than *Picnic*, and it does fulfill my original intentions."⁶ In this play, the reunion of Hal and Alan is much less joyous; it's confrontational, because the last time they saw each other, Hal had stolen Alan's car and run off to Hollywood. Hal does not regale Alan with his sexual exploits, there is no physical expression of affection, and it is clear that while Hal has deep affection for Alan, it is not reciprocated. Hal comes across as a braggart and a con artist; his attempts to impress the people he meets are clearly insincere, and he's no more a likeable or dimensional character than the town boys with the funny nicknames who circle around Madge with their hot-rod and blaring radio.

It would appear then that Inge had no intention of insinuating that there was anything more than a collegial friendship between Hal and Alan. In *Summer Brave*, he deletes the roughhousing and the wild tales of Hal's sexual conquests. It seems he felt uncomfortable with the way they came across in *Picnic*; it may have been skating a bit too close to his own true feelings at the time. Although Inge did write about the unfulfilled and tormented relationship of a man being in love with another man in the one-act play, *The Boy in the Basement*, in 1950, it was unpublished until 1962. It shows a one-way attraction of Spencer Scranton, a meek and closeted man towards a strong and boisterous younger man named Joker, and actually does confront the issue of his homosexuality in – for the times – very frank terms. As is the manner of all such stories written at the time, the play ends in tragedy for both of them: no one is allowed to be gay in any sense of the word.

Summer Brave also ends differently than *Picnic*. Instead of Madge packing a suitcase and following Hal to Tulsa, she resigns herself to a life in Independence and, now that Alan has politely thrown her over, making herself available for dating the boys in the town (including a handsome young gas station attendant named Joker). Ralph Voss, in his biography of Inge, details the clashes between the playwright and director Joshua Logan and the nearly production-ending battles between the two of them to come to an agreement on how the play was to be done, especially the ending.⁷ Logan hated the idea of Madge becoming the “town pump” and the sentiment of the cast was also strongly against the ending. He finally forced Inge to write the ending that had Madge following Hal off to Tulsa. It may have been a more dramatically-pleasing ending, and, as Logan noted himself, Inge did come up with the ending (albeit under duress).⁸ Years later Inge

got the last word with *Summer Brave*, although by then, the only person who seemed to care was the playwright himself. *Picnic* was the success that he wanted, yet he seemed to feel that he had to set the record straight. It also leads one to conclude that Logan's influence and insistence that Inge make changes in the script run far deeper than just the ending; the roughhousing between the two boys at the beginning of *Picnic* that borders on foreplay resulted from critical reactions in previews that said Hal was a thoroughly unlikeable character and that the audience did not feel any great sense of loss when Hal breaks the hearts of the people he's met; in fact, his exit in *Summer Brave* is almost incidental to the departure of Rosemary and Howard heading off on their honeymoon to a tourist cabin in the Ozarks. At the least in *Picnic* there is a sense of loss on the part of Flo, Millie, Mrs. Potts, and Alan; instead of just another boy, Hal seemed to offer a whiff of hope and promise.

In conclusion, the conflicted friendship between Hal Carter and Alan Seymour represents more than just recognizing the differences between two different personalities and how they struggled to resolve them. It is also mirrored in the differences between the commercially successful play *Picnic* and the to-thine-own-self-be-true *Summer Brave*. It serves as a metaphor for many of Inge's characters in his works yet to come, and it also shows the conflicts that Inge had in himself between showing what he believed to be the truth about the relationships between his characters and how they dealt with them, his desire to achieve success as a playwright, and the compromises he would have to make to achieve them. And like many of the characters in his plays – Doc and Lola in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Howard and Rosemary, and Hal and Alan – he was never truly happy when he had to settle for what life and their own choices have made for him.

NOTES

1. William Inge, Four Plays (New York: Random House 1958; rpt. New York: Grove Weidenfeld 1979). p. 75-76.
2. Inge, Four Plays, p. 78.
3. Inge, Four Plays, p. 80.
4. Inge, Four Plays, p. 90.
5. Inge, Four Plays, p. 124.
6. William Inge, Summer Brave and Eleven Short Plays (New York: Random House 1962), p. ix.
7. Ralph F. Voss, A Life of William Inge (University Press of Kansas, p. 129.
8. Voss, A Life of William Inge, p. 132-133.