

## **A belated encore - Salisbury returns to theater to direct 'Picnic'**

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It has been more than 50 years since Lee Salisbury's first play opened at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and 10 years since he last directed, but he still looks sharp on the set.

Salisbury has returned to his namesake theater at UAF to direct the 50 Year Gala Theatre Reunion Performance of "Picnic" by William Inge. The play opens Friday.

Sunday, Salisbury seemed at home in the theater, sitting a few rows back from stage as he gave directions during rehearsal.

"This is my favorite space to work in," he said. "I think it's the best theater in Alaska."

The Pulitzer Prize-winning play takes place in the mid-20th century and tells the story of a drifter named Hal, played by Levi Ben-Israel, who arrives in a small Kansas town on Labor Day morning to visit an old college buddy, Alan. The town is getting ready for its annual Labor Day picnic, and Alan invites Hal to stay for the festivities. Alan soon regrets his decision, as handsome, charismatic Hal captures the attention of the ladies, including Alan's fiancée, Madge. Tensions rise as emotions are stirred in the sleepy town.

William Inge, the playwright, was born in Kansas and spent most of his life in the Midwest.

"He knows how to make characters talk like they came from there," Salisbury said.

The 11-member cast is the largest in Theatre UAF's recent history, and the play is somewhat of a departure from their recent shows.

"This is down-to-earth realism ... It's a change from the productions they've been doing in here," Salisbury said, contrasting "Picnic" to the more experimental approach Theatre UAF has taken in the past few years under the direction of Anatoly Antohin.

The set, created by Leighton Nunez, adds to the realism of the play. A two-story farmhouse with clapboard siding and a large porch dotted with wicker furniture dominates the stage. A barn or shed off to the side adds to the Midwestern feel.

Salisbury remembers seeing "Picnic" when it opened on Broadway in 1955, with Paul Newman as a cast member in his Broadway debut. In 1982, Salisbury directed

the play at UAF. When he realized a couple of years ago that Theatre UAF would be celebrating its 50th anniversary, it seemed like the perfect time to once again direct the play. Due to the theater department's full schedule, however, the play had to wait until this year, the theater's 51st season. But for Salisbury, it was worth the wait.

"It's one of my favorite plays; the audiences love it," he said.

The cast of the play made Salisbury's return to directing a great experience, he said. "They're disciplined and talented. It's just been a breeze to work on this show ... When you've got a group this talented, they've got their own ideas, some that are better than yours."

Working with Salisbury has been inspiring, cast members said.

"It's not very often you get to work for the man the theater is named for," said Katy Mulcrone, who plays the part of a spinster schoolteacher. "He has oodles and oodles of experience."

Plus, Mulcrone said, "He keeps us well-supplied with gummy bears."

Salisbury is one of the few people with UAF buildings named after them who is still alive.

"That made me nervous," he said. "I thought they knew something I didn't know."