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The Misunderstood Social Activist:  
A Reexamination of the Plays of  
William Inge

by Robert Woods

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On December 5, 1957, William Inge's play, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, opened at the Music Box Theatre in New York City. It was his fourth successive Broadway hit. Eleven months into the run, *Harper's Magazine* published "The Men-Taming Women of William Inge," a blistering critique of Inge's work by a "fast-rising young drama critic," Robert Brustein.<sup>1</sup> In an article seemingly designed to make a name for himself at the expense of one of America's favorite dramatists, Brustein presented his principal point: "The pervasive surface theme of [Inge's] work is that people find salvation from fear, need, and insecurity only through the fulfillment of domestic love."<sup>2</sup> But, Brustein wrote, Inge required each male character to "give up his aggressiveness, his promiscuity, his bravado, his contempt for soft virtues, and his narcissistic pride in his body and attainments, and admit that he is lost in the world and needs help," while "The woman's job is to convert these rebels into domestic animals."<sup>3</sup> Brustein argued, "The hero has been made to conform, not to his own image of maleness but to the maternal woman's," and he concluded that Inge's portrayal of his male characters' "willingness . . . to sacrifice their individual selves to love," made Inge's plays not merely flawed, but "commonplace" and "mediocre."<sup>4</sup>

Brustein's article was written during the era of Eisenhower and John Wayne, a time when "men were men." Brustein wrote from the then-dominant view that men should wear the pants, while women should stay home, raise the children, and worship their men. A man in 1958 was supposed to be the hero, the one with dreams, while the "little wife" was not allowed dreams of her own, but was supposed to live vicariously through her man's aspirations. Brustein's complaint was that by exposing the weaknesses, self-doubts, and loneliness of his male

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<sup>1</sup> Brustein, Robert. "The Men-Taming Women of William Inge," *Harper's Magazine* Volume: 217 (Nov. 1958): 52-57.

<sup>2</sup> Brustein, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Brustein, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Brustein, 56.

characters, Inge allowed the women to gain the upper hand, which, Brustein said, robbed the men of their "manhood."<sup>5</sup>

Our perspective fifty-four years later is considerably changed. We accept that men and women both have flaws and inadequacies. Our understanding of William Inge and his private life is also much greater than what was known in 1958. Brustein presumably lacked any particular knowledge of Inge himself, or of Inge's private torments, but subsequent biographies, especially the comprehensive work by Ralph F. Voss,<sup>6</sup> have illuminated Inge's lonely life as a homosexual who never "came out" nor even accepted his own sexuality. In his biography, Voss applied this information to counter Brustein's criticism, writing:

During the time of his greatest success, Inge's works seemed only to endorse heterosexual marriage and traditional families. Such endorsement was the crux of Robert Brustein's initial and disastrous criticism. But what if . . . Inge was sadly accepting the imperfect institutions of conventional marriage and family as *all* that society has to offer, and therefore was endorsing them by a kind of default?<sup>7</sup>

Where Brustein had criticized Inge for allegedly forcing his male characters to submit to their women and settle into traditional marriage, Voss countered that both Inge and his plays simply presented a pragmatic view of life, that "Inge's dominant theme is acceptance, making the best one can of one's situation."<sup>8</sup>

This paper contends that both Brustein and Voss missed the mark, that Inge was neither endorsing emasculation for the greater good of conventional heterosexual marriage nor preaching acceptance of our lot in life and love. Rather, William Inge's dominant theme was a

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<sup>5</sup> Brustein, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Voss, Ralph F. *A Life of William Inge*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Voss, 252-253 (*italics in original*).

<sup>8</sup> Voss, 252-253.

condemnation of the world he lived in, a world which forced people to conform to the mores, norms, and demands of society by entering into or remaining in loveless marriages, even though doing so would inevitably lead to a crushing of the spirit and a devastation of the soul.

Inge used his plays to expose the cruelty of 1950s society with its taboos on any sexual relationship outside of marriage. The taboo against homosexuality prevented Inge from exposing that cruelty in his personal life, but his sexual orientation gave him first-hand knowledge of how 1950s society forced a wide range of people into the role of "outsider," and his plays and characters were a means to express the depth of his anguish and despair at the life he, and others, were forced to live.

In order to fully appreciate Inge's theme, one must understand Inge's background and certain aspects of his life.

Inge grew up in the small town of Independence, Kansas. Voss writes that even in high school, Inge very seldom dated, although he was "good-looking, trim, tall, and attractive to women."<sup>9</sup> Until Inge was in his early twenties, he lived in small Kansas or Missouri towns where it was impossible for him to engage in any kind of homosexual encounters. When he was 23, he moved to Wichita, Kansas, the first town large enough to offer anonymity. Voss explained, "Wichita . . . might have appealed to Inge as a place where his sexuality might find a fuller – and safer – expression. But the word *might* must be stressed, for Inge was quite guarded about his homosexuality all his life, often preferring unfulfilled loneliness to any sort of companionship."<sup>10</sup>

Inge continued his lonely existence for his entire life. From 1955 to 1959, Inge had a close relationship with actress Barbara Baxley, but even though this relationship offered him a

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<sup>9</sup> Voss, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Voss, 55 (*italics in original*).

chance for a "conventional" marriage, he could not commit. Inge had a longtime male secretary, John Connolly, but they were apparently never lovers. Again Voss explained:

Given Inge's extreme reticence and shame about his homosexuality and given that he could not commit himself to married life with Barbara Baxley, it seems plausible that he also could never have lived with a man, even if he felt an attraction. . . . Ultimately the question of whether or not they were ever lovers is much less important than the fact that Inge *always lived alone*.<sup>11</sup>

On June 10, 1973, at the age of 60, Inge got into his car in his closed garage, opened the car windows, started the engine, and committed suicide.<sup>12</sup>

Inge's four hit plays were all produced on Broadway in the 1950s, starting with *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), continuing with *Picnic* (1953) and *Bus Stop* (1955), and ending with *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957). Inge's last major work of fiction, fourteen years later, was the autobiographical novel, *My Son is a Splendid Driver* (1971). While writing it, Inge gave an interview to Digby Diehl, for *The Transatlantic Review*, in which Inge said,

In this novel I find myself writing about the failure of American manhood. I'm exploring the reasons for it, the estimates of it, the tragedy of it. I think that the American male is in a tragic position because he has no real mode of personal expression. I was brought up in a semi-primitive society – Kansas in the twenties. Culture was far away, and the American man was limited to being a breadwinner. It's just one place where the forms of life are imposed on the man.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Voss, 214 (italics added).

<sup>12</sup> Voss, 270; William Inge Center website, William Inge Biography Page, <http://ingecenter.org/william-inge-biography/>.

<sup>13</sup> Diehl, Digby. "William Inge, A Playwright in Transition, A Conversation with Digby Diehl," *The Transatlantic Review*, No. 26, (Autumn 1967): 51-56, at 52.

Commenting on that interview, Voss identified "the American man" as Inge himself, which it undoubtedly was, and he interpreted the lack of any "real mode of personal expression" as meaning there was no outlet for Inge's homosexuality in a world where the only acceptable "form of life" was heterosexual marriage.<sup>14</sup> It was the restrictiveness of this society-sanctioned "form of life" that Inge railed against in each of his four successful plays.

In *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Inge sets up three couples: Lola and Doc, a middle-aged, childless couple; Marie and Turk, college students who are engaged in an affair; and also Marie and Bruce, her wealthy fiancé. Doc is an alcoholic, currently sober, who was forced to marry Lola when he got her pregnant. Lola lost the baby, a source of deep regret for her. Lola and Doc do not love each other, but are still together because they have no other options. They rent a room to young, nubile Marie, whom Doc secretly adores. He does not reveal his desire to her because he knows she is beyond his reach. Turk is an athlete, a javelin thrower, who fascinates Lola by telling her about his javelin, a "big, long lance" which he holds "erect," throws, and it then "sticks in the ground, quivering like an arrow." Lola lusts after this Greek god of raw male sexuality, but just as Doc can never have Marie, Lola can never have Turk. Both Doc and Lola are stand-ins for Inge himself. Each character is tortured by sexual desire which can never be satisfied.

Turk especially represents the men Inge wanted to enjoy but could not have because society would not sanction a homosexual "form of life." When Turk leaves for the evening with Marie, Inge's stage directions specify that "a sad, vacant look comes over [Lola's] face. Her arms drop in a gesture of futility." Far from preaching acceptance of society's boundaries, Inge was saying the inability to have the love we desire would crush the spirit. At the end of the first act,

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<sup>14</sup> Voss, 252-253.

after Lola has eavesdropped on Turk and Marie's plans to come back to the house later for sex, Lola immediately goes to the porch and calls to her lost dog, Little Sheba. Of course, Little Sheba does not respond to Lola's call, and the act ends on this desolate note. There is no positive message of acceptance there. It is a stark portrait of despair born of impossible desires.

In the second act, Inge expands upon the misery caused by rigid 1950s mores. Doc's illusion of Marie as his ideal, pure woman is shattered when he finds out she is not a virgin, but is having a fling with Turk before she marries Bruce, a man she does not love. Doc sees that Marie and Bruce will end up with the same empty life as he and Lola. Lola also suffers "a serious disillusionment," when Marie tells Lola that Turk is "not the marrying kind." The male god of sex is unattainable, a truth Lola cannot bear. For both Doc and Lola, Inge's message is clear: the desire for love that the world says we cannot have, and the forced acceptance of relationships that society does condone, will take away our illusions, blight our lives, and destroy our souls.

At the end of the play, Lola describes to Doc the dream she had. Her father, representing society, has disqualified Turk, the purely physical man, from the "games." Doc, Turk's inadequate replacement, threw the javelin into the sky, but it never came down. Lola discovered her dog, Little Sheba, dead in the mud. Doc responds by telling Lola, "We gotta go on," and the play ends with Lola and Doc still unhappily together. This was not, as Voss asserted, a message of acceptance, a statement that we must accept the circumstances we are given, even if they are less than ideal. Inge's message was exactly the opposite: life *makes* us keep going, even when everything is ruined and all our dreams and desires for love are "smeared with mud" like Little Sheba's white fur.



*Picnic* reexamines the *Come Back, Little Sheba* characters from a different point-of-view. In *Sheba*, the young woman and her two boyfriends are catalysts for the devastation of the older couple, but in *Picnic*, the young people are the tragic couples. Hal takes over for Turk as the forbidden sexual male icon. Madge steps in for Marie as the young woman torn between her desire for sexual fulfillment versus an "appropriate" but loveless marriage with the rich college boy. But, in *Picnic*, Inge also introduces a new character, Rosemary, who is Inge's alter-ego: the woman who claims to have no need for a man, but who is actually desperate for such a relationship.

Inge devotes the first act of *Picnic* to laying out his theme that raw male sexuality is not only taboo, but dangerous. The first scene appearance of the shirtless Hal injects that sexuality into the women's world, and by the end of the play it has ruined their lives.

Inge shows that while the handsome, sexual male can be idolized for his physical prowess, he can never be fully accepted into society. Although Hal is a member of rich Alan's fraternity, Alan explains that the fraternity wanted Hal because he was an All-American, "for the publicity," but that the other boys actually didn't like Hal. Inge uses the lusty Mrs. Potts to further illustrate that the desire for men is forbidden. As a young girl, Mrs. Potts had run off and married a boy, but her mother – the symbol of society at large – immediately had the marriage annulled. Now Mrs. Potts "takes in every Tom, Dick, and Harry" so she can have sexy young men around her, even though her invalid mother's presence in the house prevents her from actually enjoying them. Is Inge showing us that Mrs. Potts has accepted her lot? No, he is showing us that she is bitter because she was blocked from fulfilling her sexual desire.

One of *Picnic*'s strongest images of society's intolerance of too much male sexuality – and by extension, homosexuality – occurs in the second act. Rosemary, dancing hip-to-hip with

Hal, tells him he is like the Roman statue at the school, the one which wore nothing but a shield on his arm – a statue that had to be "fixed" by the janitor taking a chisel and making the statue "decent." Although Rosemary clearly desires Hal, she claims to have been "insulted, havin' to walk past that statue," and says "those ancient people were depraved." In other words, Hal's male sexuality is "depraved," and proper society must make it "decent" by literal castration. Inge's condemnation of the world he lived in could not have been more clearly stated.

Both Rosemary and Madge give in to their sexual desires, with disastrous results. Rosemary forces her boyfriend, Howard, to marry her, thereby securing a socially acceptable relationship, even though she knows it must lead to even greater unhappiness, a life of scrimping and scraping with a man who does not love her. Madge gives up her virginity to Hal and decides to follow him to Tulsa, despite knowing that he will never be able to support her, that he will spend all his money on booze, and that there will always be other women. Far from preaching acceptance, Inge condemns the heterosexual relationships that Madge and Rosemary enter into, even though society says those are the only acceptable "forms of life," because they must inevitably lead to heartbreak.

Inge presses home his theme that in the 1950s, love was a living hell for anyone who loved outside of society's sanctioned "form of life." When Hal asks Madge, "Do – do you love me?" she responds, "What good is it if I do?" When Madge wails, "Oh, Mom, what can you do with the love you feel? Where is there you can take it?" Flo, "beaten and defeated," replies, "I . . . I never found out." The world in which Inge lived, the world he condemned, forced him to hide or suppress any love he may have felt for men, because there was nothing he could do with that love, nowhere he could take it.

Inge's third Broadway hit, *Bus Stop*, is, on its surface, his most comedic play. He once claimed that the characters were all "types" and that he wrote the play to "experiment" with different kinds of love: "the earthy love, the purely physical attraction of the bus driver for the woman who runs the restaurant. There's the corrupt attraction of the old man for the young girl; there's a kind of homosexual feeling the older cowboy has for the younger . . . They all kind of play into a pattern."<sup>15</sup> In saying this, however, Inge entirely omitted the central relationship of the play, between Bo, Inge's by-then-typical brawny, unintellectual male stud, and Cherie, the young woman who has gotten herself into difficulties by giving in to her sexual desires. It is that relationship which Inge uses to lay out his dominant theme. Cherie does not love Bo and cannot fathom the idea of living on a ranch in Montana, but she ends up going with him at the end of the play because she has nothing else. She knowingly chooses a path that must lead to misery, for it surely will not be long before she deserts Bo, leaving them both brokenhearted. Once again, Inge is not saying that we must get by in life by accepting whatever relationship is offered to us, but to the contrary, that by doing so we are dooming ourselves to disaster.

Inge expresses his personal despair through the characters of both Dr. Lyman, an alcoholic, former college professor (which Inge himself was), and Virgil Blessing, the older cowboy who held the "homosexual feeling" for Bo. At the top of the second act, Dr. Lyman tells Elma, the virginal teenager, "My dear girl, I have disapproved of my entire life." When Bo laments to Virgil that he is so lonesome he doesn't what know to do with himself, Virgil says, "A long time ago, I gave up romancin' and decided I was just gonna take bein' lonesome for granted." Because Inge disapproved of his own homosexuality and could never have the love relationships he wanted, he was forced into lonesomeness as a way of life. Inge also has Cherie

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<sup>15</sup> Diehl, 55.

express his frustrated desires and lost dreams. Speaking to Elma, Cherie says, "I'm beginning to seriously wonder if there *is* the kinda love I have in mind. . . . I just gotta feel that . . . whoever I marry . . . has some real regard for me, apart from all the lovin' and sex." Real regard, respect, sweetness: those were the qualities Inge wanted from a man, but because society forbade homosexuality, all he could ever have was tawdry, anonymous sex in stolen moments. He could never have the kind of love that comes when a couple live together and care for and support each other, because such a relationship could never have been tolerated between two men in Inge's world.

In Brustein's critical article, he dismissed *Bus Stop* as, "a vulgar folk vaudeville with night-club acts and dirty jokes,"<sup>16</sup> but he failed to see the substance beneath the comedic façade. Of all his four major plays, Inge uses *Bus Stop* to speak most directly to his major theme. As Dr. Lyman tells Elma, "It takes strong men and women to *love* . . . People strong enough insides themselves to love . . . without humiliation. People big enough to *grow* with their love and live inside a whole, wide new dimension. People brave enough to bear the responsibility of *being* loved and not fear it as a burden." (Italics in original). Inge was never brave enough to love and could not love as he wanted, for fear of the humiliation of society. For him, love was indeed a burden. The homophobic world he lived in made it so. Inge ends *Bus Stop* with a piercing summation of his theme of condemnation. Virgil has nowhere to go as Grace locks up the diner. She says, "Then I'm sorry, mister, but you're just left out in the cold," and Virgil replies to himself, "Well . . . that's what happens to some people." Inge, the miserable, closeted homosexual, and all others who, like him, could not or would not conform, were left out in the cold by a heartless society. There is a profound disillusionment with society in Inge's work, for

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<sup>16</sup> Brustein, 53.

homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. Inge wanted the world to see that everyone who contorted his or her true desires to fit into the tight box of acceptable love that society permitted would end up as a broken person.

Inge's last and most autobiographical Broadway success is *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. In that play, Inge revisits and reinforces the themes and characters he developed in the earlier plays. As with Lola and Doc in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Cora and Rubin had to get married because Cora was pregnant. Unlike *Sheba*, the child was born to Cora and was then followed by another child. While Lola is miserable because she lost her baby, Cora is miserable because she had her children and now does not know what to do with them. Cora and Rubin show us the future that awaits Madge and Hal, from *Picnic*. All that Cora and Rubin have between them is sexual heat – the same as Madge and Hal. Rubin cheats on Cora, and Cora knows it, but is powerless to stop it – just as Madge knows that Hal will cheat and she will be unable to prevent it. Cora lives most of her life alone, but she remains with Rubin because she has nowhere else to go. Madge will be living that same life twenty years down the road, a life of loneliness and despair.

Inge never accepted his own homosexuality, and in his four Broadway hits, he could not bring himself to write a patently homosexual character. Instead, in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, Inge creates Sammy Goldenbaum, a Jew thrown into the white, Anglo-Saxon world of small-town Kansas. Sammy is painted as a thoroughly nice boy, and he very much wants to fit in, but he ends up committing suicide because he is horribly humiliated by the rich society matron at the big country club party. As the character of Flirt tells the story, "[Mrs. Ralston] said she wasn't giving this party for Jews, and she didn't intend for her daughter to dance with a Jew, and besides, Jews weren't allowed in the country club anyway." Sammy is cast out of society

because is Jewish, just as Inge felt cast out because he was a homosexual. In the world Inge knew and showed us, "different" people were sentenced to a life of misery and loneliness.

In reexamining Inge's four Broadway hit plays, we find that there is not one happy relationship among any of the characters. Every couple, without exception, is either miserable or is taking a road which will lead to misery.

Robert Brustein castigated Inge for endorsing the sacrifice of the individual self to the altar of the traditional, heterosexual marriage. Ralph F. Voss asserted that Inge's message was to accept life and make the "very best" of it. However, by reviewing and analyzing Inge's major plays from a historical perspective, knowing that he was never able to accept his homosexuality and consequently lived a life of unrelenting loneliness, culminating in suicide, it becomes apparent that Inge neither endorsed traditional heterosexual marriage nor argued for acceptance of life as it was. Rather, William Inge created his characters and plays to show us, as vividly as he could, that the unforgiving restrictions of society, the strict limits and boundaries of what love was or could be in the world as he knew it, were to be condemned. William Inge's message was that the world would need to be very different from the one that existed in 1950s America if real love was ever to have a chance.