



# HORROR ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON

When several schoolgirls disappear one summer's day in 1900, a timeless mystery is born in ***Picnic At Hanging Rock***.



**IN 1975** an Australian movie took the world by storm, garnering massive critical acclaim and drawing big bucks at the box office. The film, *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, was based on Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel of the same name. It launched the career of director Peter Weir, and introduced a fresh cast including John Jarratt, Jacki Weaver and Anne-Louise Lambert.

The film also did wonders for book sales, the soundtrack (including Romanian Gheorghe Zamfir's haunting panpipes), and tourism around Mount Macedon – the area where it was filmed. But the greatest success is the story itself. Is it legend, folklore or fact? Whatever you believe, *Picnic At Hanging Rock* has become a part of the Australian national psyche. Now it has been adapted for the stage by Australian actor/writer Tom Wright.

Set on St Valentine's Day in 1900, the story follows a group of schoolgirls from Appleyard College who picnic at the natural volcanic wonder of Hanging Rock, Victoria. When some of the schoolgirls and their governess disappear without trace, a nightmarish scenario slowly unravels creating one of the most haunting stories in literature and on film.



Peter Weir's film adaptation of *Picnic At Hanging Rock* still intrigues audiences.

Where does this stage adaptation take us? "It's an interpretation where landscape is conjured through words... there is no giant rock on stage," explains director Matthew Lutton. "Telling this

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story and reciting this myth is a descent into dreams and nightmares. We don't want to recreate the Peter Weir film on stage. The novel is our inspiration, so the challenge was finding a way to use Lindsay's language to conjure an epic landscape, and how to capture the experience of horror on stage.”

Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts graduate Harriet Gordon-Anderson bears an eerie resemblance to Anne Louise-Lambert, who played the film's iconic Miranda, while Arielle Gray, Amber McMahon, Elizabeth Nabben and Nikki Shiels portray the other ill-fated schoolgirls. Set and costumes are designed by the critically-acclaimed Zoe Atkinson, while Ash Gibson Grieg is responsible for the composition.

The fate of the missing girls remains unknown, which goes some way to explaining the

enduring appeal of the *Picnic At Hanging Rock* story.

Matthew Lutton explains it perfectly. "Lindsay created a mystery that we are still addicted to solving. The novel articulates an experience that is at the heart of what it means to live in Australia. To live in a land that is so much larger and older than us. That can obliterate us. Lindsay's perceptions of Australia make it deeply poignant.”

One only has to travel to Hanging Rock in regional Victoria to realise it holds a haunting and mysterious air that extends beyond imagination. From novel to screen, and now screen to stage, the lingering mystery continues. There is little doubt it will continue forever.

**MORE:** *Picnic At Hanging Rock* plays Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre (Feb 26 to Mar 20) and Perth's Heath Ledger (April 1 to 17).