

Review

Arthur Miller's ALL MY SONS Opens Tennessee Rep's Season With Searing Drama

By: Jeffrey Ellis, *broadwayworld.com*

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Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, which debuted on Broadway in 1947, continues to resonate with contemporary audiences thanks to its timeless, heart-wrenching relevance and Miller's unequaled ability as a storyteller. Now onstage at TPAC's Andrew Johnson Theatre in an impressive production that opens Tennessee Repertory Theatre's 2011–2012 season, *All My Sons* is Miller's searing consideration of the relentless pursuit of the American Dream, selflessness be damned in the name of profit.

Directed with focused confidence by Tennessee Rep's producing artistic director René Dunshee Copeland, *All My Sons* is just as emotionally powerful in 2011 as it must have been in 1947, when only two years after the end of World War II it set the Great White Way ablaze with Miller's powerful indictment of war profiteers and the evolving American family structure. Echoing the Greek classics in structure – a father sacrifices his integrity to provide for future generations, only to see his progeny bring about his tragic (though not unexpected) downfall – it's dramatic theater at its very best, enacted by an estimable cast of Nashville stage favorites under Copeland's caring and exquisitely telegraphed vision.

Based upon a true story – Miller reportedly found the genesis for the play in a newspaper clipping given him by his mother – about a young woman in Ohio who turned in her father for supplying faulty materiel to the Army during wartime, the premise of *All My Sons* is very similar, although he changed the child's gender to male in his play. Miller's dialogue, so real and genuine that you feel as if you're eavesdropping on a series of private conversations, provides the perfect structure for the characters he has created, each of whom is richly drawn and sharply delineated.

Miller's plot revolves around a wartime tragedy that resulted in the deaths of some 21 American pilots who were flying planes with faulty parts supplied them by Joe Keller's Midwestern factory. While his business partner remains jailed as a result of that tragedy, Keller was exonerated and is back home, continuing to amass a personal fortune for his wife Kate and son Chris. While the play's basic premise is extraordinarily compelling – war profiteering to increase personal wealth in the pursuit of the American dream – the underlying themes of betrayal and blind devotion further deepen the play's emotional impact as the story develops before you.

With the unsettled economic times in which we live, coupled with the continuing military struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan and the myriad of realities of life in the 21st century, the relevance of *All My Sons* is obvious and given the attention to detail that has become emblematic of Tennessee Rep productions, you can't help but find yourself completely caught up in the drama of Miller's work.

Copeland's skillful direction is deftly handled by her cast, led by Chip Arnold as the flawed Joe Keller. Arnold's Joe is boastful and showy at one moment, then shockingly weak and embittered the next, showcasing the actor's strengths and versatility to perfection. He is paired with Ruth Cordell as his long-suffering wife, who refuses to accept her pilot son's death because it will require her to accept her husband's frailties and failings. Cordell's richly nuanced performance is enormously affecting as she portrays a mother's undying devotion in the face of the harsh realities she refuses to accept. The interaction between Arnold and Cordell provides something a master's class in acting for the audience and, I daresay, for the other actors in Copeland's starry ensemble.

Chief among the younger actors is Eric Pasto-Crosby, who delivers a riveting performance as the idealistic Keller son, Chris, who survived the war only to return home in search of truth, beauty and a place for himself in the tumultuous post-war era. Pasto-Crosby's heartfelt

portrayal of Chris is refreshingly upbeat and positive, masking the deep-seated anguish he wrestles with throughout the play, enabling audiences to further identify with the character's struggles while witnessing his tour-de-force performance.

Emily Landham is well-cast as Ann Deever, the daughter of Joe Keller's imprisoned business partner and the childhood sweetheart of the dead son, Larry. Landham effectively handles her scenes with a studied grace and charm that belies her own character's inner struggles. The flirty playfulness that punctuates her scenes with Pasto-Crosby helps to underscore and to illuminate her later, much more dramatic scenes with Joe and Kate during which she reveals the real story behind Larry's wartime demise.

Patrick Waller shines as Ann's angry brother George, an attorney who has returned to his hometown to exact some sort of revenge on the Kellers while attempting to clear his father's name. Waller's tightly wound performance is compellingly articulated yet somehow understated, which makes it all the more powerful.

Copeland's practiced eye is evident through her casting choices, particularly in the supporting roles filled by Nate Eppler, Holly Allen, Peter Vann and Marin Miller as the younger couples in the Kellers' neighborhood, and young Isaiah Frank as a neighbor boy caught up in a fantasy world of Joe's making.

Tennessee Rep's genius design wizard Gary C. Hoff supplies a remarkably beautiful and detailed set for the piece, perfectly capturing the feel and warmth of the Kellers' neighborhood in late summer. His spectacular physical trappings provide the ideal backdrop for the play and, no doubt, inspire the actors to even greater heights.

Paul Carrol Binkley's sound design is superb, as are the period costumes provided by Trish Clark, and Phillip Franck's atmospheric lighting design seems to envelop the whole of the Johnson Theatre in a comforting ambience that artfully allows the passage of time.