

Review

Tennessee Rep shines with moving Arthur Miller tragedy *All My Sons*

Hell and Keller

By: **Martin Brady**, *Nashville Scene*

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I had hopes for Tennessee Repertory Theatre's new staging of Arthur Miller's 1947 play *All My Sons* (the precursor to the playwright's epic *Death of a Salesman*), and I wasn't disappointed. Director René Copeland's smartly assembled cast provides a group tour de force. The play has been on Copeland's professional bucket list for some time, perhaps providing extra motivation for gathering together such a talented and experienced ensemble.

Miller's tale of postwar travail, a rumination on business and personal ethics, was mounted locally by Actors Bridge Ensemble just a little over 18 months ago. But for those experiencing the play for the first time — or the first time in several years — there are consistent rewards in the performances, despite the story's sometimes contrived and dated plot points.

The drama concerns Joe Keller (Chip Arnold), a manufacturer whose partner went to jail three years earlier when he was blamed for allowing defective machine parts to be used in U.S. warplanes. Keller and his wife Kate (Ruth Cordell) have their own war-related trials, given that their son Larry never returned from a combat mission in the South Pacific. At curtain's rise, Ann Deever (Emily Landham), daughter of the jailed partner and formerly Larry's best girl, is back in the neighborhood — and suddenly in the romantic crosshairs of surviving Keller son Chris (Eric D. Pasto-Crosby).

What looks on the surface to be the Kellers' prosperous postwar bliss — an impression helped immeasurably by designer Gary Hoff's beautiful house setting — soon becomes a powder keg of bad memories and ominous accusations, especially when Ann's brother George (Patrick Waller) enters the Keller backyard armed with what appears to be the inconvenient truth about the past.

Miller's work is classically structured, and here its original three acts are pressed into two. Act 1 is an efficient setup with easy and entertaining dialogue, while Act 2 offers one emotionally charged scene after the other, including a tense tête-à-tête between Waller and Pasto-Crosby, a sharp and telling exchange between Landham and Holly Allen as a neighbor (both actresses making the most of their Rep debuts), plus Arnold's scenes with practically everyone, especially Cordell, whose pain-wracked readings evoke chills more than once. Nate Eppler, Peter Vann and Marin Miller provide solid support in substantial ancillary roles.

The terrific acting sustains the production and highlights the play's strengths, despite its status as a period piece reflecting old-fashioned attitudes toward women. Miller's working of the broader theme of practicality vs. idealism still manages to say something resonant about the gray moral areas of contemporary American life.