

Review

Tennessee Rep brings 'All My Sons' home

By: **Amy Stumpfl**, *The Tennessean*

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I believe that I was still in high school the first time I read Arthur Miller's 1947 drama *All My Sons*. And to be honest, I didn't really get it. It was too preachy, too sad, too something for an inexperienced 17-year-old to fully grasp and appreciate.

Fast forward 20-some years later to Tennessee Repertory Theatre's season opener of Miller's modern-day tragedy. Perhaps it is René D. Copeland's sure-handed direction, the stunning performances, or simply the fact that I've grown up. But this impeccable staging resonates in a way that is both marvelous and unsettling.

The compelling story centers on Joe Keller, a successful businessman whose factory was responsible for distributing defective airplane parts during World War II, which led to the death of 21 American pilots. Keller was exonerated, while his partner went to prison. But it's Keller's son, Larry, who goes missing in action and is presumed dead.

Now his other son, Chris, wants to marry Ann — the daughter of Joe's imprisoned associate and Larry's former sweetheart. The family's matriarch, Kate, is opposed to the marriage, desperately clinging to the idea that her beloved Larry is still alive. And yet, as we soon learn, the truth is far more devastating than any of the family realizes.

Direction, design, acting superb

Once again, Copeland demonstrates an uncanny ability to bring classic stories to life in TPAC's intimate Johnson Theater. Her vision — coupled with a host of finely tuned performances and a crackerjack design team — brings *All My Sons* home in unforgettable fashion.

Chip Arnold is excellent as Joe Keller, the devoted family man with "a talent for ignoring things." He charms his way through much of the first act, and at times I wondered if he might be a tad young for the role. But as events unfold, Arnold seems to age before our eyes, crumbling under the weight of past sins.

Likewise, Ruth Cordell is quite amazing as Kate. It's a tricky role that could easily be overworked, but her carefully controlled performance speaks volumes about the burden that Kate has carried.

Eric D. Pasto-Crosby turns in a gut-wrenching performance as the idealistic Chris, capturing the complex emotions of a man torn between moral certainty and overwhelming denial. And Emily Landham proves that this summer's achievement in Nashville Shakespeare Festival's *Romeo and Juliet* was no fluke; she conveys Ann's conflicted soul with grace and sincerity.

Patrick Waller also shines in the small, but pivotal role of Ann's brother, George. Waller skillfully balances George's anger with an almost childlike longing to return to happier days — and his confrontation with Pasto-Crosby is simply crushing.

Holly Allen, Nate Eppler, Marin Miller, Peter Vann and young Isaiah Frank lend considerable support as the Keller's neighbors. There's truly not a weak performance among them.

Once again, Tennessee Rep's outstanding design crew delivers, with Gary C. Hoff's detailed set creating a perfect slice of Americana. Trish Clark's costumes are beautifully constructed and true to the period, while Paul Carrol Binkley's sound and Phillip Franck's lighting are artful and effective.

The same can be said of Miller's exploration of lies and retribution. Yes, there are touches of melodrama, and Miller can be a bit preachy. But his message — and the richly drawn characters who deliver it — continues to register with today's audience.

Sadly, nearly 65 years later we remain all-too familiar with the grief of soldiers' mothers, and big business profiting from war. A modern-day tragedy, indeed.