

ABSTRACT

Directing Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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This thesis is a record of the Fall 2007 production of Arthur Miller's play, *All My Sons*, as directed by Graham Northrup. Chapter One seeks to contextualize the play by presenting a brief professional biography of Miller and the circumstances that attended its writing. Chapter Two contains a production analysis of the script, which seeks to determine the nature of its structure, themes, characters, and setting. Chapter Three details the design concept and the process of implementing the scenic, lighting, costume, and sound elements for the show. Chapter Four is a record and a reflection on the rehearsal process, from auditions through dress rehearsals. Chapter Five presents a critique of the performances, as well as a reflection on the entire production process.

Directing Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Arthur Miller and *All My Sons*

Introduction

Arthur Miller's huge Broadway successes in the 1940s and 50s—*All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Crucible*—as well as his significant body of work thereafter, have guaranteed his reputation as one of America's greatest playwrights. An impressive array of awards, including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for *Salesman*, demonstrate his critical as well as popular appeal. Detractors point out flaws in his writing, narrative structure, and other facets of his work, and yet few playwrights have struck so deep and resonant a chord with the average American. As a dramatist, "Miller's virtues outweigh these faults," writes Gerald Weales. "The theme that recurs in all of his plays – the relationship between man's identity and the image that society demands of him – is a major one; in one way or another it has been the concern of most serious playwrights" (180). Miller's life and works have spawned numerous volumes of criticism with contributions by such notable scholars as Harold Bloom, Eric Bentley, and Christopher Bigsby; a biography by Martin Gottfried; the Arthur Miller Society, dedicated to promoting the study of Arthur Miller; and countless professional, civic, and educational productions of his voluminous body of work.

I will first frame the discussion of the play and the playwright in terms of the goals of the production, and the style, conventions, and themes at work in the play. This chapter will then examine Miller's professional life and identity, including his body of work and his development as a playwright. It will touch upon aspects of his personal life

as they relate to his professional journey. In particular, this chapter will focus on Miller's writing of *All My Sons*, his first critical and commercial success, and discuss his earlier and later works in relationship to it. Miller's dramaturgical approach to *All My Sons* will also be addressed, including the structural and stylistic choices that impacted my production of his work, particularly the combination of Realism and classical Greek influences. Four major considerations provide the throughline for my production of *All My Sons*. All of my preparations and research were in some way connected to them. First, my goal was to have a rich and layered production that integrated dialog, action, and design for an engaging and meaningful overall experience. Second, the action and dialog by themselves were written in the Realistic mode, which influenced the approach to rehearsals and working with the actors on character development. More on Miller's use of Realism will be discussed later. Third, despite the fact that the text of the play is Realist in form, there is a great deal symbolic imagery that can be used to particular advantage in both the staging and the design. These will be laid out here, and Chapter Two will discuss in detail some of the symbolic elements of the play. Fourth, Miller employed classic Greek dramaturgical devices as structural underpinnings for his story, which when understood and utilized can enhance a production. These aspects of the production will be discussed at length throughout this thesis. These four considerations, working in concert, serve to expose the themes of the play: that people are connected to and responsible for each other, and that choices made without consideration for others can have damning and irrevocable consequences. The playwright's ideas of the interconnectedness of humanity and our responsibility to each other were developed over

the course of his life, and a look at Arthur Miller's personal and professional history is appropriate to a discussion of his plays and the stories he told.

Beginnings

Arthur Asher Miller was born in uptown Manhattan on October 17, 1915 to Isadore and Augusta Miller. His father made women's coats and ran a successful shop in the garment district until economic trouble hit, and he went bankrupt in the "Black Thursday" stock market crash of 1929. Of necessity, the Millers moved from their home in Manhattan to an old Brooklyn neighborhood. "Flimsily built on a pathetic patch of ground, it amounted to no more than six rooms and a pile of clapboard," Gottfried writes. "A sad comedown from the sixth-floor splendor of Central Park North" (12). It was here that Miller spent the remainder of his youth.

His own family life would play an important role in his writings on many occasions. Experiences in Miller's youth and early adult life contributed significantly to the themes, characters, and settings of his plays. Both the cultural and economic circumstances of his upbringing would influence his thoughts, beliefs, and writing. The Great Depression was the imposing backdrop of his teenage years, and Miller wove related themes into several of his plays. His one-act play *A Memory of Two Mondays* touches on the hardships of several characters working in an auto parts warehouse in the Depression. *After the Fall* shows two characters, ostensibly reflections of Miller's parents, struggling with poor economic decisions leading to financial and marital ruin in the Crash. Miller recalled that several uncles, many of whom were traveling salesmen, wandered in and out of their home. In an interview with Miller in 1949, just after *Death of a Salesman* began its successful run, Robert Sylvester commented that his uncles

“made an impression which stood him in good stead some years later” (Miller and Roudané 12). Using a salesman as his primary figure, Miller’s masterpiece critiques the façade of the American Dream and the meaningless and ultimately destructive pursuit of the material.

In addition to economic circumstances, cultural factors were also involved in shaping both Miller’s life and writing. While he and his parents were not religiously observant, Miller found himself steeped in a Jewish culture and strongly identified with the social, practical, and even religious issues of that community. Many of his plays invite analysis of the Jewishness of the dialogue and characters. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* has been the subject of study as a product of Miller’s Jewish experience. Martin Gottfried also finds parallels between Joe and Kate Keller and Miller’s culturally Jewish parents in *All My Sons*: “The browbeaten husband-dominating wife relationship . . . certainly has an Isadore-Gussie ring to it, and notwithstanding . . . the Midwest setting, an occasional Jewish idiom can be found in the dialogue” (99).

One particularly vivid memory of a Jewish custom helped him connect with certain characters in his plays. His grandfathers observed the Sabbath weekly at synagogue, and Miller recounts in his memoir, *Timebends*, a frightening and exhilarating experience he had as a young boy observing his great-grandfather during a ritual. He was told to close his eyes as his great-grandfather and others began to sing and dance around the sacred scrolls of the Torah (39). Of course, his curiosity got the better of him, and he peeked. The vigor with which his great-grandfather worshiped in ritualized dance was shocking to the young Miller. He kept his observations to himself. Much later in his life, while researching Puritans for *The Crucible*, Miller made connections between what he

found out about the Puritans and his indelible impressions of his great-grandfather's faith.

He commented:

I felt strangely at home with these New Englanders, moved in the darkest part of my mind that they were putative ur-Hebrews, with the same fierce idealism, devotion to God And God was driving them as crazy as He did the Jews trying to maintain their uniquely stainless vessel of faith in Him. And now, in these pictures, they also had the beards and oddly, a building and lighting suggestive of the somber synagogue on 114th Street, where light . . . seemed to vanish into dim paradisiacal indefiniteness . . . so that all the humans moved as though suspended in a luminescence not quite of this world, lacking a hardness of outline—an impression derived, I suppose, from my having first seen that incantatory dancing through the fuzziness of my own eyelashes. (43)

In addition to what his family did as Jews was the importance of what happened to them as Jews. Both the internal culture of Jewish practice and heritage as well as the treatment of Jews by larger society were themes that found their way into Miller's works. His only novel, *Focus*, is about an anti-Semitic man who will not hire people who even appear Jewish. The tables are turned when he comes to need glasses that make him look Jewish. *Incident at Vichy*, written in 1964, addresses the atmosphere of anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust. *Playing for Time*, penned in 1980, tells the story of a Jewish woman's struggle to survive in a Nazi concentration camp. *After the Fall*, a semi-autobiographical piece written in 1964, ostensibly details Miller's relationship with Marilyn Monroe and draws parallels between the lies and betrayals that bring down a marriage with events of the Holocaust. While an exploration of the impact of Miller's Jewish culture on his plays is not the purpose of this chapter, it is nevertheless clear that this aspect of his life was one of many strong influences on his writing and an important source for understanding Miller's works individually and collectively.

Aside from community and family influences, Miller's academic career also played a role in his development as a playwright. As a student in high school he was not particularly conscientious and failed to make the necessary grades for admittance to a university. After working in his father's coat factory for a while, he decided once again to try the college route. He finally was accepted at the University of Michigan on a conditional basis (Gottfried 20). He enrolled in such subjects as chemistry and history before settling on journalism as a major. During his studies, he became interested in playwriting, and with no formal training, began to write. He met with some early success. His first play, *No Villain*, written over just six days in 1936, received a Hopwood Award, a prestigious literary prize bequeathed to the University by the dramatist Avery Hopwood. The award came as a bit of a surprise to Miller, because apparently, "up to that point he had seen only one stage play in his life and . . . before sitting down to write his first drama, in all innocence he asked a classmate how long an act was supposed to run" (Hutchens 4). He revised the play and gave it a new title, *They Too Arise*, and submitted it to the Theatre Guild's Bureau of New Plays contest. The play, about a Jewish family struggling with the effects of the Depression, was awarded a \$1,250 prize. Another play, *Honors at Dawn*, won a Hopwood award in 1937. These critical successes propelled him onto his professional course, compelling him to change his major from journalism to English and giving him the confidence to pursue writing as a career.

The further he got into his craft, the more Miller paid attention to that of others. Influences on Miller's playwriting include the great American playwright of the early 1900s, Eugene O'Neill. Miller holds up O'Neill's *Anna Christie* as an example of "the

kind of theatre I believe in” (Hutchens 5). Miller has often been compared to O’Neill, with journalist Robert Sylvester stating in 1949 that he is “generally accepted as an authentic *Wunderkind*, the ablest writer of stage tragedies since Eugene O’Neill” (9). Miller also credited Henrik Ibsen, the great writer of the Realist tradition, as having a profound influence on his work. Additionally, Miller was moved by the work of his contemporary Tennessee Williams, whose style and language made a significant impact on Miller’s writing of *Death of a Salesman* and subsequent works.

Another person who would profoundly influence his life and work was Miller’s college sweetheart, Mary Grace Slattery, whom he married in 1940. Her influence on Miller’s work is seen in *All My Sons*. While the play does not name the town of its setting, both explicit and implied details point toward a town much like Lakeview, Ohio, where Mary Grace was born and raised. The couple eventually had two children together, Jane and Robert. Robert, born the same year that *All My Sons* premiered, would go on to produce some of his father’s work, including the 1999 film adaptation of *The Crucible*.

After college, Miller wrote radio plays for the Federal Theatre Project and other ventures. In a 1947 interview with John Hutchens, Miller confessed that he hated writing for radio: “‘Every emotion in a radio script has to have a tag. It’s like playing a scene in a dark closet.’ He winced a bit at the thought of it” (5). After 1947 he published no more radio plays.

Learning

Miller finally broke into the world of professional commercial theatre in 1944, with a production of *The Man Who Had All the Luck*. The play revolves around a

resourceful young man, David Beeves, who experiences an incredible streak of good luck. His wife, his careers in auto repair and eventually mink farming, his wealth, and even the birth of his first child all seem to come as great strokes of fortune, in spite of his own weakness. He begins to doubt his worthiness when others around him, including his brother, are faced with seemingly arbitrary catastrophes and setbacks. David learns by the end that it is as much his own hard work and conscientiousness as any so-called luck that have made him successful. The play won the Theatre Guild's National Award. Unfortunately, critics were indifferent at best, and some panned the production as a laughable attempt. George Nathan's summary of the event in *The Theatre Book of the Year 1944-1945* was particularly vituperative:

Most of the audience expected the final curtain to come down upon the spectacle of everyone on the stage squirting seltzer siphons at one another and with the central character thereupon stepping to the footlights and confiding to the house that the whole enterprise had been conceived as burlesque – and that money would be refunded at the box-office to anyone who had not duly appreciated it. (173)

The show ran for only six performances, including two previews, and lost its investors around \$55,000, nearly half a million dollars in today's terms.

Miller commented in a 1947 interview that the learning experiences “‘came down on me like a ton of bricks for that one It was faulty all right. It couldn't have succeeded because it was not a resolved play’” (Hutchens 5). He also felt that it would have been better as a tragedy than as a “folk-comedy.” The failure of *The Man Who Had All the Luck* on Broadway also compelled Miller to revisit the settings of his plays. *Luck* takes place over the course of three years in two very different locations, an auto shop (with a full-sized automobile brought in as a centerpiece) and a farmhouse. The scene change requirements were exceedingly heavy, and Miller recognized that the long pauses

in the action caused his audience to lose the story's momentum. He admitted that the scenic requirements contributed to the failure of the play: "'For the first four weeks,' he says, 'we rehearsed the stagehands. Then it was too late to rehearse the actors'" (Sylvester 11). This realization led him to choose single, simple settings for *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *After the Fall*, and others. The action of *All My Sons*, for example, takes place in the backyard of the Keller home over the course of a single day, minimizing the need for any burdensome scene shifts.

Still, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* contains Miller's recognizable dialog and repartee, and signs of the genius that attend his later plays. Two recent productions of the play have met with modest praise and success, with reviewers often commenting on Miller's formative state as a playwright. For example, in a review of the 2002 Williamstown Theatre Festival production, the critic commented that, "it's apparent that this Miller-in-the-making play has much to offer his many fans" (Sommer par. 8). That production, starring Chris O'Donnell as David Beeves, later ran on Broadway for a brief engagement. Apparently, the play has been optioned for a film version, which is currently in development.

Despite Miller's ultimatum that he would have quit playwriting if his next play were to flop, it is easy to see how the author who wrote about diligent work bringing about success would turn around to become one of America's leading dramatic playwrights. Of course, Miller did not know what kind of success lay around the corner, and the intervening years between *Luck* and *All My Sons* were difficult. He wrote about six plays that were never published or produced. With a need to generate some income, Miller tried his hand at writing fiction, and in 1945 published *Focus*, a "taut study of anti-

Semitism and fascism” (Schumach 6). The novel sold 90,000 copies, but met with tepid reviews.

The Big Break

Finally, in 1947, Miller’s sophomore outing on Broadway put him firmly on the map. Success, however, seemed a long time coming for Miller, and the prospect of another flop was daunting. Miller’s determination to write both a critical and popular hit led him to take his time to prepare *All My Sons*. Beginning in 1941, the process of research and rewrites took Miller five years to complete; his approach to the play itself will be addressed later in this chapter. The Broadway production of *All My Sons* at the Coronet theatre under the direction of Elia Kazan, won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Brooks Atkinson declared in his *New York Times* review “that the theatre has acquired a genuine new talent,” and that

His drama is a piece of expert dramatic construction. Mr. Miller has woven his characters into a tangle of plot that springs naturally out of the circumstances of life today. Having set the stage, he drives the play along by natural crescendo to a startling and terrifying climax. (par. 3)

The play also won audiences over and ran for 328 performances. Miller’s painstaking diligence seemed to finally have paid off.

Miller discussed in his memoir some possible reasons for the play’s success:

Something in the play seemed to have departed from tradition. It is possible that Mordecai Gorelik’s set, a disarmingly sunny suburban house, as well as the designedly ordinary and sometimes jokey atmosphere of the first ten minutes, made the deepening threat of the remainder more frightening than people were culturally prepared for; this kind of placid American backyard was not ordinarily associated, at least in 1947, with murder and suicide. (133-134)

This subtle twist on the stereotypical tragedy enabled Miller's play to draw in the audience fully by developing an affinity with them, and then engage them at close range in the serious consequences of the characters' behavior.

The success of *All My Sons* on Broadway led to mixed feelings for Miller. He expressed his gratitude for the financial stability and recognition that it brought, but that, too, caused some anxiety on his part. Miller noted in his memoir that:

It occurred to me . . . that if I did not work I would still be earning a lot of money and by the end of the week I would be richer than at the beginning. My mind worked at this anomaly, trying to get used to it. If I simply went outside and walked around the block the cash would still come in. Even if I took a nap or read some stupid magazine for half an hour or went to the movies. The word *royalty* took on a more exact meaning. (143)

His social views being what they were, Miller wanted to avoid becoming the very kind of person that his play decried. To ground himself and to alleviate the guilt that sprang up in him, he briefly took a menial job making box dividers.

All My Sons, and subsequently *Death of a Salesman*, were well received at the time of their original production and continue to fascinate due in part to Miller's complex characters. For example, there is an "ambiguity that occasionally touches the characters in [*All My Sons*]," writes Weales, "that makes the supposedly admirable idealist son sound at times like a hanging judge" (169). Chris's sentiments about responsibility to others are somewhat contradicted by his actions toward Joe. Joe Keller is not a simple, villainous criminal. He is a good husband and father, and a hard worker, who loves and is incredibly, though misguidedly, loyal to his family. "There is nothing ruthless about Joe, no hint of the robber baron in his make-up; his ambitions are small – a comfortable home for his family, a successful business to pass on to his sons" (168). Joe seems to be more of a moral coward than an outright crook. As for Kate, Miller himself commented

on an ambiguity in the character that even he had not noticed in the original production. When both an Israeli and a London production each emphasized Kate's role in the family's crisis, Miller realized that she could indeed be more than he imagined her to be:

For while trying to put it out of her mind, she knows from the outset that her husband indeed shipped faulty plane engine elements to the army. Her guilty knowledge, so obdurately and menacingly suppressed, can be interpreted as her wish to deny her son's death but also, and perhaps even primarily, to take vengeance on her culpable husband by driving him psychically to his knees and ultimately to suicide. (*Timebends* 136)

The ambiguity makes Miller's characters rich sources for actors, directors, and critics alike to mine and mount fresh productions.

Critics of the play, however, have faulted *All My Sons* for various reasons through the years, including melodramatic moments, a too-convenient ending, and a subject that is easily dated. Specifically, one criticism often leveled at the play is the device of the letter from Larry. "For all its neatness," says Weales, the play "tends to go to pieces in the last act when the recognition of Joe's guilt no longer comes from the interaction of characters, but from the gratuitous introduction of Larry's letter" (179). Addressing this common criticism, Miller asks if the same complaint cannot be leveled at ancient and venerated plays such as *Oedipus Rex*, for its reliance on prophecy and fate. "The letter's appearance in *All My Sons*," Miller argues, "seems to me to spring out of Ann's character and situation and hence is far less difficult to accept than a naked stroke of fate" (*Timebends* 134).

Critic Tom Driver, writing in 1960, praises the play's "lofty" ideas, but asserts that "when all is said and done, the play seems to be only a play about an aircraft parts manufacturer in wartime. It has rapidly become dated. The mistake was not in being timely, but in being timely with too simple a point of view" (48). Whether the play is

universally timeless or not seems rather irrelevant in light of the fact that several productions have resonated with audiences who face similar crises at different times. The Israeli production of 1977, for instance, was wildly successful and broke the record for the longest running play in that country. Miller asked Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was sitting nearby, why there seemed to be an “almost religious quality in the audience’s attention,” to which Rabin responded, “Because this is a problem in Israel – boys are out there day and night dying in planes and on the ground, and back here people are making a lot of money. So it might as well be an Israeli play” (*Timebends* 135). My own production seems rather timely, given the War on Terror and our current situation in Iraq. Accusations of war profiteering have been slung at various companies, and accounts of fraud and embezzlement that have plagued certain corporations in recent years remain fresh in the collective memory. Soldiers are returning from terrible war zone circumstances, some with life-altering injuries, and trying to re-assimilate into the social and economic landscape.

Success

With the success of *All My Sons*, Miller’s career was set to take off in ways that even he probably could not have imagined. He took six weeks in 1949 to pen his masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*, which introduced the near-revolutionary idea of a “tragedy of the common man,” and won several prestigious theatre awards in addition to the Pulitzer Prize. He earned a reported \$2 million in the initial run and subsequent licensing of *Salesman*.

Miller’s success, however, did not come without trials. Divorce from his first wife in 1955, marriage to Marilyn Monroe in 1956, and a summons to appear before the

House Un-American Activities Committee created stress. The intense years following *Salesman* impelled him to write more significant works for the theatre, including *An Enemy of the People* (adaptation, 1950), *The Crucible* (1953), *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955), and *A View from the Bridge* (1956). In 1957, just ten years from his first Broadway success, *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays* was published.

In the four decades following the 1950s, Miller never quite reached the same level of commercial success, but he nevertheless continued to produce a significant body of work with notable plays such as *After the Fall* (1964), *Incident at Vichy* (1964), *The American Clock* (1980), *Playing for Time* (1985), *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1990), *The Last Yankee* (1993), and *Broken Glass* (1994). Several other plays, articles, film adaptations, and short stories were scattered throughout his career. Miller married Inge Morath in 1964, and remained with her until her death in 2002. He often traveled with her, and published photo essays and travel journals with her photography, such as *In Russia*, and *In the Country*.

As Miller collected experience, his craft became more refined. His settings are one example of his maturation as a playwright. The settings continued to evolve from the unwieldy sets in *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, to a more rational and realistic unit set for *All My Sons*, to a slightly non-realistic, yet practical look for *Salesman*. Miller was influenced by Tennessee Williams (and vice versa), and appreciated the look of Jo Mielziner's set for Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Mielziner was tapped to do *Salesman*, and produced the now iconic set that was echoed in the 1985 television adaptation with Dustin Hoffman. Miller's work became increasingly experimental, having moved away from the strict Realism of *All My Sons*. For example, the stage

directions for *After the Fall* indicate that the action “takes place in the mind, thought, and memory of Quentin. Except for one chair there is no furniture in the conventional sense; there are no walls or substantial boundaries” (Miller, *Portable* 260).

Politics as Usual

One aspect of Miller’s work, however, has been fairly consistent. He was an unabashedly “political animal,” and his works reflect his ideology. ““I am a confirmed and deliberate radical,”” he told one interviewer, who then summarized the relationship of Miller’s politics and plays: “He firmly believes that the stage is the last sounding board for an independent thinker, and he will use it that way” (Sylvester 17). Arthur Miller fits into the category of playwrights who seek both to entertain and to enlighten. Gottfried comments on the birth of Miller’s political attitudes:

Here surely was the origin of Miller’s intense left-wing ideology, a chemistry of the Wall Street crash, its cataclysmic effect on his family’s fortunes and his chance enrollment in the University of Michigan, which was not only a dynamic center of student radicalism but one located on the cusp of Detroit’s automobile industry, where one of the first and greatest battles of American unionism was being fought. (24)

Miller’s politics, however, evolved along with experience, and evidence can be found in his plays to trace his ideological journey. For example, Bigsby suggests that Miller had an isolationist attitude toward World War II until the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany in 1940. Afterwards he changed his mind, and his plays’ themes heavily lean toward an individual’s responsibility to everyone else, reflecting his own desire to see justice done overseas.

The Man Who Had All the Luck extolled the virtues of diligence and conscientiousness in a post-Depression capitalist environment. Miller observed in his essay “History’s Fables,” that, “*The Man Who Had All the Luck* tells me that in the midst

of the collectivist thirties I believed it decisive what an individual thinks and does about his life, regardless of overwhelming social forces. There is no force so powerful, politically as well as personally, as a man's self conceptions" (par. 8). His subsequent plays reflect a certain critique of the values that make up free enterprise capitalism. The fact that his father was involved in pursuing the American Dream and ran a successful coat factory, but lost it in the greedy, overheated economy that finally collapsed, may provide a clue into Miller's view of work and responsibility. That the American Dream seemed to have failed his father may be one reason he so readily critiques it.

All My Sons seeks to strike a balance between the idea of providing for oneself, and one's responsibility in the larger societal context. This apparent middle ground evoked responses from both liberal and conservative extremes. Communist-leaning commentators faulted the play for being "the story of one exceptional capitalist in an otherwise acceptable system," while right-wing groups "saw it as an attack on American values (it was banned from appearing at US bases in Europe)" (Bigsby 98).

Miller went on to critique the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*, commenting on the skewed values of a system that promotes being rich and "well-liked" over personal and community responsibility. In 1949, Sylvester touched on the political bent of Miller's work:

Since *All My Sons* was an attack on war profiteers and *Death of a Salesman* is in a sense a criticism of the American way of life, Miller has been accused of communistic tendencies. He expects to be similarly accused following production of other plays he is planning, for they are variations on the same theme – man's need to examine himself and his relationship to society. (17)

Sylvester was likely referring to Miller's upcoming work, *The Crucible*, which debuted in 1953.

Miller's most overtly political piece, *The Crucible* directly attacked the "witch hunt" tactics of the Red Scare era. Miller's own visits to Communist Party meetings with his friends in the 1940s earned him an invitation to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, during which he was asked to give the committee the names of those he knew to have been involved with the Communist Party. Refusing to give up their names on principle – "I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him" – Miller was found in contempt of Congress and had his passport suspended. On appeal, his conviction was overturned. Those troublesome times cost him a friend when, standing on principle, he severed ties with Elia Kazan for "naming names" before the committee.

Miller's plays continued to have themes of social responsibility, such as his adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, in which a doctor is the sole voice warning of a health crisis while others keep the information secret in order not to disturb the town's tourist revenues. Several of his works address issues of anti-Semitism.

Despite his strong point of view, Miller's works were never overtly topical nor did they devolve into tracts or outright propaganda. Even in *The Crucible*, which was a direct response to his negative experience with politics in the 1940s, the story stands on its own. It can be enjoyed not only as a historical document from the time period in which it was written, but also on its own merits as a moving piece of dramatic literature. The richness and ambiguity of the characters and circumstances also contribute to interpretations that continue to engage diverse audiences. The dual nature of Miller's works, as both political commentary and as art, is a compelling reason why Miller's plays

have endured the test of time, and have lasted to become significant additions to the American, and even the world, dramatic canon.

Legacy

Arthur Miller remained active in playwriting, on the lecture circuit, and in politics until his death on February 10, 2005 at his home in Connecticut. His final full-length play, *Finishing the Picture*, premiered in 2004, capping off a corpus of twenty-four published plays, a novel, a few screenplays, and dozens of articles and essays on life, art, politics, and theatre. More significant, however, is his lasting legacy of drama accessible to the broadest possible range of Americans. His works endure through the years and are as insightful about the human social condition now as when they were originally written.

Miller's works were a significant part of my formation as a theatre professional. Seeing a production of *Playing for Time* helped me connect with the experiences of Jews in the Nazi death camps. I found the film adaptation of *The Crucible* with Daniel Day Lewis an incredibly moving experience. In college, I acted in a one-act version of *All My Sons* as Joe Keller, and learned a respect not only for the social ideals of the play, but also of the strong characters and complex relationships.

My preparation to direct *All My Sons* and write about the production and the playwright has given me a greater respect for his contributions. It has provided me a unique opportunity to examine and consider deeply the character relationships, ideals, and social commentary. I was excited to direct a play that engaged the audience emotionally and intellectually through a well-crafted and timely story. My own hope for popular and critical success was much the same as Miller's original ambitions. Understanding the cultural and historical framework in which he wrote the play, as well

as analyzing the internal workings of the script has provided me with the tools to achieve success. Miller's works will continue to be an important part of the canon of American plays, but more importantly for me, *All My Sons* is now a part of my own canon of experience.

While my interpretation and analysis of the play will be thoroughly addressed in Chapter Two, an understanding of Miller's approach to the play is appropriate to the current discussion of the playwright and his work.

Miller's Dramaturgy in All My Sons

The seed of the story came from a real-life occurrence. Miller had heard about a tank parts manufacturer in the Midwest that sent faulty parts to the Army, causing the deaths of several tank crewmembers. In a 1969 interview with Robert Martin, Miller reveals some details about the connections between the real-life incident and the product he created: "There wasn't a son involved but the daughter of a manufacturer in the United States who turned him in during the war. I never knew the people involved, and it turned out that it wasn't a daughter, but a son in my play. All I knew was just what I told you, that this had happened in the Middle West" (311). The location of the incident was significant to Miller, who surmised that if it "could take place in the isolationist Midwest its appeal might be general" (Hutchens 4). While stereotypes make it easy to write off the actions of New Yorkers or Californians as examples of the extreme, it is more difficult to ignore such behavior from the seemingly grounded folk of America's Heartland. The locale eliminates an easy dismissal on the basis of radical or reactionary thought, and points to a more systemic problem. Both the novelty and the applicability of Miller's setting for *All My Sons* is its tranquil, mundane location.

Since the setting seemed to Miller like it was going to resonate, the challenge was then to create characters that would be believed by post-war theatergoers. Miller's experiences while working on other projects helped him with his development of the characters of *All My Sons*. While researching for *The Story of G.I. Joe*, a screenplay for which he would write the initial draft before deciding to leave the project, Miller visited with troops to help understand their experience in wartime as well as peacetime. Bigsby writes of Miller's discovery:

In 1944, Miller contemplated the fate of those who would return from the war and re-enter a world whose values would be fundamentally different from those operative in battle. Those prepared to lay down their lives not only for a cause but more directly for one another would find themselves . . . back in a society that privileged the individual, that preached the virtues of competition, that substituted the material for the spiritual or say materialism as an expression of utopian values. (79)

Miller's observations would provide him with the foundation for Chris's character, including the guilt and unease he feels about returning to a new car and a new refrigerator, while he left so many of his "brothers" dead on the battlefield. He returns to a home where family and neighbors "seem to have put idealism aside in the name of a post-war pragmatism" (79). The unity and near-familial bonds that were formed with his battalion seemed to evaporate.

Those bonds, or the lack thereof, provided the thematic core of this script. Miller wanted to explore the concept of "relatedness" in society through *All My Sons*. The play examines the notions of personal responsibility and obligation to society. Miller wrote in the introduction to his *Collected Plays*,

The fortress which *All My Sons* lays siege to is the fortress of unrelatedness. It is an assertion not so much of a morality in terms of right and wrong, but of a moral world's being such because men cannot walk away from certain of their deeds. In this sense Joe Keller is a threat to

society and in this sense the play is a social play. Its “socialness” does not reside in its having dealt with the crime of selling defective materials to a nation at war It is that the crime is seen as having roots in a certain relationship of the individual to society, . . . which, if dominant, can mean a jungle existence for all of us no matter how high our buildings soar. (Miller and Martin, 131)

“The crime at its center,” notes Bigsby, “raises in stark form the clash between self-interest and human solidarity” (78). He goes on to explain that the play is “about a man who places survival above responsibility to a group, pragmatism above the ideal, loyalty to family above responsibility to society. It is also, however, about loss, loss of a sense of common humanity” (80). Chris’s idealism represents the view that all men are essentially brothers, and our responsibility to each other is as important as our responsibility to our flesh and blood. Joe’s ethic, however, represents Miller’s view of the American value that loyalty to family relations is of paramount importance. Chris’s men “killed themselves for each other,” while Joe killed others for himself.

In a way, *All My Sons* was an exercise in mastery of the Realistic format. Speaking of the more fluid form of *Salesman*, Miller commented, “I’ve always been impatient with naturalism on stage. But I knew I had to master naturalism before I tried anything else. *All My Sons* was in that category” (Schumach 6). “It is hardly possible,” Driver claims, “to read Miller without being impressed with his desire to see and report life realistically” (46). However, Miller’s “naturalism” in the case of *All My Sons*, was not the “slice-of-life” approach of the Naturalist playwrights. It was more closely associated with the Realism of Ibsen and Strindberg than with Zola. Miller himself distanced his work from Naturalism in a 1980 interview with V. Rajakrishnan:

You see, naturalism to me has a very concrete meaning. It is an attempt to bring on to the stage a picture of life uninterpreted, as far as possible, by the artist's visible hand; as though one should feel one were actually there.

Well, I don't believe in that; in fact, I am thoroughly opposed to that. It is a lie in the first place. In the theatre one can't be "actually" anywhere but in the theatre. One is in the theatre facing actors. It is not the job of the theatre to reproduce life; it is to interpret life. (200)

In this respect, *Sons* was an important milestone in his development as a playwright: his sense of having mastered the genre allowed him to push beyond it.

Ibsen's Influence

Structurally, *All My Sons* employs conventions of two major dramatic periods or styles. First, Miller draws on Ibsen as a model for the behaviors of his characters. Each of his characters' speeches and actions can be linked to specific causes and effects. Just as Nora and Torvald's actions drive them inexorably toward the famous door slam in *A Doll's House*, Joe, Kate, Chris, and the others are on a path dictated by past choices. No fantastic, heavenly, or absurd forces help to shape the events. Even the revelation of Larry's letter, criticized by some as a too-convenient, *deus ex machina* ending, is rooted in cause and effect relationships stemming from Joe's fateful decision. Miller's use of psychological realism paves the way for a Stanislavskian approach to the acting, which calls for behavior motivated by the desires of the characters.

Raymond Williams describes *All My Sons* as a play that follows this pattern:

"The Ibsen method of showing first an ordinary domestic scene, into which, by gradual infiltration, the crime and the guilt enter and build up to the critical eruption, is exactly followed" (Bloom 9). Since Ibsen used characteristics of the well-made play, a tightly constructed and neatly packaged dramatic form of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that Miller employed many of the same techniques. "The machinery of the well-made play," writes New York Times drama critic Ben Brantley, "is indeed visible here (right down to a climax-precipitating letter, produced at the last minute)" (par. 9).

Miller himself acknowledges a heavy influence from the venerable Norwegian dramatist. Miller's respect for Ibsen's work and style are a matter of record. Indeed, Miller went on to adapt Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* in 1964. In the preface to that publication, Miller admitted Ibsen's profound influence on his own work:

There is one quality in Ibsen that no serious writer can afford to overlook. It lies at the very center of his force, and I found in it – as I hope others will – a profound source of strength. It is his insistence, his utter conviction, that he is going to say what he has to say, and that the audience, by God, is going to listen Every Ibsen play begins with the unwritten words: “Now listen here!” And these words have shown me a path through the wall of “entertainment,” a path that leads beyond the formulas and dried-up precepts, the pretense and fraud, of the business of the stage. Whatever else Ibsen has to teach, this is his first and greatest contribution. (Miller and Martin 16)

Additionally, a mastery of Ibsen's use of time, exposition, and causality are clearly manifest in *All My Sons*, an “‘old- fashioned’ play of exposition, confrontation, and climax” (Driver 46). Miller went on to experiment with time and causality, and in *Death of a Salesman*, with its flash-back memory scenes, ended up with “‘an explosion of watch and calendar,’ with a corresponding change in the level of reality to which it appealed” (46).

Greek Influence

In addition to Ibsenite Realism, Miller also employed many of the conventions of classical Greek tragedy. While it was not until *Death of a Salesman* that Miller wrote about tragedy and the common man, *All My Sons* was clearly a philosophical forerunner to that important idea that helped reestablish tragedy as a legitimate genre in the American dramatic canon. Willy Loman, the salesman whose desires and relationships are so closely related to those of the audience who watched his descent into misery and death, stands as an archetype. His dreams are our dreams, his fears are our fears. His

downfall is tragic precisely because he is not of high station. Being common, the audience can relate directly to him. Joe Keller, on the other hand, is written not as a lowly man leading a seemingly inconsequential existence, but as an echo of his kingly predecessors in Greek tragedy. Joe's story is that of a noble spirit whose choices bring down a curse on his household. Gottfried writes:

All My Sons contains elements of Greek tragedy not only in its retroactive structure but also in a story that at times evokes Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Joe Keller can be viewed as a king whose hands are stained with a son's blood, and Kate Keller as a Queen who is suspended between shielding her husband and destroying him for love of a son. (101)

Just as Oedipus' past actions come full circle when he realizes what he has actually done, Joe's past is quickly catching up with him. The Furies that hounded Orestes until justice was done are embodied here as George, then Ann, and ultimately Chris, whose final torment of his father drives Joe to suicide. Kate also plays a Cassandra-like role, as a prophetess whose dreams and visions are portentous for good or ill, yet she remains captive to Joe's past choices. Jim, Sue and the other neighbors represent a chorus of the citizenry, and tend to speak the truth when no one else seems able.

The key difference is in the domestic setting and familiar language, through which Miller brings Joe down close to our level. He attempts to get his audience to see that it is not just kings and princes that hold fate in their hands, but those of us who, like Joe, earn our living by the sweat of our brows. Thematically, the play created a recognizable contemporary domestic setting in which your average "Joe" could make great and terrible choices. Whereas we might express sympathy for those of royal blood in a classical tragedy, Miller wants us to empathize with the protagonist, to see ourselves

in him. Miller is, in essence, closing the distance between the lives of his characters, and the lives of audience. In his interview with Rajakrishnan, Miller stated:

I have always assumed that the real job for me was . . . to try to create empathy in the theatre, and not the kind of distancing, achieved through comic and grotesque means, which the anti-theatre of Ionesco and Beckett creates in the audience. I felt that there was enough dissociation in life, without my adding to it in the theatre. I wanted the spectators to associate rather than dissociate. The measure of it all is death, and that can't be parodied, at least not by the participant. (202-3)

Unlike the classical plays he uses as a model, the tragedy that attends the characters in *All My Sons* is only one small step removed from the kind of tragedy that can affect the spectators personally. Here we see Miller's use of tragedy and his social views converge.

In "Tragedy and the Common Man" he states:

Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist. But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief—optimistic, if you will—in the perfectibility of man. (par. 20)

Miller employed the form of tragedy for a specific purpose, to enlighten as well as to entertain.

Miller's use of Greek construction does not end with character parallels or plot structure. Dramatic elements of Aristotle's *Poetics* are working at full force in the play. Joe's tragic miscalculation, or *hamartia*, leads him to place the financial security of his blood relatives above the very lives of others. The revelation of Larry's letter produces *anagnorisis*, a discovery which quickly leads Joe to *peripeteia*. Joe reverses his prior attempts to protect himself and his family through deception, and, burdened by a new and profound guilt for his failures, decides to end his life.

Moreover, the Greek aspects of the play afford a stylized approach to the design. The set, which calls for a two-storey house lined on either side with poplar trees, could easily be seen as a column-lined palace, the steps of which provide the location of much of the action. Other aspects of the design could easily be heightened to reflect the mythic and universal themes that accompany Greek tragedy.

In summation, Arthur Miller's life experiences, his social views, and his artistic heritage all influenced the writing of *All My Sons*. An understanding of Miller's approach to *All My Sons*, as well as his other works, is important both for a thorough comprehension of the play and a resonant production. My analysis in Chapter Two focuses on the conventions that Miller infused in his play, particularly the Realistic nature of the characters and dialog that informed my approach to the acting, and the symbolic and Greek aspects that influenced the design.

CHAPTER TWO

Analysis

Introduction

The impressions of my first reading of *All My Sons* with a production in mind are still poignant: a son who reveres his father; a father who wants the best for his family; a mother trying to keep her family together; a fateful decision that shatters the fragile façade and leaves in its wake sorrow, anger, despair, and death. In step with Miller's reasons for writing *All My Sons*, one of my goals for this production was to help the audience experience a visceral response that leaves them with a new appreciation for the weight that our personal decisions carry, if not an outright aching desire to use their lives for a greater purpose than self-fulfillment. At the same time, if a play does not entertain, it will not have the power to reach its audience on any level. Achieving this goal means producing a work of art that is ultimately greater than the sum of its parts. This is no easy task. My first step, regardless of the anticipated synergy, was to examine the parts of the play themselves through close literary analysis. Discovering their individual functions would be a necessary move toward effectively executing those functions. Then, getting all the parts to work in concert would be a significant milestone on the path to the synergistic effect required to achieve my goal. Each of my subsequent readings of the script was focused on understanding and, in a way, cataloguing the different elements of the play, and determining how they all fit together. Of all the components that can be

analyzed for production purposes, no single element is more important than the action of the play. Therefore the next logical step in this chapter is a synopsis of the plot.

Plot Synopsis

Like many Greek and neoclassical plays, the action takes place over the course of a day. It opens with Joe Keller talking to his neighbors, Dr. Jim Bayliss and Frank Lubey, on the back porch of his two-storey, seven room home on a Sunday morning in late August 1947. We discover later in the play that they are in a town near a lake within driving distance of Columbus, Ohio. We see a young, broken apple tree in the yard, which we learn is “Larry’s tree.” Jim’s wife, Sue, and Frank’s wife, Lydia, each make brief appearances, and much of their commentary is focused on the broken tree and the unexpected arrival of Ann Deever, the Kellers’ former next door neighbor, who has come to visit the family.

Chris appears from the house as the last of the neighbors exit. A youngster, Bert, arrives to give a report to Joe, who plays “policeman” with the neighborhood children, entertaining them with stories of a jail in his basement. When Bert leaves, the conversation between Joe and Chris returns to the broken memorial tree, which has blown down during the night. Chris suggests that he and Joe have been dishonest with Kate by playing along with her hope that Larry will return safely from the war three years after he was reported missing. We learn that Chris’s motive for letting go of Larry is to marry Ann, who was Larry’s girlfriend before he served in World War II; however since Kate does not believe Larry to be dead, Ann is still “Larry’s girl.” By marrying Ann, Chris will effectively pronounce Larry dead, so Joe fears that Kate will object to the proposal. The conversation shifts to Chris’s possible departure from the company and the

town to pursue a life with Ann elsewhere if things do not work out with Kate at home. Joe gets upset that Chris would even hint at leaving the business, since Joe has been building “the whole shootin’ match” for his sons. Chris urges him to take up the issue with Kate.

Kate appears and complains that Joe has once again thrown a bag of perfectly good food in the garbage. They discuss the damage from last night’s wind. Kate expresses her relief that Larry’s tree is broken, and begins connecting events like the tree breaking and Annie’s arrival to her notion that Larry will return. She mentions a pain on the top of her head and explains that she had a terrible night and describes her nightmare about Larry. When Ann finally enters, everyone in the family engages in small talk until Kate asks Ann if she is still waiting for Larry. Ann says that she is not, and realizes for the first time how deeply Kate’s hope runs. We learn that Ann’s father, Steve Deever, is serving time for the deaths of twenty-one pilots who crashed due to cracked cylinder heads shipped out by Joe’s factory. Ann has refused to have any contact with her father. We hear Joe tell his version of the story about the plant being under tremendous pressure to supply cylinder heads for P-40 aircraft, and Steve shipping off cracked cylinder heads. Joe disagrees with Steve’s decision to ship the cylinder heads, but defends him: “That’s a mistake, but it ain’t murder.” Joe manages to change the subject to dinner, and says he will go in and call for reservations, leaving Chris and Ann alone.

Chris and Ann reveal their love for each other, and they kiss, but Ann senses Chris’s shame and asks him to tell her about it. Chris recounts losing his company of men during the war, and how his men were selfless to the point of giving their lives for each other. He explains that he feels like the material things he has returned home to are

somehow “loot,” and he feels ashamed to have so much of it. Ann reassures him that he has no reason for guilt over either his possessions or her. They kiss as Joe returns. Ann’s brother George calls from Columbus and Ann goes in to take the call. When Ann reenters, she reveals that George is on his way to the Kellers’ after visiting his father in prison for the first time.

When Act Two opens the family is inside getting ready to go out to dinner. Kate says she cannot handle George bringing up the case again. Chris assures Ann that they will tell Kate of their marriage plans.

Sue enters and asks Ann to move away from the area if she and Chris marry because Chris’s idealism is negatively affecting Jim. Sue lets on that she and others still think Joe is guilty, and that Chris knows it. Ann defends Chris, saying that he would not take money from his father’s factory if there was anything wrong with it. Chris tells Ann he would not be able to forgive his father if he had murdered the pilots.

Having gone to pick George up from the train, Jim enters and warns Chris and Ann that George is angry and should be driven somewhere to talk, a proposition which Chris promptly refuses. George enters and tries to convince Ann that Chris knows Joe is guilty, and that Joe allowed Steve to take the blame for shipping the cracked cylinders. Kate enters, causing Chris and George to stop their argument. She is able to calm George for a while. Joe then enters; George reluctantly greets him. Joe asks George about Steve and then argues that throughout Steve’s life he never took responsibility for his own actions, so he must be guilty now. Just when it seems that George is convinced and he agrees to stay for dinner, Kate lets on that Joe has never been sick in fifteen years, causing George to doubt Joe’s earlier alibi that he had the flu on the day of the incident.

George latches on to this slip of the tongue and begins to interrogate Joe. This begins in earnest Joe's reversal of fortune, or *peripeteia*.

Frank comes in with Larry's horoscope and asserts that the day Larry was supposed to have died was his "favorable day" and he must be alive somewhere. Kate believes him and tells Ann that she must leave with George. Ann insists that she will stay until Chris tells her to go, and tells George to leave. Chris tries to insist that he will marry Ann, but Kate finally tells him that if Larry is dead, Joe killed him. Chris realizes that Joe *is* guilty of shipping the faulty parts. Keller admits his involvement, but justifies his actions saying that if he had warned the Army about the bad parts, the factory would have been shut down and he would have lost money needed to support his family. Chris rejects this explanation, telling Joe that his responsibility to others sometimes outweighs responsibility to his family. Chris storms off, leaving Joe wondering what to do.

Act Three begins at two o'clock the following morning. Kate waits outside with Jim for Chris's return. Ann has stayed in her room. Jim lets on that he has known about Joe's guilt for some time now. Joe enters as Jim leaves. Joe and Kate surmise that Ann now knows about Joe's guilt. Ann enters and promises not to do anything about Joe, but in return asks Kate to tell Chris that she knows Larry is dead, so that Chris will no longer feel ashamed about his love for Ann. Ann asks Joe to go into the house and then produces a letter that Larry wrote her the day he died. Chris returns and tells Ann and Kate that he is going away because he can no longer bear to look at his father but can also not bring himself to send him to prison as he deserves. Joe enters and confronts Chris, and they argue about Joe's guilt. Ann rushes forward and gives Larry's letter to Chris. Chris reads the letter aloud: it describes how, upon learning about what his father did,

Larry could not bear to live anymore. He told Ann that he knew he would be reported missing and that she should not wait for him. On hearing this news, Keller goes inside the house to get his jacket and turn himself in, but while Chris and Kate argue about sending him to prison, a shot is heard. Ann runs off to find Jim, and Chris and Kate are left grieving on the porch.

One of my first steps after gaining a solid understanding of the plot was to divide the play into units of action. Each unit, consisting of one or more beats, contained a significant action. Like Aristotle stated in his *Poetics*, “the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all” (36). The action of the play is of paramount importance to its overall effect, and if executed intelligently and with feeling, is the most significant factor in revealing the themes and mounting a successful production. Rehearsing the action by units would help us find the unique rhythms and tempos in the play. The action also contributes to other elements of the production, including the overall concept and designs. Mining the text (the dialogue as well as Miller’s stage directions) is one of the major sources for the analysis, though at times a semiotic approach will be used to explore the symbolic nature of various physical objects encountered and used by the characters. First, I will address the major themes of the play. Afterward, Miller’s approach and structural conventions will be discussed. Then, the given circumstances, including the setting and environmental facts, previous action, and character attitudes will be explored. A deeper look at the characters themselves will follow. The symbolic importance of several objects or images in the play will also be discussed.

Themes

Miller described this play as exploring the “relatedness” of people. Chris often acts as the mouthpiece of Miller’s ideals, particularly when he speaks about everything being destroyed around him, but one new thing being made, “a kind of . . . responsibility. Man for man” (31). The kind of responsibility that is born out of a concern for the common welfare, and that binds men and women together in a common struggle, is the same kind of responsibility that will ultimately save us from the kind of destruction that has rained down on the Keller household. Chris’s anger at his father for violating this principle of responsibility, and his loathing of himself for being complicit in the violation, brings out more of the ideas Miller is trying to address: “This is the land of the great big dogs, you don’t love a man here, you eat him!” (66). Chris is faced with a choice in that moment, a choice each spectator faces, to deal with the problem head on and try to change the status quo, or to do nothing and live out the rest of his life in shame.

Joe’s world is carefully constructed of lies to cover up the wrongful deaths caused by his actions. He continues to deny his guilt, and even when he is exposed he rationalizes away his responsibility to the pilots that died. His attempt to evade the consequences for his actions proves futile, and the choices he made in the past are now coming back to plague him. When Joe quietly acknowledges that “they were all my sons” (68), he recognizes that his priorities were antiquated, a product of a more barbaric time, and ultimately misplaced. At the climax of the play, Joe Keller kills himself not because he has failed at his charade of innocence, but because he finally realizes that he has failed as a father. Again, Aristotle clues us in. “Now character determines men’s qualities,” he says, “but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse” (36). The

stunning tragedy of this play is that it could happen to any of us. Miller has brought the tragedy down from Olympus and into our own backyard, and has allowed us to see the colossal damage that can be done by refusing to recognize the responsibility we have for each other.

Structure and Convention

As mentioned in Chapter One, *All My Sons* was for Miller an exercise in the Realistic style made famous by Henrik Ibsen. It was also an opportunity to tap into the classic and timeless feel of Greek tragedy. Miller used conventions from both of these sources to create a play that feels timely and applicable as well as mythic and universal.

The play takes place in the confines of the Keller backyard. This location is simple and deceptively mundane. It is in fact Joe's palace, in which he, as king, makes decisions that determine the fate of many. Kate, as queen, both spars with and shares complicity with Joe in the momentous choices. Kate also serves as a seeress, a role filled by Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. She dreams of Larry and prophesies that Ann's heart will "dry up" when she gets into Chris's bed. These things, as well as her belief in the horoscope that Frank is preparing for her give us a sense that she does indeed know more than a normal human being could know, or that she puts her faith in a universe driven by fate. Unfortunately for her, all of her predictions about Larry are proven false beyond any doubt, leaving the audience to suspect about her what the Greeks initially concluded about Cassandra: that she is insane. Chris, the character with whom Miller most wants the audience to identify, mentions the insanity of waiting three years for a missing son's return. While it would be a stretch to assume that she is clinically insane, there is a profound desperation about her beliefs that impels her to unreasonable action.

There is also, however, a portentous quality to her predictions, even though they themselves are unfounded.

The real fate at work in the play, however, is that of a choice made in the past that is now wreaking havoc on the present. “Above all else,” writes Miller, “tragedy requires the finest appreciation by the writer of cause and effect” (“Tragedy and the Common Man” par. 14). Gottfried also commented on Miller’s structural choices. “As to his Greco-Ibsen approach,” he writes, “Miller smoothly adapted a scheme of retroactive construction that effectively introduces facts of the past without making the dialogue uncomfortably expositional. The play’s present action indeed hinges on past events” (100). There is a curse that lies over the land. It has been caused by Joe’s initial crime, and perpetuated in the cover-up that continues to this day. Just like Oedipus, who came to realize that the cause of the trouble was his own past action, Joe finally realizes that his choices have caused irreparable damage to others, his family, and himself. Oedipus gouged out his eyes upon the terrible realization; Joe takes his life.

The Setting

Miller describes the setting of *All My Sons* in the stage directions as the “back yard of the Keller home in the outskirts of an American town” (5). While Miller left out the town’s name in the script, the location is thematically significant for him, and therefore it can also be significant to us. Although he describes the house itself in some detail, we are left to examine the text of the play for a more thorough understanding of its exact location. Comments from several characters give us clues. We know that George has flown from New York to Columbus, and then taken a train that would get him to the Keller residence by evening. We also know that Sue wanted her husband to drive her to

the “beach” and that the Kellers were going to dine down by the “shore.” It is easy to assume, then, that their town might be situated on Lake Erie, possibly a suburb of Cleveland or Toledo. Interestingly, Mary Grace Slattery, Miller’s first wife and source of encouragement when writing this play, was raised in Lakewood, Ohio. This suburb of Cleveland, about eight miles from the city, would have made an ideal environment for the tragic events of *All My Sons*. It is likely that Miller had Lakewood in mind when writing this tale about your average “Joe” in “an American town.”

In addition to place, time is also an important factor. We know that the action takes place in “August of our era.” Miller was likely working on the play in 1946 and the play was produced in 1947, a little over two years since the official end of World War II. The dialog points to a war that has recently concluded, and a pilot, Larry, who has been missing for nearly three years. These facts lead us to conclude that the play takes place in 1946 or 1947, with very little room for alternate interpretation. This, of course, is very helpful to costume designers who like to know what styles of clothing to research. It also helps us understand how timely the original production of this play was to those who saw it. It was current, fresh, and given the very typical American setting, very close to home.

The action of the play takes place over the course of one day, with its point of attack very late in the overall story. It is a perfect storm of events that have been building up over the last few years and have finally converged. A draft of the play had the title “Morning, Noon, and Night,” indicating that it was a very conscious choice on Miller’s part to employ a short time span for the action, reminiscent of classical and particularly neo-classical construction. The varying tempos of the play also convey a strengthening storm, whose winds are about to tear down what has been so flimsily constructed by Joe.

The opening scenes are loose and jovial, and subsequent scenes become faster and more intense until the final explosive moments.

Two other aspects of time, the season and the day in which the action of the play takes place, are also important. August is a time of year that is typically quite warm in the northern hemisphere, but also represents the waning of the summer season. Come September, the green and growth of summer would turn to the slow decay of fall. The stage directions speak of plants in the yard “whose season is gone.” It is significant that Miller set the time of his play in the hottest part of the year, on the precipice of change. The Kellers have been feeling the heat brought on by their choices and circumstances and this is reflected in the environment. The day on which the action of the play takes place goes from early Sunday morning in the first act, to evening in the second act, to late at night (or very early the next morning) in the third act. Again, this use of time and place are reminiscent of classical or neoclassical dramaturgy. This day is also significant as it represents a very late point of attack on the overall story. If the inciting incident was Joe’s choice to ship cracked cylinder heads to the Army Air Force, then this day marks the ultimate and terrible conclusion to Joe’s story.

Physical Environment

Joe’s story begins and ends at his house, where he once pretended to be sick to avoid responsibility, and where he finally commits suicide. Keller’s house, described by Miller in his stage directions, is “two stories high and has seven rooms” (5) It would have cost around \$15,000 when new in the 1920s. Simply accounting for inflation and not for particular real estate markets, the Kellers would have spent around \$170,000 for the same house today. In other words, it is a solid middle-class home in a neighborhood where

people like Jim Bayliss, a medical doctor, also reside. Since it is obvious from the text that the Keller and Deever children spent their growing-up years in that house, and since Keller's factory has recently grown to look "like General Motors" (53), it is fair to assume that Keller's income now far exceeds the income he had when he purchased the house. There are numerous references in the script to money, and particularly that the Kellers have plenty of it. The fact that they are still in the same house even after a significant increase in income, and after immense backlash about the purported crime, speaks to the Kellers' desire to maintain things the way they were, to make things appear as if nothing has changed. At the same time, the house is impeccably kept, and Kate, with the help of a maid, runs a tight ship. Miller writes that the house is "nicely painted [and] looks tight and comfortable" (5). Keeping up appearances is important to the Kellers, both physically and emotionally.

Mordecai Gorelik's original set included rows of "tall, closely planted poplars" on either side of the house, which created a "secluded atmosphere." The physical separation from their neighbors is an echo of Joe and Kate's desire to hide the truth of their actions from the community. With this in mind, it was easy to draw a parallel between the tall, straight poplars and the bars of a prison cell. It is a spiritual prison that holds the Kellers captive by their choices, reflected in the stage environment. Chapter Three will discuss how this interpretation influenced the scene design.

Social, Economic, and Religious Environment

In addition to the physical environment, social and economic factors must be taken into account in order to understand the bigger picture. History tells us that wartime productivity and the years that followed brought an end to the Great Depression and

enabled a return to prosperity for many Americans. Audiences in 1947 were experiencing this upturn firsthand, and themes of war profiteering and indulgence in the material aspects of life must have been poignant. Chris's tirade on the immorality of personal or family wealth at the expense of community, and Joe's defense of it were not simply hypothetical arguments. They were immediate and timely for Miller's audience. Educated modern audiences can understand the historical aspect of this theme, but may or may not connect emotionally with the argument. Relatively few of us have lived through anything resembling the Depression or experienced firsthand the horrors of a protracted, catastrophic war in which fifty to seventy million people died, including four hundred thousand Americans. Modern audiences might be able to imagine such circumstances, given the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, though the experience is not as far reaching. Joe's factory product line illustrates a huge contrast between what was experienced during the war and what Chris returns home to: from warplane engines to pressure cookers and washing machines. A challenge for the director is helping the actors, especially twenty-year-old college students who have experienced little of the world, portray the psychological complexities of such a stark contrast in mental and emotional states.

The psychological complexities, of course, spill over into social complexities. When the court exonerated Joe on appeal, he returned from his stint in the penitentiary and people on his own street shouted "murderer!" at him. Given the timeline, this happened less than three years prior. The immediate social environment is at least latently hostile, and this is something the Kellers have had to deal with, and have been determined to overcome. We learn from Sue that most people in the neighborhood think

Joe is guilty, but still give him credit for being “smart.” She complains of living under the shadow of “the Holy Family” and is seething at the hypocrisy of it all. Her feelings are particularly strong about Chris, who she claims is acting like a saintly philanthropist and encouraging Jim to do likewise, yet taking blood money from Joe’s factory. Chris’s idealism is affecting Jim’s behavior, causing him to want more than she is willing to let him have. Jim, who comes over regularly to play cards with Joe and other neighbors, admits to Kate in Act Three that he knows about Joe’s guilt, but also admits that he has just as much of a talent for covering up the truth as Kate has. He compares Chris’s explosion and departure to a “private little revolution” which will soon come to an end. Just like Jim’s abandonment of his research hopes, Chris will eventually capitulate and accept the seemingly harsh and inevitable truth about the world, that there is very little room for idealism when dealing with human beings.

While these social questions in the play are grounded in a secular context, Miller also references well-known Christian themes to help create the desired effect. The Kellers’ religious lives are not addressed directly, though through some dialog and given circumstances we can draw some conclusions. Since the play takes place on a Sunday and the Kellers do not so much as mention church, it is possible that they do not participate in any organized religion. A couple of references in the dialogue, however, point to at least a marginal understanding of Christian doctrine and its application or misapplication in their lives. When discussing Frank’s courting of Lydia while George was away, Chris mentions George’s selfless act of leaving Lydia available for others as he went off to war. With tongue in cheek, Chris says “truer love hath no man,” a clear reference to John 15:13, in which Jesus says “Greater love hath no man than this, that a

man lay down his life for his friends.” In the context of the moment, the inference is a casual and sarcastic remark on Frank’s victorious sexual conquest of Lydia in George’s absence. In the grander scheme of things, however, Miller’s obviously purposeful use of the phrase is not just thematically appropriate, but represents the very crux of his argument. In shipping the cracked cylinder heads, Joe Keller sacrificed others to avoid socio-economic diminishment. Instead of showing loyalty to his family through financial aggrandizement, he should have shown true love by being willing to sacrifice his own position to ensure that the pilots were safe. Joe, saving his own life, ultimately lost it.

Another line that carries religious significance is Joe’s exclamation to Chris that “a man can’t be a Jesus in this world!” (68). Joe’s contention is that no one can be expected to live up to such high and self-sacrificing standards, and in that light, he did the best he could for his family. Since the reference to Jesus, arguably the best-known exemplar of charity, compassion, humility, and sacrifice in the Western world, comes from the villain, the effect on the audience is opposite from Joe’s intent. A person may not be able to be Jesus, but he can at least try. Indeed, Chris expected his parents to be better than the average person. The fact that his parents let him down on this point leaves him at a terrible crossroads, as it were, and he is faced with the decision to move forward with his idealism (tempered by realism) intact, or to abandon all hope and leave the world to the “great big dogs.”

Characters

Because this is in many ways a Realistic play, and I planned to use a Stanislavskian approach to the acting, it made sense to look at the characters’ given circumstances and motivations. The histories of the Keller and Deever families are

deeply intertwined, and they are both drawn into the fray as a result of Joe's choices. The relationships with each other, as well as with their neighbors, are complex and fraught with a sense of the past that is difficult to ignore. The individual characters are studies in complexity as well, and cannot be painted with broad strokes. Indeed, at once the most challenging and rewarding aspect of this play is portraying characters who are neither wholly evil nor wholly good, but who are principled and likeable, though each have their own *hamartia* or moral flaw. Understanding the motivation and choices of each character is essential to a nuanced and genuinely honest production. This section will explore each character in some detail in an attempt to reveal those facets of their personalities that aid in creating an effective representation on stage.

Joe Keller

The phrase "loyal to a fault" is given new meaning in the character of Joe Keller. Joe's sole motivation for pursuing wealth is to give it to his family. In other words, in his Depression-era mentality, he sees himself as provider and protector in a dog-eat-dog world, where one mistake could send you into unemployment and all the misery that implies. Bigsby relates the following about Joe in the introduction to the Penguin Classic edition of *All My Sons*:

His life is a triumph over such disadvantages, a triumph that he will not readily allow to slip between his fingers. He is a man for whom survival is a primary necessity. Having lived through the Depression, he knows how fragile a grasp he, or anyone, has on the world. Nor is survival only a matter of maintaining a way of life and a way of being. Keller survives by insulating himself from knowledge of the consequences of his actions, by denying involvement in the world. (xii)

Joe's ingenuity, determination, and old-fashioned hard work are to be credited for enabling him and his company to survive that distressing economic period. For Joe, the

threat of losing his contract to supply airplane engines to the Army Air Force was a real and significant problem, one that required quick thinking and decisive action to avoid. Joe's loyalty to his family automatically precluded the option of failing financially. His overwrought determination to look out financially for his family eventually causes him to lose everything.

Educated in night school, Joe's recipe for success is more parts perspiration than inspiration, and has included frugality and a singular attention to detail. He is the kind of boss that "never left his shop without first going around to see that all the lights were out," and knowing "how many minutes a day his workers spent in the toilet" (47). He also has the gift of gab, and for the most part, is able to win the affection of others through his warm and friendly demeanor. Elia Kazan, quoted in Gottfried's biography of Miller, noted that Joe is personally "attractive, jolly, lovable, playful, [and] sexy," and that "all this conflict only exists because he is a nice guy" (105). His genial nature probably had a lot to do with his convincing the appeals court that he was innocent, and placing the blame solely on Steve, a "frightened mouse" of a man. Sue, complaining that Jim would pick up George from the train station but not drive her to the beach, states that "People like to do things for the Kellers." She also gives him credit "for being smart," acknowledging that his station in life and his success at business are well deserved, not counting, of course, the matter of the cylinder heads. In terms of casting, finding a Joe who is truly likeable with a magnetic personality will increase the tragic feeling of the play, since the audience will be conflicted about whether to love him or loathe him.

As the tragic hero, he manifests a kind of *hamartia*, or tragic flaw. Miller wrote about this flaw in his "Tragedy and the Common Man."

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his "tragic flaw," a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing—and need be nothing—but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are "flawless." Most of us are in that category. (par. 6)

Joe's flaw, then, is that he is unwilling to let social forces prevail that he feels are an affront to his right as a father to care for his family. His stubbornness in defending his positions as dutiful father ultimately proves irreconcilable to his responsibility to his other "sons" who flew planes that carried his engine parts.

Joe himself touts his ability to overcome obstacles. He recounts to Ann that just fourteen months after getting out of jail his factory regained its place as one of the top performers in the state, and explains that "the only way you lick 'em is guts!" (26). At the same time, he refuses to deal with certain aspects of his life in a head-on manner. "I ignore what I gotta ignore," he says when pressed about Kate's potential reaction to Chris's courtship of Ann. His ability to ignore things has enabled him almost to believe in an alternate reality, one in which he is not actually culpable of the deaths of twenty-one pilots. Even in his private moments with Kate, he still brings to bear an amazing power of denial about his guilt. When cornered, however, his façade begins to crumble and his once-meaningful denials become meager excuses for his selfish and ultimately homicidal judgment.

Kate Keller

Just as Joe is good at "ignoring things," Kate is equally skilled at perpetuating a hope beyond hope for Larry's return. Her insistence that he is alive somewhere has more to do with Joe than with any personal belief that Larry has a chance of survival after three

years missing. Kate knows Joe is guilty, and in Kate's mind, if Larry, who was a pilot, has died, then it is Joe's fault. She is willing to keep up the pretense of Joe's innocence only as long as she holds on to the hope that Joe did not, in fact, kill their son. It is interesting to note, though, that she either cannot or will not keep up the pretense alone. In a moment of frustration at Chris's suggestion that they all forget Larry, she insinuates that Joe "above all" must hope for Larry's return. Joe responds by asking "Why me above all?" seeking to reinforce a new reality in which he is truly not guilty. Kate demurs, but at the same time implores, "Believe with me, Joe. I can't stand all alone" (20). Death awaits both of them if they do not keep up the charade. "Because if he's not coming back," she says to Joe, "then I'll kill myself" (19). Later she pleads with Chris not to send Joe back to jail: "How long will he live in prison?—Are you trying to kill him?" (69). Complicating matters is her own ill health. The pain on the top of her head is indicative of the pressure she had been under these last few years. Jim, the doctor, recognizes the stress she is experiencing and repeatedly warns her and others to take it easy for her sake.

Kate has been a pillar of strength for the Keller family for a long time, and only recently has she "no strength to think anymore." Miller describes her in his stage directions as "a woman of uncontrolled inspirations, and an overwhelming capacity for love" (16). While Joe runs the factory with autocratic efficiency, it is clear that Kate rules in the home. Various productions, including the original directed by Kazan, centered on Chris or Joe. Miller, however, saw Kate as the play's "center of gravity." In a letter to Kazan, Miller writes that Kate is

a woman who mercurially rises to peaks, subsides, rises to a higher peak, subsides less, rises to a still higher peak I believe it is a bad mistake

to hold this woman back too consistently. The audience must feel she is capable of sudden and irrational, and wild surges of emotion of all kinds. And the slapping of Keller, and the revealing of his guilt is the highest of such surges. (105)

Kate wields enormous power, which holds sway over nearly everyone she encounters. She single-handedly turns George from his path of accusation; she keeps Chris from acting on his impulses for Ann; she has Frank drawing up a horoscope for her, and Lydia making her a hat; she keeps Joe under her iron wing, safe from outside accusation but essentially in bondage to her moral stance that if Larry is dead, then Joe killed him. If she is going to protect her family from Joe's past choices, then it will be on her terms.

Chris Keller

Chris appears to be a dutiful son. He has become a medium-level executive at the family business, and will likely soon become a top-level executive. In a family where rash actions seem to be the norm, Chris seems capable of more moderated responses, though at times he can be very passionate and angry. He champions "Joe McGuts," however, extolling his virtues and commending his courage for withstanding the negative attention he received in the period following his trial, incarceration and appeal, and reintegration into the community. He is one of those sons who "still likes his parents," though at times he seems self-conscious about it. Later on, we learn that he suspected his father, but did not do anything about it. And while Chris says he would have done more had he really known, he remains trapped by his own unwillingness to pursue the issue.

Early on in the play, Chris struggles to break free of the unhealthy pact that he and Joe have silently made with Kate, which is to never acknowledge the fact that Larry could be dead. This perpetual waiting keeps them all mired in a hopeful hopelessness, and Chris is never able to honestly, openly, and appropriately court Ann. Even when he

and Ann have finally declared their love for each other, Chris is burdened by a sense of shame stemming from his family situation and his experience in the war. He struggles with the ideals of a brotherhood of all humanity when pitted against the strong desire for family, stability, and providing the best the material world has to offer for one's own. He feels guilty about accepting the nearly free ride from his father when contrasted with those who gave their lives for him, for each other, and for the good of the country in the war. He wants to be held to a higher standard, and he holds others, like his father, to that higher standard. When faced with the actual choice of doing the right thing by the community and at the same time severely transgressing family loyalty, however, he admits his own cowardice. Instead of pursuing social justice, he retreats and tells everybody he is going away. At that point, Ann decides to show him Larry's letter, which finally incites Chris to action.

The terrible result of that action is to sting the conscience of Joe so profoundly, to so thoroughly convince him that his failure to protect the P-40 pilots was a failure as a father, that Joe commits suicide. Chris is left teetering on the brink between self-destruction and becoming the transitional character that finally atones for the sins of the family and moves forward on a new and more responsible path. Kate senses this crossroads and gently encourages Chris to "forget now. Live." The final moments of the play center on Chris's response to Joe's suicide, and the hope or hopelessness of the final image will be the last impression on the spectator's mind. In the character of Joe is the person whose selfish actions damned him; in Chris is the person who gets the gift of choice in the wake of his father's damnation.

Ann Deever

Ann Deever is another strong-willed character. Ann is balancing precariously between her recently developed devotion to Chris, her familial obligation to her father and brother, and her perceived responsibility toward Kate and Larry.

Among the characters in this play, Ann and Kate have made the strongest choices: Kate in her nearly iron-clad hope for Larry's miraculous return, and Ann in her steadfast decision to move on with her life with Chris. While this may not be as dramatically interesting as someone who is forced to make a choice in front of the audience, it is nevertheless a sign of Ann and Kate's strength of personality.

Kate's hope for Larry is conditional, based on her aversion to the idea that if Larry is dead, then Joe is the one who killed him. If one is true, then the corollary must also be true. Ann's choices, however, are more staunchly and irrevocably made. Even though her decision to disown her father is made with erroneous information and would probably change if she found out he were more or less innocent of the charges, she has nevertheless decided to put everything behind her to attempt to make her own happiness. She has the advantage, in that regard, of being the only person to really know Larry's fate, and is therefore able to make a clean break from those particular social ties. She is also determined that no matter what Kate does, or what Joe did, or what Chris chooses to do about it, she will stay her course and seek happiness in a life with Chris, separate from anyone or anything to do with her past. The entire Keller family is trapped in a state of denial that impedes their ability to move forward with their lives. Ann has come to terms with Larry's death and, therefore, is able to move on with her love life, and almost succeeds in getting Chris to do the same.

It is interesting to note some of the attitudes toward Ann or women in general in the play. Ann is told by three different people—Kate, George, and Chris—how and what she should feel, as if it were the right of a matron or a male to dictate to her conscience. This could be slightly problematic in a modern production, given that audiences are not accustomed to women being treated in this manner as a matter of course. If Ann plays her objectives strongly, however, the audience will recognize her as one of the few characters who both knows what she wants and has the tenacity to get it.

George Deever

George's purpose in the play is to bring an already tense situation to a head and force the hand of the conspirators and their dupes. He has also been injured in the war, a wound that earned him a medal. He carries another wound, however, that is deeper and more painful: a fractured family, and the guilt of turning away from his father when he should have done the opposite. "Annie," he says, "we did a terrible thing. We can never be forgiven" (46). The hurt is made all the more poignant when he comes to suspect that those he thought of as friends and family have betrayed them. He wants to amend his faults, and save the one person he can from the clutches of the Keller legacy.

His entry on the scene represents the final and inescapable collapse of the Kellers' feigned innocence. His training as a lawyer is readily seen in his cross-examination of Chris about his father and in his final assault on Joe's flimsy pneumonia defense. George immediately jumps on the admission that Joe has never been sick and presses Joe until the atmosphere reaches a boiling point. Ann finally sends George away, concluding his visit to the Keller house, but not ending his caustic influence. Shortly after he leaves,

Kate explodes in an emotional outburst that leaves Chris little room for doubt about Joe's guilt.

The Neighbors

The Kellers' next-door neighbors fill the role of chorus in Miller's Greek-influenced structure. Like the chorus in ancient Greek plays, the neighbors represent the view of the community and often provide perspective to the action that seems to be consuming the principal characters. Their role is not limited to a homogenous representation of the neighborhood, however. Jim and Sue Bayliss, and Frank and Lydia Lubey each have a significant role in the story. Jim knows what it is like to live a lie, being compelled by his wife to give up his dream of being a research doctor in order to keep her in good stead with a higher-earning job. He needs constant urging by his wife to treat patients whom he sees as not really needing his attention. Sue wants the money. He wants to do more with his life than hold the hand of someone who could just as easily solve their own problems. He is inspired by Chris, whose idealism is infectious. This duality in his life helps him understand how the Kellers can keep up their act. He also understands how tenuous that act is, and since he believes in Joe's guilt where Chris doubts it, he understands the danger of Chris meeting with an irate George in the presence of an increasingly frail Kate. In Act Three, he talks with Kate about Chris's inevitable return. "These private little revolutions always die," he says, speaking from deep experience. He speaks of the "star of one's honesty" and how once it is extinguished, it cannot be rekindled. Having gone through a sort of extinguishing himself, he feels unjustified in holding it against Joe and Kate.

Sue is a very “realistic” woman, according to Joe, which is very close to “practical,” the epithet that Chris uses against himself in the final scene. Sue ensures that her husband keeps his feet on the ground and his nose to the grindstone. She has little time for any kind of idealism that diminishes her standard of living. She sees Chris as a hypocrite, who talks a good game about the idealism of brotherhood, but who does not understand the sacrifice it would take in financial terms. “If Chris wants people to put on the hair shirt,” she says, “let him take off his broadcloth” (38). She is also concerned about social status, and living next door to the “Holy Family” makes her look petty by comparison. While she comes across as a somewhat antagonistic character, we see that she is right in many ways, including her knowledge of Joe’s guilt, as well as her expectation of Jim to provide for their family.

Frank, who was always one year ahead of the draft, established his family, paid off his house, and has time to pursue such activities as horoscopes. He therefore puts a lot of stock in fate, and the ability of the stars to give guidance to mortals. Jim’s passivity and lack of faith on one side (“you don’t *believe* in anything”) is balanced by Frank’s hopeful but seemingly credulous belief (“you believe in *anything*”) on the other. Frank represents Kate’s hope for a return to some semblance of a normal family life upon Larry’s return. The falseness of Frank’s optimistic prediction highlights the family’s tragedy.

Lydia, a bright, warm spot in the play, also presents us with a bittersweet acknowledgement of a life that could have been. George’s love interest prior to the war, Lydia married Frank and had three children by the time George returned. Additionally, she and Frank together seem to represent the economic state of those who were not

involved in the war but continued with their lives. Frank's employment has provided them the leisure to engage in hobbies like horoscopes and hats. The trivial nature of these pursuits stands out in stark contrast with the life-changing ideals of Chris.

Finally, Bert, the young neighbor boy whom Joe has recruited as a "deputy," keeps watch on the neighborhood. He regularly reports to Joe on suspicious activities and longs to see the "jail" in Joe's basement. His function in the play is twofold: to show Joe as a playful, lovable grandfatherly character, and to establish Joe's history as one who is an expert on "the jail business," and show how he has turned things around to his favor. It is interesting to note that Joe claims there is a jail in his basement, which, on its face, is an outright lie, one that is in line with the overall pattern of lies and deception that Joe has perpetuated. On another level, it is as true a statement as any in the play: the Keller home is indeed a prison for those involved in the lies.

Semiotic Analysis of Objects in All My Sons

In the analysis phase of a project, the director often makes a concentrated effort to determine what objects, images, and concepts "mean," to the end that his or her production may take full advantage of the symbolism and metaphor in words and images provided by the author. Marianne Boruch stated:

One could say a playwright is not a great playwright unless he can use things—in themselves—thematically, not simply as properties to be touched and then discarded on the way to discovery, but somehow as the discovery itself. At this point, the drama extends itself into poetry, and metaphor swells with movement to a broader, historical reality. Arthur Miller operates in this vision with reserve and intelligence and surprise. (561)

In addition to determining what individual objects or images mean, a semiotic study of *how* these objects mean what they mean to an audience and of the playwright's structural use of these signs may shed light on possible approaches to the production.

The broken apple tree, for example, is a seemingly arbitrary object that comes to represent more than itself, an image that is symbolic of a larger truth. This symbol is the subject of discussion, not just among spectators or analysts, but of the characters themselves. In fact, the characters' attempts to ascribe meaning to the tree, or the breaking of the tree, highlights a technique that Miller employs to help his audience reach a deeper understanding of the play. The technique involves presenting an object on the stage, such as the tree, and drawing attention to it through dialog. The characters present differing or opposing viewpoints on what the object is or means, thereby creating a controversy around the object. Semiotically, multiple signals on the delivery channel create noise that obfuscates an immediate clear reception. A state of cognitive dissonance is created, in which the audience must reconcile their original belief about what an object signifies with the new meanings presented to them through the dialog. The audience then has the responsibility of determining the true meaning of the object in question. While this technique is not unique to Miller, he uses this controversy model to significant effect in *All My Sons*.

Several objects appear on stage throughout the course of the play that seem to carry some significance more or other than the object itself. In addition to the tree, some of these objects include the bag of potatoes, the horoscope that Frank is working on, the grape juice that Kate makes for George, George's hat, and the letter from Larry. As part of my analysis, I will attempt to identify not only what these objects signify beyond

immediate perception, but will also, using the controversy model that Miller has established, try to illuminate the structural use of these objects and how they mean what they mean. Understanding the method Miller uses to create meaning helped me during the rehearsal process to shape the performances accordingly.

The broken tree the audience sees immediately upon curtain rise serves as a major visual focal point as well as a conversation piece among the characters. Nearly every character comments on the tree when they first appear in the Kellers' backyard on that fateful day. Frank, Jim, and Lydia, as well as Chris, Kate, Joe, Annie, and even the eight-year-old Bert either comment about the tree or take notice that it has broken. The tree by itself is somewhat arbitrary, but Miller loads the tree with significance simply by having so many people react to it. The repetitions of concern about the tree point the director and the audience toward something more than simply a broken tree. The tree itself becomes a symbol. The fact that the tree is broken means something. We find out that when the tree got broken also means something. Frank, who is working on a retrospective horoscope for Larry, Joe's son who is missing in action, comments that "He'd been twenty-seven this month. And his tree blows down" (7).

We find out that Chris and Joe planted the tree in memory of Larry but that Kate still holds out hope that he is alive and will return. Jim, Frank, and Lydia, along with Joe and Chris, may understand that this tree was a memorial and are respectfully saddened when it blows down. To Chris, the tree may hold a more specific and personal meaning. Since he is about to propose to Larry's former girlfriend, the breaking of Larry's tree may signify an obstacle that has been removed from his path. The broken tree holds the strongest significance for Kate. Miller spends nearly a page of dialog on Kate's dream of

Larry and the breaking of the tree, which she finds to be related. The stage directions are an important part of Miller's method.

MOTHER. . . . The tree snapped in front of me . . . and I like . . . came awake (*She is looking at tree. Suddenly she realizes something, turns with a reprimanding finger shaking slightly at KELLER.*) See? We never should have planted that tree. I said so in the first place; it was too soon to plant a tree for him.

CHRIS. (*Alarmed.*) Too soon!

MOTHER. (*Angering.*) We rushed into it. Everybody was in such a hurry to bury him. I *said* not to plant it yet. (*To KELLER.*) I *told* you to . . . !

CHRIS. Mother, Mother! (*She looks into his face.*) The wind blew it down. What significance has that got? What are you talking about? (18)

Kate's dream of Larry coinciding with the tree breaking strengthens her notion that Larry is alive out there somewhere.

Miller helps create significance for the object by having each character somehow express what the object means to them. These meanings are often contradictory, which creates a controversy about the significance of the object. Two or more characters have attached a personal meaning to the object in question. The audience, sensing the controversy, will begin to take sides and to believe one character over another. Further, and more significantly, they will begin to search for what the object signifies to them.

The broken tree is the most obvious symbol in the play, but Miller's controversy model is applied to several more objects throughout the play to add more subtle, but equally significant meaning. One of the simplest examples is Kate's bag of potatoes which Joe mistakenly discards. This controversy is light-hearted and only lasts a few lines, but it follows Miller's structure for creating meaning. Keller sees the sack of potatoes as having one meaning (trash), and Kate sees them as having another (supper).

The event may seem innocuous, but this dichotomy of significance analyzed according to the controversy model suggests that the audience is meant to attach significance to it, just like the tree. Keller takes something wholesome and good and mistakenly recognizes it as trash; Kate goes to the garbage pail to try to salvage what is to be their family meal. This misrecognition and mis-valuation of such a mundane thing as a sack of potatoes provides an opportunity to add color and a down-to-earth feel to their relationship. More than that, however, it represents a small version of the larger problem: Joe's misplaced values are going to end up hurting the very people he wants to protect.

Chronologically, the first controversy over a physical object in the play is Frank and Jim's disagreement over the usefulness of a horoscope. For Frank, the horoscope operates as a semiotic index, a sign that relates Larry's fate to its causation. He attempts to determine if the day Larry went missing was his "favorable day." If so, he postulates, it is highly unlikely that he would have died that day, thus giving Kate evidence for hope of his return. Jim, a doctor and very scientifically-minded neighbor, scoffs at the use of such a device.

FRANK. (*peevd.*) The trouble with you is, you don't *believe* in anything.

JIM. And your trouble is you believe in *anything*. (8)

This simple couplet sets up the controversy. By presenting the audience with two characters' opposing views, the object becomes a sign, and Miller forces the spectators to consider the significance of the horoscope for themselves. Will Kate and Frank's appeal to a kind of mysticism bring Larry back? Which is the more potent, choice and consequence, or a fate determined by the stars?

Moving into the second act, George enters wearing a hat. In a brief exchange, we find out that George has just started wearing it today, and that it is his father's. Ann, who has previously confessed that she has never written to nor visited her father in prison, seems surprised that George would be wearing it. The fact that he has only recently taken to wearing a hat, and that the hat is his father's, lets us know that it has a specific meaning to George. The contrast in attitudes toward their father, found in the wearing of a hat, points the audience toward a possible broader significance than what it means to Ann or George individually. The hat is both a symbol of their feelings, as well as an icon representing Steve Deever. The hat becomes Steve's presence on stage, and when George puts on the hat, he takes on the mantle of his father.

In another brief exchange later in the scene, George, through a hint in the stage directions, sets himself at odds with Kate, Chris, and Ann over a glass of grape juice.

CHRIS. . . . (*Turning to George.*) How about some grape juice? Mother made it especially for you.

GEORGE. (*With forced appreciation.*) Good old Kate. Remembered my grape juice.

CHRIS. You drank enough of it in this house. How you been George? – Sit down. (44)

The grape juice may represent a token of Kate's affection for "Georgie," but George's hesitant manner when receiving it signifies that he feels differently about it. Again, the audience is drawn, however briefly, to examine for themselves the significance of the grape juice. Token of affection? A ploy to flatter or ingratiate? An attempt to return him to his youthful and non-authoritative position? The pattern that Miller has established begs the question. In addition to its arbitrary symbolic meanings, the grape juice can be seen as an icon representing blood, since it is closely tied to blood in both color and

cultural significance. Kate attempts to reconcile through an offering of grape juice, but all George can think about is the blood on the Kellers' hands.

Miller presents the final object through Ann, who carries the letter from Larry explaining his intent to commit suicide. The pattern continues. For Ann, who has done her best to achieve her goals through other means, it may represent the last echo of Larry's voice, providing her with a way to help Kate finally let go. For Chris, it is ironclad proof that his father's choices were not only wrong, but ultimately killed his son, regardless of the fact that Larry "never flew a P-40." For Kate it is the severing of her last strand of hope, and the end of her family. For Joe, it is the complete crumbling of his faulty ethic, proof of his failure as a father, and reason enough to die. As the director, it was for me the inescapable and damning consequence of Joe's selfish choices. And for the audience . . . well, they must decide for themselves.

If this controversy model is to be trusted, then the objects Miller employed in this play are not simply tactical contrivances used solely for the purpose of the scene they appear in. Rather, Miller uses them strategically to enhance the overall effect of the play. They follow a pattern that allows the director to think structurally about their significance. In rehearsal, helping the actors understand why Miller used these objects will help them understand their job better, which is to be the vehicle by which Miller helps the audience find meaning in the play.

Having prepared my analysis, and equipped myself with as much relevant information as possible to mount a successful show, I proceeded to create my design concept. The Greek dramatic parallels, including a tragic hero with a *hamartia* who experiences *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, and a sense of time, location, past circumstances,

and present actions that are similar to classical construction, were considered. Likewise, the Realistic dialog and action that presupposes a Stanislavskian approach to the development of character and relationships all influenced my production concept. Given the rich relationships, classical structure, and symbolic depth of the script, I wanted to make sure that the visual elements of the production fully harmonized with the direction in which my analysis had taken me. Again, Miller's use of classical storytelling conventions and themes made a significant impact my design concept for the production.

CHAPTER THREE

Design: Concept and Process

Introduction

This chapter addresses the design of my production of *All My Sons*. As director, my goal was to provide a clear vision of what I wanted for the production, while establishing a collaborative environment where individual designers had as much latitude as possible to be creative. My vision started with a high-level concept that incorporated the themes of the play, as well as the look and feel that I hoped to achieve in the production. The analysis phase of my preparation was key to forming the design concept, since I wanted the various elements to enhance the themes. While I had some ideas about what I wanted to see, the design concept grew out of continued exposure to the script. I will discuss how I came up with my concept, and describe aspects of the process that enabled the level of collaboration required to realize the designs. Additionally, I will discuss each element of design with respect to the desire to have a metaphorically rich and layered production.

Design Concept

Two major factors influenced my design concept and informed many of the choices that were made throughout the entire design and construction process. The first factor was Miller's body of work, which tended toward the abstract, experimental, and memory-based branches of Realism. As mentioned in the previous chapters, *All My Sons* was Miller's most "naturalistic" play. While other plays had many realistic elements,

they also included conventions that transcended pure Realism. *Death of a Salesman*, for instance, drew on Willy Loman's memory, which was played out before the audience. This departure from Realism in the writing prompted a similar departure in the set design. Designer Jo Mielziner used color, translucency, and scale to emphasize the memory and dream elements of the script, as well as the claustrophobia and weight of the urban environment. Likewise, *After the Fall* clearly distanced itself from the Realist tradition through its use of monologues and abstract sets.

Additionally, I have seen two and acted in one production of *All My Sons*. In each of these shows, there seemed to be little consideration as to how the design could enhance the telling of the story, rather than simply provide a backdrop to play against. Even in photos I have seen of several professional productions, the design tended toward the Realistic. The back porch was a back porch, trees were trees, and the house was a house. Plot was given full priority, with the expectation that a well-executed plot would bring out the theme. Spectacle was given a reduced role. While spectacle alone rarely, if ever, makes a satisfying drama, I felt that there were some missed opportunities to give the look of the show a higher priority, which would help define the characters and generally enhance the audience reception of the production. I wanted to do something more to let the design work in concert with the plot, characters, and theme.

This desire, coupled with the non-Realistic nature of several of Miller's other well-known works, led me to push for designs that avoided a strictly naturalistic approach. I decided to embrace the idea of "heightened" design that built upon the metaphors and symbolism inherent—both explicitly and implicitly—in the script. One of the design metaphors I established early on was the idea that each character is in a kind of

psychological or spiritual prison. I wanted the audience instantly to recognize the house, the trees, or the porch, but on further consideration realize that the house was more than just a backdrop. It would be an extension of the dialog, relationships, and action that were unfolding before them. Just as Gorelik managed to create for the original production a set “with a life of its own” (Atkinson, par. 8), I wanted something that the audience could enjoy aesthetically but engage with intellectually.

The second factor that strongly influenced my design concept was Miller’s use of Greek conventions in the storytelling. Chapter Two addresses some of the Greek elements of the play from a structural standpoint. As I continued to discover how Miller employed Greek conventions in *All My Sons*, I became more and more convinced that the designs needed to match them. Joe Keller, as genial and down-to-earth as he may be, is essentially an Oedipus Rex, a king who has risen to power through dubious methods. His palace is his home. His subjects are his children, friends, neighbors, and employees. The consequences of his decisions ripple outward through space and time to affect the fortunes of many. I knew early on that I wanted a house that metaphorically could pass for a Greek palace. When I think of Greek architecture I envision imposing structures with both weight and grace, simultaneously angular and fluid. The Parthenon, with its triangular gable, its columns, and its wide steps, became the image I most readily saw. The influence of the Greek in the design of the production would lend it a gravitas that would complement the weighty themes inherent in the script.

Design Process

I decided early in my preparations that I wanted the design process to be as collaborative as the rehearsal process, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.

While I had worked with some designers before on class directing assignments, this was the first time in my student career that I would be working with a full cadre of designers. My goal was to provide a clear vision and concept, but let the designers do their jobs. Having designed the majority of my own projects, it was going to be tempting to impose my particular ideas first and potentially stifle their creative impulses. I was determined to “let go” and not set expectations for specific designs, but let the designers show me their creativity. It was important for me, therefore, to establish good working relationships with each of them, and respect their skills and decisions. We could then have a free exchange of ideas without the fear that I was squelching creativity when I asked questions, offered suggestions, or made requests.

The first design meeting was a gathering of the whole team, which included one faculty designer and the student designers with their faculty mentors. I took the opportunity to express my thoughts on the way I wanted us to work together, then presented my design concept via a digital slide show and talked briefly about the play and its themes. The presentation included photographs that represented themes that I wanted to emphasize, such as the Parthenon compared to the architecture of a house in the 1920s, and a series of photos comparing Greek columns, poplar trees, and jail cell bars.

Next, I tried to get into a discussion about the concept, but there seemed to be some inhibition on the part of the student designers to jump into a conversation. Two faculty members provided some guidance that went a long way in helping us function as a team. One suggested that we not use the formal meeting with production heads present to discuss ideas. She recommended that we find an alternate time and venue where just the director and designers could get together. This would remove the formality and

reduce any inhibitions. Another faculty member suggested that instead of talking about design, we should start off by discussing the play itself. Design ideas would spring up from that discussion and would be more likely grounded in the requirements of the play itself, rather than imposed upon it from the outside.

We took both of those suggestions to heart and scheduled a morning meeting at a restaurant, where we ate pancakes and discussed the play. This was a good opportunity to discuss some of its themes and my analysis, particularly the Greek concepts, since some of the designers were a bit confused on that point. Parenthetically, one professor recommended that I utilize terms such as “prison,” “bruised,” and “heightened,” and other words more readily grasped by designers, instead of talking about “Greek” structural elements. She told me that the first thought that went through the mind of her design mentee was actors dressed in chitons or togas reciting Miller. Taking her suggestion to heart, I tried to adjust my speech accordingly. However, as we continued to discuss the play, I employed Greek parallels such as referring to Joe and Kate as king and queen and the neighbors as chorus, among other things, and the designers began to grasp the parallels between the Greek forms and what I wanted to accomplish.

Our first restaurant meeting was a success, inasmuch as we discussed the play in depth, and had a good breakfast to boot. We determined to meet at the restaurant one more time, this time to discuss specific design ideas. In this second discussion, we utilized the language of design to a greater degree, sharing ideas on line, shape, color, silhouette, texture, and more as it related to the script.

After these breakfast meetings, the designers began to make concrete choices, and they made decisions in increasingly rapid succession as the due dates drew nearer. We

no longer met as a group, but I met with the designers individually to discuss their ideas and discover solutions. For matters on which I had a strong opinion, I would share my ideas or suggestions. Usually these involved issues of practicality for the actors such as where furniture or masking walls were placed. Occasionally they were matters of thematic importance. By and large however, I avoided dictating design decisions, and encouraged dialog. In the following sections, I will discuss each design element and how each member of the production team approached their work.

The Space

One of the major influences on scenic design in any production is the venue in which it is held. Its dimensions, configuration, and even seating capacity are all important factors to consider. Since *All My Sons* was a well-recognized show, it made sense to put it in the larger of Baylor University's spaces, the Jones Theatre, a proscenium configuration with a nearly three hundred fifty-seat house. The stage itself is wide and deep, and able to accommodate large sets and drops. The play is also conducive to proscenium staging, although a previous production of *All My Sons* was mounted in the Mabree Theatre's smaller thrust stage in the 1990s. The story of *All My Sons* is intimate in nature, taking place in a middle-class backyard among seemingly average people, but there is a universality to its themes, a breadth and depth to its ideas that could be captured in the design much more readily in the larger space. Although I would have been happy with the Mabree's configuration and audience proximity, the Jones provided a larger canvas on which to paint.

The Set

After my first meeting with the set designer, I was heartened by her comment that she was glad I wanted to do something more with the set than have it be “just a house.” She was anxious to explore the potential for symbolism in the design. Throughout the process, we continued to discuss my needs for the set—the most important of which was a dynamic acting space—and shared ideas about different approaches. I wanted the house to seem grand, like a temple or palace, but at the same time be recognizable as a middle-class home (See color plate #1).

The set designer experimented with a few different configurations for the house, including one that was at an angle to the stage. While this would have made for a more dynamic acting space, we both felt that it did not have the imposing nature that we were seeking. From the beginning I was fairly insistent that the design include trees on either side of the house, and an angled house would have effectively eliminated the trees on one side. We wanted the trees to line the house in a look reminiscent of the Parthenon or similar structure. In order to counteract the “flat” look of a set that was parallel with the stage, the porch was thrust forward, creating a more active space. I specifically requested the porch steps be as wide as possible for two reasons: they would echo the idea of palace steps, and would become an acting space upon which many important lines would be delivered. The porch also included four columns, coinciding with the classical feel of the house.

As much as possible, I wanted the stage environment to reflect the prison-like feel of the character’s lives. The trees served as a barrier between the Keller home and their neighbors, but more than that, they could be read as the bars of their self-erected prison.

The set designer included other “prison” nuances such as vertical bars on the porch fence, and cross framing in the windows. The stage-right side of the porch was enclosed by a short fence with large columns at the corners. Whenever a character sat in the chair there, it seemed as if they were in a cage. At the end of Act Two, when Chris storms out leaving Joe crushed, Joe ends up in this cage, with his head hung low, sobbing for Chris. At the beginning of the third act, Kate is in this same place, anxiously and fearfully awaiting Chris’s return.

We decided that since Joe Keller’s world was constructed of lies and deceit, the majority of the set would be a recognizable “façade,” and only the area immediately around him would be “real.” Accentuating the symbolic nature of the house was its use of translucent panels and gaps between the structural elements. There was a downstage wall and interior walls on parallel, but no side walls. The walls were attached to the deck and stabilized by aircraft cable. With the exception of one masking wall behind which the actors could escape, all of the walls were made of muslin on wooden frames. At the beginning of the show, the lights would be fully frontal, giving the painted muslin a solid appearance. As the Kellers’ world destabilizes, backlight would expose the sheer nature of the lies, and the framing—the “bones” of the house—would become visible. The porch was the most realistic portion of the set. The closer one gets to Joe, the more one buys into his version of reality. The further one gets away from him, the more obviously fabricated his world is.

Nowhere was this more evident in the production than with the trees. Their final, non-realistic treatment made for some good discussion with audience members but also caused the most consternation during the process. The set designer could not settle on a

single design for the trees, and the production manager raised concerns that they would be problematic to build and, more particularly, to stabilize. Since I was pretty sure I wanted round trunks to capture both the prison and Greek feel, the branches and leaves were causing the design challenge. Six trees made the final design and finding or constructing branches with leaves would be extremely problematic, given the time of year and the difficulty of mounting them. The set designer, sticking with the idea of a world that became increasingly non-realistic as it moves farther away from the center, finally determined to use dead branches with panels painted with leaves. In this way, I could keep the round trunks, avoid the hassle and expense of gluing thousands of leaves on branches, and, with the panels, maintain the primary design conceit at the same time.

As I mentioned earlier, our highly conscientious production manager raised several construction concerns during the process, including the likelihood of having to use over one hundred thirty cables to hang and stabilize the trees, branches, tree panels, house walls, gable, and neighborhood windows. It would be technically difficult, costly, and time-consuming. Aesthetically, it would be a nightmare. This notion caused some frustration for the set designer who was anxious to see her tree designs realized. We significantly reduced the number of planned trees from ten to six, which we felt would not unduly compromise the desired effect. A turning point for the production manager, as he reported to me after the show closed, was during one of these discussions in which tensions were slightly elevated. I said something to the effect of “if time and money were no constraint, how would you build the trees?” His answer was metal trusses, which, given our resources, were an impossibility. He said, however, that as he continued to think in this direction over the next few days he had “an epiphany.” He formulated a plan

to create truss-like supports out of scrap plywood. The result was quick, sturdy, and inexpensive tree sections that could be easily assembled, wrapped in cardboard and muslin, painted, and mounted on the stage. Through this process of compromise, innovation, and focused thinking, the trees were completed and the total number of cables was reduced to around fifty which, in the end were barely noticeable. The designer and director accomplished their design goal.

Moving downstage from the trees and house, the set design included a bench, a table and chairs, the broken apple tree, and a rosebush. It was difficult to settle on furniture that the set designer and I both felt matched the look and feel of the rest of the set. After a fair amount of scavenging, however, a rustic teak outdoor table and chairs were borrowed from a professor's backyard, graciously lent to us for the production.

Aside from the furniture, another aspect of the set that was troublesome was the yard itself. Other productions I had seen ignored the yard, and the actors walked around on a black floor. While the suspension of disbelief on the visuals alone is possible, the truly problematic part was the sound the actors' footfalls made on the hard surface, which almost always draws attention to itself. I determined not to use "Astroturf" on the yard, since it too closely resembled a mini-golf course. We were about to settle on painting and lighting the stage when the set designer—again after much scrounging around in the storage areas—found a large amount of stage grass that had been used in a production some years before. It could be laid down like carpet, and with a little paint it could be made to look like real grass, and would solve the problem of noisy footsteps. It was truly an amazing find, as it was enough to cover the entire yard.

One subtle but poignant nuance that I enjoyed was the addition of rose petals strewn over the flower bed and yard. Kate's line, "no more roses," acknowledges the destructive power of the previous night's wind. In this moment, our actress playing Kate picked up a handful of petals as she launched into a monologue in which Kate marvels about past events returning. It concludes with a foreshadowing "everything is coming back," upon which she let the bright red rose petals fall from her hand like so many drops of blood. The past was indeed coming back, and there would be blood.

The past is most prominently symbolized on stage by the fallen apple tree. The tree was placed extreme downstage left, which featured it prominently but not intrusively. While Miller's original stage directions called for Larry's tree to have "fruit still clinging to its branches," it was difficult to find such a thing in Texas in late fall. We did, however come up with a young pear tree, albeit with no fruit on it. The main design challenge was for the tree to be attached every night to its stump and then sawed off and then reattached the next night. This was solved by tearing off a piece of bark and stapling it to the tree and stump. The ability to see Chris actually severing the tree from the stump and reverently removing the tree from the yard in the opening scene of Act Two provided a nice moment for the audience to see him truly letting go of Larry. The use of a real tree, which was literally severed from its stump each night, emphasized the connectedness of the family, and the close proximity of matters of life and death.

In the set design of other productions and production photos I had seen, the house and yard seemed to be the only considerations. For my production, I wanted to have a sense of community, a sense that the Keller home was situated among other homes in a neighborhood. This would serve to echo the theme of the play, that there is "a universe

of people out there.” To create the neighborhood, the set designer suspended windows above and behind the house. Throughout the first act, the windows simply added depth to the scene and reminded the audience of the Kellers’ proximity to their neighbors. Additionally, the windows would serve to extend our Greek motif, since the collection of windows represented a “chorus” that had an interest in the activities of the Keller family. Throughout the second act as evening waned, the neighborhood lights turned on one by one, timed loosely to moments of heightened tension or raised voices. As a result, it seemed like the neighborhood was observing the action and shining a light on the dark secrets of the Keller home. The third act opens late in the night, and all but a few of the windows were darkened. As the final gunshot was heard, the lights came on individually as if the neighbors had awoken.

Overall, I was very pleased with the design and construction of the set. It served its dual purpose as both an acting space and an active part of the story I was trying to tell. If the only thing a director hears after the close of a show is “I really liked the set,” it can be quite devastating, given that the director’s larger effort went into preparing the actors to tell a compelling story. In this case, it was rewarding to hear that the play was well received as a whole, with specific compliments going toward the set and other design elements in proportion to compliments toward the acting.

Costumes

Taking her cue from the prison metaphor, the costume designer arrived at a color palette based on the colors of a bruise. Since several of the characters are emotionally injured or suffering in some way (or soon will be), she chose to work with the different colors of a bruise, from the deep reds and purples at the center, moving outward toward

greens, browns, and grays. Much to the delight of some and revulsion of others, she brought photographs of severe bruises to a design meeting to illustrate her choice of colors. She also researched ancient Greek clothing styles, hairstyles, and color palette. Coincidentally, the ancient Greeks also enjoyed reds, purples, greens, and other colors of the same intensities as a bruise. Furthermore, the deep reds and blues at the center of a fresh, severe bruise also double as the colors of royalty. Joe and Kate are the king and queen, as well as at the center of the hurt. Purple and maroon for their costumes worked on many levels.

Ann's first costume was the only one that fell outside of the bruise metaphor. While Joe and Steve's choices impacted her deeply, she is the one character not mired in the past. She is the one who is desperately trying to move on with her life. Chris is trying to move on as well, attempting to convince his family to "put our minds to forgetting" Larry, but his immediate circumstances prevent him from breaking free from the bonds of Joe's decision. Ann's determination to begin anew is like a breath of fresh air, a shot of optimism in an otherwise dreary outlook. The costume designer took these thoughts into account and gave her a light blue dress that reflected this aspect of her character. While Ann is not totally free of guilt and some of her efforts misguided—she has not written to her father and her decision to show Larry's letter to Chris may be more selfish than it seems at first—I wanted her to be the beacon of hope for the Keller family. She is a determined individual with the power to reunite the sundered Keller and Deever families through a healing marriage with Chris. The audience, of course, leaves the theatre highly doubtful that such a union will ever take place, but as long as the house lights are down, she remains the bright spot, both in character and costume. The

execution of the costume construction will be addressed in the section on technical rehearsals later in this chapter.

Lighting

At the beginning of the design process, I encouraged the designers to focus on a layered approach. The lighting designer took these encouragements to heart and delivered not only the practical lighting needed for the actors to be seen on the stage, but added some subtle and beautiful embellishments. As mentioned previously, the set was designed to accommodate the inclusion of rear-projected light to take advantage of translucency effects. The lighting designer made the first act all front light, emphasizing the apparent solidity of the house. Into the second act, as the evening wanes, the back light gradually intensified to reveal the aforementioned “bones” in the Kellers’ whited sepulcher. The third act brought the interior light to a maximum as Joe went inside to commit suicide.

In addition to backlight effects, the lighting designer took advantage of the cyclorama, or “cyc,” washing it with a morning blue in Act One, and clouds and deep sunset colors in Act Two. It was replaced with a star drop in Act Three. The clear and cool morning wash on the cyc contributed to the sunny and upbeat tone of the first act. As a background for the suspended neighborhood windows, it also provided a sense of greater depth, giving the idea that the Keller home existed in a much larger context. The lighting designer introduced cloud gobos onto the cyc in the second act, making use of the same color palette chosen by the costume designer. As the action wore on, more clouds appeared in deeper shades of magenta and purple. The designer described the shape of the clouds running in slender horizontal wisps as claw marks that were

shredding the once peaceful atmosphere. While Frank's observation that there is "not a cloud" in the sky holds true for most of the day, Joe's weather report from the paper that it is "gonna rain tonight" begins to look more and more accurate both in the sky and in the lives of the characters.

Sound

The sound designer approached the soundscape in the same way the set designer approached the scenic design—with an emphasis on a heightened experience. I encouraged the designer to take liberties with the qualities and characteristics of the sound. By combining realistic and non-realistic sound elements, we came up with sound effects that enhanced the thematic concept.

Three types of sounds were employed in the show—sound effects, ambient environmental sounds, and music. The script called for three specific sound effects, namely a phone ringing, a car horn, and the gunshot. The first two were tracks from a collection of sound effects, and were fairly realistic. Early on, I insisted that the gunshot be live. Concerned about the possible expense of buying rounds for the gun, the sound design mentor asked why I preferred the live gunshot. I responded that either way, the audience might be momentarily jarred out of the performance. I would much rather they be jarred by an extremely loud and terrifying sound and think, "Wow, that was real," than by a canned sound and think, "Wow, that sounded fake." Thematically, I wanted the audience to get the impression that the world Joe has created for himself is false, but the consequences of his actions are quite real.

The ambient sounds included nocturnal birds and other environmental noises to set the atmosphere for Act Three and to cover the scene change between the second and

third acts. The final aural component was music that would lead into the show, cover intermission, and lead out at the final scene. The designer compiled a large number of songs from the 1930s and 1940s that I could choose from. To match the tone at the opening of the show, I selected an upbeat love song, Ella Fitzgerald's "Someone Like You." The song to open intermission, "Foolish Tears," another Fitzgerald tune, had a more somber tone to reflect the uneasiness of Joe's exit and Kate's foreboding admonition to "just be smart." The final selection would begin soon after the gunshot and play over Kate's dictum to Chris to "Forget now. Live." I selected Barber's "Adagio for Strings," which had a minor, melancholy sound embellished at times with a hopeful major resolution. Though I did not know it at the time, this same song was used in the final moments of the movie *Platoon*, which, for some people, made it a recognizable song with an immediate connection to the tragedy of war and death.

The songs chosen were highly appropriate for their designated uses, but the designer enhanced the intermission songs with a light flange or "wah wah" effect to create a slightly unnatural sound and increase the sense of unease. We wanted the audience to sense that something is wrong in the Kellers' world, and it is reflected in the music.

Props

Properties design was fairly straightforward, and most of the hand props were pulled from storage. We did end up buying perishables on a regular basis, such as the parsley that Sue picks, and the grape juice. Admittedly, for reasons I cannot explain, props were very low on my list of priorities, aside from getting the items the actors would be using early so they could get used to them. After the show, one professor commented

that the props were an area of the show where a little more attention to detail would have enhanced the production. Specifically, she pointed out that Larry's letter would likely have been in an airmail envelope. We had used a plain white envelope, albeit slightly worn from the three years it had been in Ann's possession. This kind of attention to the smaller details in a show can separate a good production from a great production, so I plan to give equal concern to each area of design on future productions.

Fine Tuning

Constructing the set, hanging and programming the lights, sewing and altering costumes, and gathering props opened another round of design modifications where fine tuning of the executed design could take place. Dry techs, or technical rehearsals without the actors, were an opportunity to see the lights and sound for the first time, and to give my feedback to the designers. We did a "cue-to-cue," advancing through the lighting and sound cues one at a time. There were several that were adjusted as we went along. The second act "evening" wash looked too similar to the Act One cue, and I wanted a bit more differentiation between the early morning light and the late afternoon/early evening light. The lighting designer consulted with her faculty mentor, and she came up with a plan to achieve the right effect. She added blue lights to one side and kept the amber lighting to a minimum, which ended up looking very good. At other times, the face light was a bit weak, which left some of the actors in shadow. That, too, was adjusted for a much better appearance.

Tweaks were made to the sound effects, usually with regard to volume levels and the timing of cues. We also tested the gunshot, which was a live weapon with blank rounds. We tested it earlier in the process when much of the set had yet to be built. I was

worried that the full set would muffle the sound and render it less effective. I was pleased, however, to hear that the shot still sounded shockingly loud.

Most of the technical elements were spot on, or after minor adjustments were made to work effectively. There were times, however, when I was unsure of how I wanted a particular effect. Sometimes I would bring it up, and we would play with the effect until I had settled on a choice. Other times, however, I was hesitant to say anything, since I was not sure myself, and others seemed to think that changes to a particular moment would be difficult or impossible. Looking back, on advice from a professor, I probably should have raised my concerns and sought a solution to whatever it was that was troubling me. For example, I had heard from the production manager that it would be impossible to light the dormer window. It had always looked strange to me that it was not lit equally with the remainder of the house. There is even a line that references Ann being up in her room all night, and yet the window was never lit. I should probably have pressed the issue to come up with a workable solution, since I had a feeling that it was not impossible as was suggested. The absence of the light did not fundamentally damage the production, but it would have provided a nice detail.

Costume parade provided the opportunity for me to comment on the finished costumes on the actors. Many of the costumes were excellent and worked very well. There were a few major concerns, however. Neither of Ann's dresses suited her. For a girl whom everyone says is so beautiful, her costumes were exceedingly frumpy. I did not know exactly how to communicate what was wrong or what was technically needed, but I did express my desire that Ann needed both to look and feel beautiful. The actress playing Ann was noticeably self conscious wearing the dresses during costume parade,

and I made sure to let her know that with changes, she was going to look great on stage. Simple changes, such as ironing a skirt and adding a belt, made an enormous difference in the quality of the costume. A jacket had to be altered, but afterward it fit well and looked lovely.

Altogether, I was pleased with the look of the show and how well the designs were realized. The level and manner of the collaboration between the various artists afforded us the opportunity to be boldly creative and ultimately enhanced the production value of the show. I felt that I had achieved my goal of a heightened design that would play its own part in the story I wanted to tell. All plays require the same degree of thought and care to achieve a well-executed and relevant design. The design process of this show has become a benchmark by which I will judge other experiences, and taking into account areas of possible improvement, it is currently the standard by which I will try to model my future experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rehearsal Process

Introduction

This chapter reflects on the rehearsal process, from auditions through dress rehearsals. I will address the approach I took and the techniques I used to make the entire rehearsal process as effective as possible. The period during which director and actors collaborate to tell a story is the most critical to the overall success of the show. The set, costumes, lighting, and sound may all be breathtakingly spectacular, but if the actors cannot tell a compelling story, everyone might soon find themselves out of a job.

As discussed in Chapter Three, there is latitude to approach the spectacle of the production from a stylized, symbolic, and classical Greek standpoint and still do the play justice. The action and dialog of the play, however, falls squarely in the realm of Realism, which necessitates a particular methodology for rehearsing the acting. Stanislavski's "System" was the model of choice, being the standard actors have used for over a century now to portray natural, Realistic characters. This approach emphasizes the need to understand the given circumstances of the play, a scene, or a character's life. This is particularly relevant to *All My Sons*, since past choices drive almost all of the current action. The actor, understanding those circumstances, can make decisions in the present based on the character's objectives. The higher the stakes and the more important the objective, the bolder the tactic must be to obtain it. In this chapter, I will detail some of the tactics I used to get the actors thinking about their objectives and tactics, and to raise the stakes to create compelling moments. I will document the process I used as well

as think critically about the role I played. I will address the different aspects of the rehearsal process chronologically, including auditions and casting, scene work, run-throughs and dress rehearsals.

Auditions

One of the most important aspects of creating a good production is to cast the right people in the roles. The saying goes that 80 percent of a director's job is fulfilled by good casting. While this is an oversimplification, anyone who has directed a show understands and appreciates the sentiment, particularly those who have suffered from a poor casting decision. Since this would be the capstone project of the MFA program and the production meant to showcase the skills acquired during the program (in addition to being the largest single learning experience), I was heavily invested in finding actors who would lift the show to its highest possible level—those with consummate skills, a solid understanding of Realistic acting techniques, a collaborative attitude, and a focused approach. One potential obstacle was the fact that the production of Tina Howe's *Museum* was going up just prior to *All My Sons*, and would be auditioning at the same time, and there would be no overlap in casting. The director of *Museum* needed to fill three or four of the larger roles with very capable actors. I needed the majority of my cast to have experience and skill to pull off Miller's intricate and broad range of intentions and emotions. Fortunately, we made every effort to keep the best interests of *both* shows firmly in mind as we negotiated casting decisions.

Since the relationships in *All My Sons* are complex and layered, I felt I would be better served by using readings from the script as opposed to monologues. The stage manager posted sides in advance so actors could familiarize themselves with the content.

I chose sides to highlight an actor's ability to follow Miller's dialog through its cycles of tension. It was important for me to see the actor go through a range of tension while maintaining a relationship with their scene partner. Actors signed up to audition on Tuesday, September 11 in groups of six in 15-minute increments. The stage manager and an assistant brought the groups in, and I paired them as the scenes required. If initial readings concluded before time was up, I asked the participants if there were specific characters they still wanted to read for. Proceeding in this manner, it was quickly apparent that I could narrow my choices to under thirty actors who would be called back for the nine adult roles.¹

We held callbacks two days later, on Thursday, September 13, to accommodate *Museum* callbacks on Wednesday. Callbacks were less regimented than the open auditions, and for the most part, everyone stayed in the room the entire time. One professor graciously volunteered to sit in on callbacks and to be a sounding board. The space was set up to approximate the anticipated set, with a porch area with a door, a designated spot for Larry's tree, and specific entrances from the neighbors' yards. I called groups of actors to read each scene, and swapped out actors each time until I had a clearer idea of who I would like to see audition again together. Groups who I knew were going to audition after the current group finished were sent into the hallway to go over their scene together. About halfway through the allotted time, several actors were dismissed, most of whom were not going to make the cast, but also some who I was going to cast but had seen sufficiently.

¹Anecdotally, I found it interesting and telling that I did not invite a single freshman to callbacks. This demonstrates that life experience and actor training do make a difference in an actor's ability to portray characters believably. Miller's play would require a higher level of experience.

During the audition process, I realized that three roles were going to be very difficult to cast: Joe, Kate, and Ann. While skill was the number one priority, a combination of other factors—including physical appearance—weighed heavily in my decision process. I had two likely choices for Joe, since most of the men who auditioned were so young that not even make-up could help them appear the appropriate age. In terms of skill, the two actors who could portray Joe's age, wisdom, and experience were very different from each other. One demonstrated a tendency toward gravity, the other toward levity. In reviewing my casting choices with another professor after auditions, she mentioned that the casting of the tall, jovial Joe would help create a deeper tragedy, because the audience would quickly identify with the lighthearted and neighborly character and ask along with him, "how could [*he*] kill anybody?" His fall would be more profound because of his likeability, his death more poignant because of the way he lived.

I read each of them several times with different Kates. As I felt drawn toward one of them, the problem of the actor's height presented itself: he towered over all of my possible Kates by more than a head. While strong acting and a believable relationship would help the audience overcome the height difference, the actress would have to be able to show an inner strength that competed favorably with Joe's height advantage. This led to an intense examination of the potential Kates for the one who could command the stage, even in Joe's presence.

Two Kates were heavily in the running, a senior with a fair amount of experience, who would have been quite capable, and a sophomore with limited experience, but who had certain qualities that shouted "Kate" to me, including a simultaneously reserved and

vivacious personality. Again, physical appearance and life experience were going to limit the ability of any actress I chose to portray a convincing matron, but I had narrowed my choices to those whom I felt had the best chance of pulling it off. The professor sitting in on auditions expressed her well-reasoned opinion and nearly convinced me to go with the senior for Kate. She had more experience and no doubt would have been adequate. A nagging feeling kept pulling me back to the sophomore, however, whom I had cast before in a non-speaking role and had seen in just a few student-directed scenes. Prior to coming to auditions, another professor shared her wisdom that I should “go with my gut” on casting choices and not settle for anything until I was sure that it would work. My head (and a couple of professors) reminded me that the sophomore was young and inexperienced and untested on the mainstage. To thrust her into such a heavy role as Kate was a significant gamble; however, my gut feeling was to go with the sophomore, which I did. From casting until rehearsals started I was anxious to see whether the warnings of my professors would prove true. When rehearsals began, however, my anxiety was assuaged: the sophomore Kate exceeded my expectations in both her professionalism and performance.

Casting Ann was also difficult because I had narrowed my choices down to two women who were very skilled and reflected the qualities that I had envisioned in Ann. Again it came down to the choice between a senior and a sophomore. This time I chose the senior, with the hope that her depth of experience as an actress as well as her seniority would provide leadership for the cast that might not be found in the three sophomores, two juniors, and the two other seniors who both had moderate reputations as departmental class clowns. She could provide a mature example where the others could not.

The actor playing Chris needed to be compelling, likeable, handsome, and the right combination of sensitive and tough that lends verity to Kate's claim that "in the war he was such a killer," but at home "he was always afraid of mice" (63). He also needed a plausible romantic chemistry with Ann. There were several "leading man" types that I had read in callbacks, but it was fairly clear early on that I could easily cast one in particular.

One role remained open, and we had to look outside the department to fill it. Bert, the eight-year-old neighbor, is only in two brief scenes but his presence could either enhance the show, or drag it down. Fortunately, we found a boy who is the son of a campus professor who was willing to try out. He was ten years old but had a small frame, and so was able to pull off an eight-year-old convincingly. His age also gave him an advantage because of his reading and analytical skills. Having worked with children before, I knew that it is difficult to set expectations for their performance. "Bert," however, turned out to be a real asset to the cast. He was completely memorized very early on. He took direction well and was able to interpret the stage directions appropriately. His parents fully supported him in this project and helped him understand his role. Once, when rehearsing his scene, Joe forgot one of his lines. Bert was able to cover seamlessly and continue with the scene.

After I had compiled my list of first choices and alternates, I called the director of *Museum* and began the negotiating process. My choices for Joe, Kate, Chris, and Ann were confirmed quickly. The actor I chose for George was also one of the top choices for *Museum*, but since he was the only one who I felt pulled off the character, I offered one of my other actors in a trade. After the entire process, I got two of my alternates, but a

solid cast that I was very happy about. The director of *Museum* commented after the negotiation process that he felt we had served not just the interests of the directors, but the best interests of the shows themselves. The stage manager posted the cast list on Friday, September 14.

Groundwork

Because of the decision to hold joint auditions, I had roughly a month to finish my research, finalize design decisions, and otherwise prepare for the rehearsal process scheduled to start on October 19. Chapter Two contains a thorough report of my analysis. With that complete, I turned my focus to the more logistical side of planning, and sat down with the stage manager on a few occasions to establish an overall calendar, and increasingly detailed rehearsal schedules. The three main segments of the rehearsal period were blocking, working, and run-throughs. Blocking would last three days, with one four-hour rehearsal period for each act. Working rehearsals were broken up by the units of action that I had established in my analysis. Run-throughs were scheduled to start when I had worked each unit at least twice. Fine tuning of scenes would follow each run-through.

Our rehearsal schedule included two significant interruptions: the Horton Foote American Playwrights Festival, hosted at Baylor University Theatre, and Thanksgiving. Each event caused me a little worry, since in my experience actors tend to return from such breaks somewhat rusty, and our schedule was already fairly tight. We tried to accommodate them, however, by starting rehearsals on the earliest day possible, and, as mentioned above, by using our four hours of daily rehearsal to maximum effect. Thanksgiving was especially troubling since it happened after our second dress rehearsal

and left us only one final dress before opening. We scheduled a pickup rehearsal on Sunday evening to help the actors get back in the game. If all went according to plan, however, there would not be too much need for anxiety.

Rehearsal Philosophy

With auditions concluded and other preliminary groundwork laid, the real effort of creating a work of art out of discrete and sometimes disparate components began. A venerated and time-tested script in hand, my job became one of matching the caliber of the production with the caliber of the script. In order to achieve this, I needed to create an atmosphere in which the actors could thrive and do their best work. Earlier in my graduate scene work, I developed what I call my “philosophy of failure.” I tell the actors that I expect them to “fail” at least three times in every rehearsal. I sometimes get puzzled looks when an actor hears me say that, but then I explain that I expect them to always be trying new things and bringing new ideas. Of course when an actor, or anyone for that matter, is constantly trying to find new and better ways to do things, they are bound to find several things that do not work. If I do not see an actor failing, in other words, occasionally making a bold choice that simply does not work, then they are not trying hard enough. The only real failure in rehearsals is the failure to try. Laying down the idea that I expect them to “fail” frees up the actor to explore their character without fear. They can make bolder choices without worrying about being shot down or belittled if the choice did not work. As an added bonus, the subject often becomes an opportunity to lighten the mood during rehearsals. For example, in one instance, when an actor made an obvious blunder, he said, “There’s one failure; only two more to go!”

Creating an atmosphere in which the actors are not afraid to try new things, where they are thinking about the motivations of their characters, and not slavishly following the edicts of the director was paramount. In this way the actors take ownership of their choices and play them more strongly than they might otherwise. Though it seems somewhat counterintuitive, readily accepting input from the actors makes them more readily accept direction, because they know that they can trust the director to act in the best interests of the production. I had already given the actors my initial take on the play, its themes, and characters, but working each scene allowed us to discuss the details more fully. In order to get the full creative output from the actors, it was important to listen to them and let them try different things, even when I was not convinced that a choice was appropriate. When an actor said something like, “I do not think my character would do *this*, I think he would do *that*,” I responded as often as possible with “Try it.” After trying the new idea, the follow-up question was always, “How did it feel?” or “How did it work for you?” The actors seem instinctively to know when a choice made the scene stronger or weaker. The things that worked, we kept, and I was grateful to have actors who were bold enough to bring their ideas forward. When things did not work, we either went back to the old way or kept exploring new ways to accomplish what we needed to do.

The freedom to explore and create, however, cannot be fully realized unless guidelines and boundaries are in place to channel the creative energy into productive outcomes. One of those boundaries is time, which always seems limited in the rehearsal phase for any show. I needed to make the best possible use of our allotted rehearsal period to maximize improvement and minimize panic as opening night drew nearer. I

firmly believe in starting and ending rehearsal as scheduled. This not only shows respect for everybody's time, but also helps create an atmosphere where diligent effort is valued, and laziness or tardiness is curtailed. If an actor arrives late, and the rehearsal has not started, they may feel as though this was acceptable. If that same actor arrives late and the rehearsal has already started, they will understand very quickly that the director and other participants place great value on timeliness and effort and will be careful to avoid further tardiness. Equally important to starting on time is ending on time. This shows respect for people's busy schedules and creates an attitude among the cast and crew to use the time wisely. Since we will not be staying late to fix something, we better work hard to get it right in the time we have. Since the actors worked diligently during the scheduled rehearsal time, I very rarely felt the need to work late.

In addition to starting and ending on time, it was important to me to use time efficiently and effectively. The thought of actors "hanging out" in the green room during the early part of the rehearsal process struck me as wasted time. When I was working with two or three actors in a scene, I would often assign the other actors to work on scenes or lines in another room. I expressed to the actors that while they are at rehearsal, they are expected to be working. In order to incentivize the cast to learn their lines quickly, I forbade doing homework during rehearsal until all lines were memorized. Later on, when memorization was complete and scenes were shaping up, I had no problem with actors taking it easy when they were not onstage.

Read-through and Blocking

The first day of rehearsal, Friday, October 19, was a table read, and some brief discussion of what the actors could expect in rehearsal, including my aforementioned

rehearsal philosophy. The stage manager brought packets for everyone with rehearsal schedules, contact information, and other pertinent information. I then gave them the same PowerPoint presentation I had showed the designers, which included my thematic concept and thoughts on the Greek aspects of the play. The general impression I got from each of the actors was that they were all very excited to be a part of the show, and very eager to work hard. I also showed them the set designer's latest model, which elicited enthusiasm. One actor commented that "we need to make the show as cool as the set [design] is." It was nice to see that the actors were already confident that the show would look good and were motivated to make the storytelling equally compelling.

The following Monday we began to block Act One. We ended up blocking the whole show in just two days. As a rule, I do not pre-block. I would certainly do it for a complex show in which actors could not be expected to divine the blocking from the intrinsic motivation of their character. As the characters in *All My Sons* are bound by the rules of psychology and sociology, however, I felt it best to give the actors full freedom to move when and where their characters felt motivated. This "organic" approach would enable the actors to move as the situation demanded, and then I could finesse the stage pictures for maximum effect. My blocking preparation, then, was limited to exploring how best to use the space to create some compelling stage pictures at various important moments in the show.

In terms of blocking, high conversation-to-outward-action ratio provided a challenge. People sit at the table and talk; they sit on the porch and talk, they stand in the yard and talk. Creating visually interesting stage pictures and keeping the movement motivated was a primary concern. For example, throughout the rehearsal process we

often realized that there did not have to be a whole lot of movement. Once Joe sat down at the top of Act One, he did not move from his chair for nearly ten minutes. He was the center of his universe and everyone else orbited around him. On another occasion, we determined that the scene where Chris and Ann declare their love needed to be done in relative stillness, letting their voices, postures, and eyes tell the story.

I recall feeling that the blocking we established early on was somewhat arbitrary and unmotivated, and the real “organic” blocking that we would end up keeping would take place as the actors learned their roles and got off book. This early blocking, however, provided a framework to work within and build upon and gave the actors a physical location or movement to associate with their lines, thereby enabling memorization to come more readily. As the actors progressed, the blocking became more and more refined. With initial blocking completed, the next task was to craft the building blocks of the story, the individual units of action.

Scene Work

Scene work is my favorite part of directing. It is the time when the process of discovery is in full effect, and actors and director alike come to understand characters and scenes in ways that before were impossible, even with thorough analysis. Miller’s play is broken down only into acts, so for rehearsal purposes it was necessary to break the action down even further. My analysis had yielded twenty units across the three acts that contained, for the most part, a single action or purpose in the play. We began rehearsing the play unit by unit.

Some of the discoveries we made during scene work helped firmly establish the story’s infrastructure, so to speak. For example, when Joe, Kate, and George sit at the

table and discuss Steve's health, it is not just small talk. Joe and Kate are making a concerted effort to convince George that Joe is innocent. George, on the other hand, is trying very hard to find cracks in the façade that Joe and Kate have erected. Structurally, we learned that this scene creates a moment of crisis in the second act, a battle of wills that is the penultimate action that leads to the revelation of Joe's guilt. Crafting the scene was a long process of trial, error, exercise, trial again, and ultimate refining of the scene.

Other discoveries we made helped to add detail, finding opportunities for emotional honesty that were being overlooked. Kate's advice to Joe in Act Three to give a *mea culpa* to Chris was initially delivered very fast, as if she were sure that it was the right and only thing to do. The ramifications of Chris actually following through and taking Joe to jail, however, would be almost too awful to consider. We tried having the actress slow down and deliver the line as if she were still formulating the thoughts. The result was a moment that was more honest and emotional than it otherwise would have been.

Discoveries also took place when working monologues. In Act Three, Chris's monologue to Ann and Joe's monologue to Chris both came a long way when we worked them. For Chris it was finding the balance between self-hatred and bitterness toward the world his father represents. For Joe, learning when to explode and when to hold back were key discoveries that made the delivery more effective. Particularly, it was a matter of finding variation in the delivery that added nuance to the tone and meaning of the lines, rather than playing the same tactic throughout.

One principle that makes scene work rehearsals both personally rewarding and professionally effective is to enable the actor to find his or her own solutions to a

character challenge. The director does this first and most often by asking the right questions of the actor. It is important that it does not become a game of “guess what the director wants,” but is an open-ended inquiry that leads to new and effective answers for the show. Usually it goes something like this: An actor says, “I don’t really understand what you want me to do here,” or “I’m not sure what would be the best thing to do here.” The director responds with, “What does your character want?”

Actor: “My character wants to avoid going to jail.”

Director: “Yes. That’s what you want in the long term. Now think about what your character wants to do *in this specific scene*.”

(The actor thinks for a moment.)

Actor: I think I want to convince the others that I’m innocent.

Director: Okay. Now, how are you going to do that?

Actor: Maybe I can shift the blame off on George’s father.

Director: Alright. Shift the blame. Try it.

And the scene is run with the new objectives and tactics in play. If “shift the blame” is strong enough as a tactic and it makes the scene better, then we move on. If not, the process is repeated until the scene plays right. There were several instances of this type of dialog between myself and an actor in rehearsal. In most cases, the actor came up with his or her own solution to the problem when asked the right questions.

As often as possible, I tried to avoid dictating objectives and tactics, and attempted to allow the actor to find the solution. Sometimes that meant providing the actors with information, circumstances, and exercises with the express purpose of resolving a particular question. Kate’s response to George’s penetrating stare when she accidentally reveals that Joe’s illness was feigned was coming too quickly and the tension

was not quite right. I was unsure of how to communicate verbally my impression of what I wanted, and she was not settling on a choice easily. I approached her and said, “Now here’s how I want you to handle that moment . . .” and I stopped, looking at her with an expression of anticipation. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds as she expected me to tell her what to do, but under the pressure of the silence she finally responded with, “You want me to fill in the awkward gap.” From that point on, when George stared at her, the condemning silence compelled Kate’s guilty conscience to try to fill the void. She fidgeted and her voice sounded increasingly defensive as she tried to deflect his tense gaze. Such moments enable an actor to take ownership of the action and use it effectively. Moments like these—little breakthroughs—make scene work incredibly rewarding.

Sometimes, however, I simply could not help the actor make enough sense of the scene so that their blocking could be properly motivated. One scene in particular stands out as an awkward moment that was never resolved. The actor playing Chris was to take George’s arm and try to lead him to a table. When George did not move, Chris was supposed to react to the tension that was created. Instead of a sense that the characters were in an awkward situation, it felt as though the actor handled the situation awkwardly. Chris did not have the opportunity or the understanding to truly own the action, and despite several attempts to refine it, it still felt stogy. If I were to do it again, I would ensure that the actors were fully invested in the action through asking the right questions, or else find an entirely different action that worked.

On one evening, we worked the scene in Act Two when Frank brings Larry’s horoscope. We spent over thirty minutes working a scene that lasted only a couple of

minutes. I was astounded at its complexity, in which every character has a different goal, or if they have the same goal—such as George and Kate both wanting Ann to leave—they certainly have different reasons. In this scene we see Miller’s use of the controversy model that was discussed in Chapter Two. Each feels differently about the horoscope: Frank believes it to be the truth about Larry; Kate wants it to be true, and uses it both as a distraction from her calamitous slip-of-the-tongue as well as reason to send Ann off to wait for Larry; Chris thinks it is “junk” and its presence threatens his relationship with Ann; George uses it as reason for Ann to leave with him; Ann knows Larry’s fate already, and looks on with pity and consternation as Kate grasps at straws. These different takes on the horoscope must be played strongly and result in a scene in which the characters are pulled in several directions at once, desperately asserting and defending their positions. It was also important for the characters to reference the actual document as much as possible, to draw attention to it as a symbolic object. The pacing is also critical, beginning with the tense moment of George’s question, “What happened that day, Joe?” Kate quickly seizes upon Frank’s entrance to distract George from his inquest. Chris enters and begins to argue with Kate and Frank about the insanity of the whole proposition and everything begins to unravel, until Ann’s final demand: “Go, George!” In order to help the actors create a dynamic scene, I asked each actor what his or her character wanted. Once they understood what they wanted, it was simply a matter of finding out how far they should go to get it. Because of the number of characters involved, we ran it several times to make sure each actor understood his or her part, and what tactics they should use to achieve their objective. Helping the actors find the right pace, as well as helping them understand what it is that each character wants was a fun

and enlightening project, and, when they began to grasp the full dynamics of the scene, very fulfilling. The process of working this particular scene illustrated for me the often stark difference between what you comprehend when reading a play, and what you experience when it is played out before you in real time.

Sometimes, in order to understand a scene more fully, it is effective to have outside commentators and contributors who understand the work you are trying to accomplish and can provide valuable input on achieving the goal. The actors, having spent a lot of time with their director, will often listen a little better to fresh voices. They tend to respond to these outside “experts” whose insights may help to remove some intellectual or emotional barrier the actor has been struggling with. In a university setting, I have found that comments from professors, whom the students respect as authorities, will be taken very seriously. I imagine that in the professional world, respected directors, actors, producers and other accomplished professionals may elicit a similar response. Frequently, the comments from observers will match what I have been saying all along, but the different perspective of a respected outside authority will place new importance on the objective, and the actor will strive more diligently to accomplish it. This is particularly true when it comes to run-throughs and dress rehearsals, which will be addressed later in this chapter. I enjoy the added perspective of an outside observer. Even if I do not agree with the notes they give, it makes me think about the issue and makes me question what it is that I really want for the scene. Additionally, if the comments are perceptive, insightful, and helpful in any way, it is an opportunity to humbly acknowledge that I do not have all the answers, and I am grateful that there are people who are willing to share their expertise on the matter.

In one case, a professor came to observe and comment during one of our working rehearsals. She watched me working with the actors and gave insights she had gained on their performance. We were working the scene in which George enters and confronts Chris and struggling to understand the dynamics of the scene. The performance seemed flat and unmotivated. At one point the professor asked if she could go up on stage with the actors. They performed the scene while she “shadowed” them, whispering various subtextual thoughts and intentions in their ears. I did not know what she said, but the result was stronger choices from the actors. The whispered subtext enabled the actors to grasp the emotional undercurrent, which then translated into bolder, more motivated action on the stage.

Experiencing good progress in motivated acting during the scene work period of the process, we began to run individual acts and work trouble spots. Characterization became more and more of a priority, particularly for Joe, who needed to color his lines and take on an air of jovial congeniality that would make his fall more poignant to the audience. The actor struggled with this throughout the process. His lines, particularly in the beginning of rehearsals, would sound as if they were being read instead of being created as Joe thought them. I would often tell him simply to “try something with that line,” after which he would make the line more colorful and natural through changes in inflection and tempo. He made vast improvements prior to opening, and became a very likeable and personable Joe. On occasion, this technique was quite handy when I either did not want to give a line reading or could not think of a specific instruction. Asking the actor to try something new called attention to their line, and they usually paid more attention to it and gave it a more believable delivery.

Run Throughs

We finally got to the point where run-throughs were the best way to improve the telling of the story. We had run individual acts, but telling the whole story in one fell swoop allowed each of us to see the shape of the show and refine pace and intensity. The first off-book run took place while I was out of town on business. It was a little difficult to let go and trust the actors and stage manager to be productive without me, but it was a good opportunity to develop my trust in them. The stage manager said it went fine, and the next day we worked scenes that still needed touching up.

Early in the process, I had mentioned to the cast my desire to do something “just for fun,” and take the cast to a restaurant where we would perform the play. They expressed their enthusiasm for the project, and soon after the first run-through we went to T.G.I. Fridays. We all ordered and ate, but we ran the show during our dinner. We got some interesting reactions. People would look over at us when voices got raised; a couple of ladies even moved tables away from us. They told us later that one of them had a stressful job and wanted to relax and not listen to people yelling at each other. A few days later, one of the actor’s teachers from another department commented that she enjoyed listening to us. It was fun to change the context of the show, and the actors commented on the more conversational quality the dialog took on in such circumstances, which is something they could carry over into performance in certain places. Overall, it was a fun outing that helped shake up the otherwise straightforward rehearsal process. Afterward, we returned to the theatre and worked individual scenes.

We continued our run-through/touch-up combination for the bulk of the remaining rehearsals. Run-throughs provided an opportunity to have more outside

observers comment on the show and provide their feedback. During my undergrad training, one of my theatre professors said that the key to a good production is “preview, preview, preview.” I took this advice to heart and invited as many qualified people as I could to watch the show before it opened. Throughout the runs and dress rehearsals there were five professors, four graduate students, and one other person who were invited to watch and provide me with feedback. At least three other professors watched and gave feedback to the designers. Since there were so many observers, it was important to filter the comments and decide which advice was in line with my overall vision for the play. I welcomed their comments, and after hearing their notes personally, invited some of the observers to speak directly to the cast with comments that I felt were particularly important. At all times the cast and the observers acknowledged that I had the final say as to which notes got implemented and which did not. Some comments I was able to ignore. Most, however, were timely and insightful and ultimately improved the success of the production. Rarely, if ever, did I get comments that were completely out of phase with my vision for the production.

On one occasion, a key piece of advice given by two professors who saw a run-through late in our rehearsal process changed the way we handled George’s entrance and his objectives during his entire presence in Act Two. We had attempted to make George unsettled at the thought of being in the Keller home. His belief in his father’s innocence would compel him to take Ann from the place. What we had been missing was the strength of his conviction, his disdain of Chris, and his outright hatred of Joe. We were missing the awful portent of Jim’s hurried entrance where he implores Chris, for Kate’s sake, “not to explode this” in front of her. “There’s blood in his eye,” he says. “Fight it

out somewhere else” (43). George gave in far too easily when Kate and then Joe tried to win him back to their side.

After hearing the professors’ comments, we set about to raise the stakes of George’s arrival. We talked through the scene from this new angle, and over the next few runs George worked on strengthening his objective for the scene. From then on, George came in, if not looking for a fight, then certainly prepared to have one if necessary. He actively confronted Chris using bolder speech and more aggressive body language and actively resisted Kate’s hospitality by maintaining a physical stiffness and emotional distance (see color plate #2). The only obstacle against which he ultimately proved powerless was Kate’s perseverance in bringing him around. Kate and Joe’s constant and calculated bombardment of reminiscent banter eventually brought down George’s defenses. His staunch defense of his father finally gave way to Joe’s overtures. In what was now a poignant moment, he was once again being sucked in to the Kellers’ world.

Working this scene based on the suggestions by the observing professors also enabled us to discover other things that helped nuance the performances in ways that were previously impossible. For example, we always knew that George’s hat was a symbol of his father, but more and more it *became* his father. George treated the hat with reverence as he handled it and set it down. Semiotically, both Steve and Joe were represented on stage. When Joe’s barrage of criticisms against Steve finally took their toll on George’s resolve, George went to the hat which he had left on the bench, picked it up and stared at it, ultimately forced to make the choice between his father and Joe Keller. The actor playing George commented to me that the new emphasis allowed him

to feel a stronger emotional connection to the character. His eyes welled with tears when he stood on the porch telling Kate that he “never felt at home any place but here.” By taking to heart a simple suggestion by an observing professor, we were able to make a significant breakthrough.

By the end of run-throughs, I was confident and ready to move on to the next and potentially grueling step of technical rehearsals, which were discussed at length in Chapter Three. Altogether, the technical rehearsal process went smoothly, and there were no major hiccups. There was an air of congeniality among the actors, designers and technicians, and tempers never flared. All challenges and technical problems that were raised were solved in an effective way, the actors were able to settle in to their costumes and get used to their performance props, and the stage manager was able to get a good grasp of her responsibilities of calling the show. One faculty member observed that this was the best technical rehearsal process in recent years.

Dress Rehearsals

I found myself eagerly anticipating dress rehearsals, since this would be the first time all the components came together: acting, lighting, sound effects, costumes, props, and the finished set. This was our opportunity to see how it all coalesced, and to make any final adjustments to the production.

Generally, things went well, and we continued to discuss how to make moments more effective, both in terms of acting and technical elements. In particular, the final music cue as Kate, in anguish, cries out “Joe!” after the gunshot, needed to be adjusted for length and for volume. I wanted the music to start at a reasonable level, adjust as necessary to allow for the final bits of dialog, and then swell greatly at the end and carry

us for a few seconds into the blackout. We had worked on this in tech rehearsals, but it still needed some adjustment.

Throughout run-throughs and dress rehearsals, I continued to give acting notes, to help add final detail and nuance to the cast's performance, and in a few cases, correct some bad habits that were beginning to form after spending so long in the role. Seeing longer stretches of the play at one time highlighted some of the more repetitive or grating business. One example is that Ann tended to flatten the front of her skirt with two strokes of her hands almost every time she moved, which by itself is a nice bit of business, but in constant repetition became a distraction. I brought it up to her, and she was more selective in her use of that particular gesture throughout the remainder of the show. Another example was that George kept raising his voice louder and louder, until he was really screaming during a part of the show. Since our discovery of George's motivations, the actor continued to play them stronger and stronger. It started to strike me as too much, so I encouraged him to decrease his volume a bit, while still maintaining his ferocity.

The Thanksgiving break occurred between our second and third dress rehearsals. I was nervous to have such a long break right before performances, since it felt like "icing the kicker" in football by calling a time out right before the opposing team kicks a field goal. With a pick-up rehearsal on Sunday night, however, we were able to warm back up to our task. Final dress on Monday night went well, with the exception of one frustrating and inexcusable problem: one of the actors completely missed his scene. The others covered well, and as soon as they were aware that he would not be coming on, they moved fairly smoothly to the next scene. It was a selfish mistake, one that could

easily have been avoided if the actor considered himself to be on the job even when he was offstage. After the dress rehearsal I approached him, and he began apologizing profusely. I expressed my disappointment and asked him how he planned to avoid this kind of mistake in the future, and he gave me some ideas of things he could do to remain engaged with the show. He apologized to the cast and made a greater effort to stay focused. Unfortunately he still has work to do, since he again missed an offstage line during our final performance on Sunday afternoon.

There were a few audience members at final dress, including students invited from the theatre department. Since people often have more anxiety performing for their peers than for strangers, the final dress tested the actors' nerves. The attendees gave very positive feedback, and it made us all very excited to open the show the following night.

Now that my job was technically finished, I wanted formally to hand the show over to the actors. I gave them their final notes and told them that although I might continue to give minor notes throughout the run, my job as director was essentially done. I expressed my confidence in them as an ensemble and let them know how pleased I was with their accomplishments. I wanted to convey to them through this gesture that I fully trusted them to fulfill their roles with distinction, and that overall they had met my expectations superbly. The journey of the rehearsal process, from auditions to final dress was now complete. I had done my work, and the cast and crew were now ready to do what we all had been working toward: performing for an audience.

CHAPTER FIVE

Performance and Reflection

Introduction

The efforts of dozens of people over hundreds of hours finally came to fruition as *All My Sons* opened on Tuesday, 27 November, and ran through Sunday afternoon. Opening night marked the end of my contribution and the beginning of the actors' and technicians' responsibility to fulfill their preparations and perform for an audience. This chapter will provide a summation of my experience as director of this play, with a review of the final product as well as the process that led to it. I will critique the performances and attempt to gauge the success of the production as a whole, addressing the acting specifically, as well as technical and other elements of the performances. Additionally, I will reflect on possible changes that would have made for an even better outcome, as well as considerations to enhance my success in directing future productions.

Performances

For most stress-inducing events in my life, the expression is usually "I can't wait until this is over." When it comes to directing theatre, however, the feeling is usually one of eager anticipation. This time was no different. I felt anxious about opening night and the run of the show, but when asked if I was nervous, my response was typically that "I can't wait to get started!" This would be the payoff for all our efforts. I felt confident that the cast and crew would perform to the best of their ability, and that errors would be few, minor, and recoverable. I especially looked forward to the audience's reaction to the final moments of the play as crisis turned to climax, and their pent up emotions achieved

purgation. Indeed, reaching this pinnacle of my student career and then contemplating it through writing this thesis was both thrilling and purgative. I was fully prepared to enjoy, albeit with heightened anxiety, the fruits of our labors.

Acting

Opening night arrived, and the run began. Having a preview performance for members of the Theatre department helped the cast and crew to anticipate performing for a live, paying audience, and so they were able to hit the ground running. The actors had a few opening night jitters, but most were pacing issues and not flubbed lines or botched timing. Throughout the run the cast became increasingly comfortable in the roles. Of course, becoming more comfortable carries its own risks, such as sloppy delivery, over-anticipation of cues, appearing stale, or overcompensating for staleness. Going “over the top” and raising the stakes of the objectives by more than is appropriate for the scene could become a problem. As I discuss the acting, I will address some minor deviations that were problematic for the show. To their credit, however, the actors remained fairly consistent with their rehearsed characters.

The first act remained our albatross, and Thursday night was by far our longest and most tedious first act performance. The actors played their objectives fairly weakly, and their failure to “pick up their cues” left relatively long pauses between lines and hampered the pace of the act. This was one of the rare occurrences when I had something specific to say to the cast during intermission. Normally I would stop by the green room and give them positive feedback. This time I encouraged them to increase their energy, pick up the pace, and play their intentions more boldly. The second and third acts were tighter and stronger, and ultimately redeemed the performance. By Friday night, the

entire show seemed tight and well-executed, and the audience received them enthusiastically. Saturday was the best performance, with most of the actors bringing their fullest capacities to bear. Two minor but significant deviations from the rehearsed characters, however, gave me some concern.

One concern was George's increasing volume as he challenged Chris about Joe. Since determining late in the rehearsal process that he should be played more combatively, the actor playing George continued to increase the forcefulness of his attacks. By the middle of the run, he was screaming near the top of his lungs on certain lines. From a character standpoint, Chris would probably have responded with flying fists if George went to such an extreme, but since we could not stage that, the volume felt somehow inappropriate. I preferred George to walk a fine line between being the bull in the china shop and remembering that he once had respect and admiration for the Kellers. In the middle of the run, I suggested to the actor that he moderate his outbursts so that he came across as someone who wants both to bring about and avoid the complete destruction of his former friends. He never got any softer, but at least he did not get any louder after that point. During one performance, before George's tirade, at one point the front door was inadvertently left open, which gave the impression that everyone in the house would be able to hear George's attacks. This made it more difficult to believe that Kate and Joe would have approached him in the way they did. Instead, they would have approached him defensively and with much more caution. I kept hoping Chris or Ann would have the presence of mind to simply close the door and resolve the situation. Though they did not close the door, they did make efforts to try to get George to quiet down. In future productions, it may be wise to spend a little time talking about how the

actors can resolve such issues so that the audience can concentrate on the right aspects of the story, rather than have their attention drawn away by a prop or other visual element that is out of place.

The second acting deviation was a more significant problem because it was a core characterization issue, and not simply a few lines that drew attention to themselves. As Joe settled into his performance, he began to get a little too casual about his objectives, and began to lose some of the “coloring” of his lines that we had worked hard to achieve. As far as his objectives, he lost some of the urgency of damage control that we had seen earlier. It did not seem as though he was trying as hard to repair the breaches that had appeared in his façade. Specifically, when he, George, and Kate sat at the table to discuss George’s father, Joe seemed to run through his lines a little too quickly, losing the intention to suppress George’s attack. The scene should feel like an intellectual and emotional clash between two giants. While it was still moderately effective, and communicated the information and emotional impact necessary to carry us into the next scene, it could have been stronger.

Contributing to the condition was the loss of some of the personality in the lines. We had rehearsed Joe as the consummate storyteller, whether it be jokes about his relationship with Kate, or the speech he gives Ann about being “the beast.” Joe’s ability to touch those around him with his words and personality is second to none in this play. While Kate dominates by sheer force of will, Joe is the guy you want to be around because of his down-to-earth demeanor and cheerful disposition. In rehearsal, we worked to give the actor many opportunities to be that storyteller and to work his charm on those around him. As the run progressed and he got more settled into his lines, some of this

colorful aspect was lost. Given an opportunity to do things again, I would like to have worked—whether through repetition or other exercises—to achieve more consistency in Joe’s performance. As much as these minor flaws were noticeable, however, they were still minor.

Technical Performance

As far as the technical aspects of the run, there were only a few minor glitches in an otherwise excellent performance. The one technical element that went awry on opening night was a random blackout near the beginning of Act Two. Apparently, an extra blackout cue had not been removed after some final tweaking of the light cues since final dress. The actors simply went on with their performance, and later jokingly referred to the event as the “eclipse.” After the performance I simply verified that the stage manager and lighting designer were taking care of the issue, which they were.

The only other technical part of the performances that I would like to have changed was the timing and volume of the music at the end of the show. Kate cried out in grief as Chris ran into the house, and Barber’s *Adagio for Stings* began to play. When Chris returned, they had their final exchange and then Kate turned to go to the door. At this point I wanted the volume to swell significantly, even as the lights faded to black on the stage. I wanted the music to stay at a high volume for a few seconds into the blackout, and then gradually fade out. I tried several times during technical rehearsals and during the run to get my ideas across. It was never fully executed as I hoped, however, though it came close. The volume never got to the high point, and it always faded out a bit too soon after the blackout. After several attempts to communicate had failed to produce the desired result, I decided that it was good enough and stopped

pressing the issue. Were I to do it over again, I would probably pursue it in technical rehearsals until it was executed exactly as I wanted it at least three times before moving on. The fact that it never got where I wanted it was more a failure on my part to communicate effectively than the crew's failure to meet expectations. My expectations for the show were high, and even with these flaws, I was very pleased with the outcome. We effectively told the story, and engaged the audience both intellectually and emotionally.

Concept

From the beginning, I hoped to give the audience a production which complemented the words of the playwright with visuals that stimulated the intellect. From the earliest design meeting, I pushed for a "rich and layered" design that would integrate with the dialog and action and enhance the overall experience. My desire was to enable the audiences to connect with the themes of the play, including the nature of our responsibility to each other, and the consequences of neglecting that responsibility. While much of the response to design choices is subjective in nature, it is possible to determine whether the concept helped or hurt the reception of the play as a whole. Some audience members who are familiar with the play may only be prepared to accept a strictly Realistic interpretation of the show, since that is largely what Miller himself had in mind. The symbolic nature of certain aspects of the play, such as the apple tree, and the clear use of Greek storytelling techniques, however, provide ample room to experiment with the concept and design.

There was something grand about the set, much like the imposing Greek palaces or temples that inspired it. While I did not hear anyone comment specifically on its

classical influences, I heard many comments about the impressive nature of the set. It was clear that people were seeing something more than a backdrop for the action when I was asked right before the show by a friend in the audience about my choice to use painted leaf panels as opposed to something more realistic. I also had several comments after the performances regarding the windows hanging above the house that came on as tension built throughout the second act. The translucency of the interior walls of the house also generated a few comments. While I do not recall anyone saying anything about the costumes or sound specifically, considering the overall response of the audience, I believe the total effect of the concept was in full harmony with the action and themes of the play.

Audience Response

After each performance I would see people emerging from the theatre with tear-filled eyes, which let me know that the performance was resonating well. The audience also responded in ways that I did not expect, particularly on nights when there were a lot of students in attendance. There was a lot of tittering at times, and at first I was annoyed with it, but soon realized that they were really engaged in the story and responding to it vocally. In fact, when Kate slapped Joe, someone in the audience actually said, “Oh, snap!” Particularly satisfying were the audible gasps when Kate exclaimed “Then let your father go!” And, of course, the gunshot was both an audible and emotional thunderclap that audiences responded to viscerally with gasps or moans of pity (see color plate #3). I sometimes watched the audience to gauge their reactions. Quite often their eyes were riveted on the stage. Occasionally, particularly in the first act, the chorus of

coughing and rustling of programs let me know that they were momentarily losing their interest.

Most satisfying, however, was to hear conversations about the play after a performance, or to have students approach me and ask me questions about the themes that struck them. One student in particular asked me if I thought there was room for an interpretation that Joe was right to do what he did. This student explained that her father was self-employed and that any business decision he made had a direct effect on what their family could afford, including food. I explained that while what Joe did was technically a criminal act and therefore deserved punishment under the law, it was easy to understand how he might have felt. I expressed my gratitude that she was taking time to consider the play in this way and encouraged her to continue to do so. The purpose of any good theatre is not only to entertain, but also to allow the audience to experience the world in different ways. For this young woman, it provided a chance to think about what she, or in this case her father, might have done in a situation similar to Joe's. That she was so moved, or agitated, or her curiosity was piqued enough to seek me out to talk about it is evidence that the story we were trying to tell really was being told.

Process

Two goals topped my list of priorities at the outset of this project. The first was to create an outstanding production that was engaging and aesthetically pleasing. The second was to conduct the process in a way that both maximized efficiency and effectiveness and tapped in to the creative potential of each collaborator, while minimizing missteps and infighting. It was important to me that we had a process that we as artists enjoyed as much as we wanted our audience to enjoy the final project. This is

not to say, of course, that I expected everything to be pure, unremitting joy along the way. Neither did I expect myself or others immediately to relent when our ideas were challenged. I know that deep satisfaction usually comes from a determined and rigorous approach to the task at hand, and that rigor is often accompanied by a fair amount of blood, sweat, and tears. Given my first goal, expectations for the process, the product, and the efforts of each team member were necessarily high. My hope, then, was to address concerns in constructive, creative ways, and to engender respect between me and my co-artists. I have observed combative situations before, and it tends to shut down creativity, and leave people with a bitter memory of the experience. I greatly wanted to avoid this inspiration-killing negativity. I addressed my feelings on collaboration at our first design meeting to set the stage for all our future interactions. As much as possible, I tried to practice what I preached. The designers and other crew members also had positive attitudes and worked well to overcome challenges, such as the seeming deadlock over the construction of the trees mentioned in Chapter Three.

In each of my productions to date, I have tried to create a positive atmosphere in which each contribution is valued. Sometimes this has led me to acquiesce to suggestions or efforts that I felt were sub-par in order to preserve a non-confrontational atmosphere. I learned, however, that expectations can be set and excellence pursued without sacrificing respect and congeniality. During the process of mounting *All My Sons*, I tried harder to keep performance expectations high while maintaining an atmosphere of trust among the collaborators. Occasionally, as I have mentioned earlier, I wish I would have pressed harder to get the results I wanted. Leadership in theatre, just

like leadership in any capacity, is providing a vision of what needs to be accomplished, and then working with those you lead to help them achieve that vision.

Working to accomplish the vision meant that I had to work diligently to fulfill my own responsibilities, including being prepared with my concept and analysis, and shepherding the design process through to a beneficial conclusion. I made many missteps along the way, such as cancelling an important meeting that I should not have cancelled, but gracious mentors gently and respectfully provided me with course corrections that enabled me to reach my destination. Overall, the process met my every expectation, including how we all dealt with errors, less-than-ideal circumstances, and underperformance. Every person was invested in the outcome and determined to work together to see it completed.

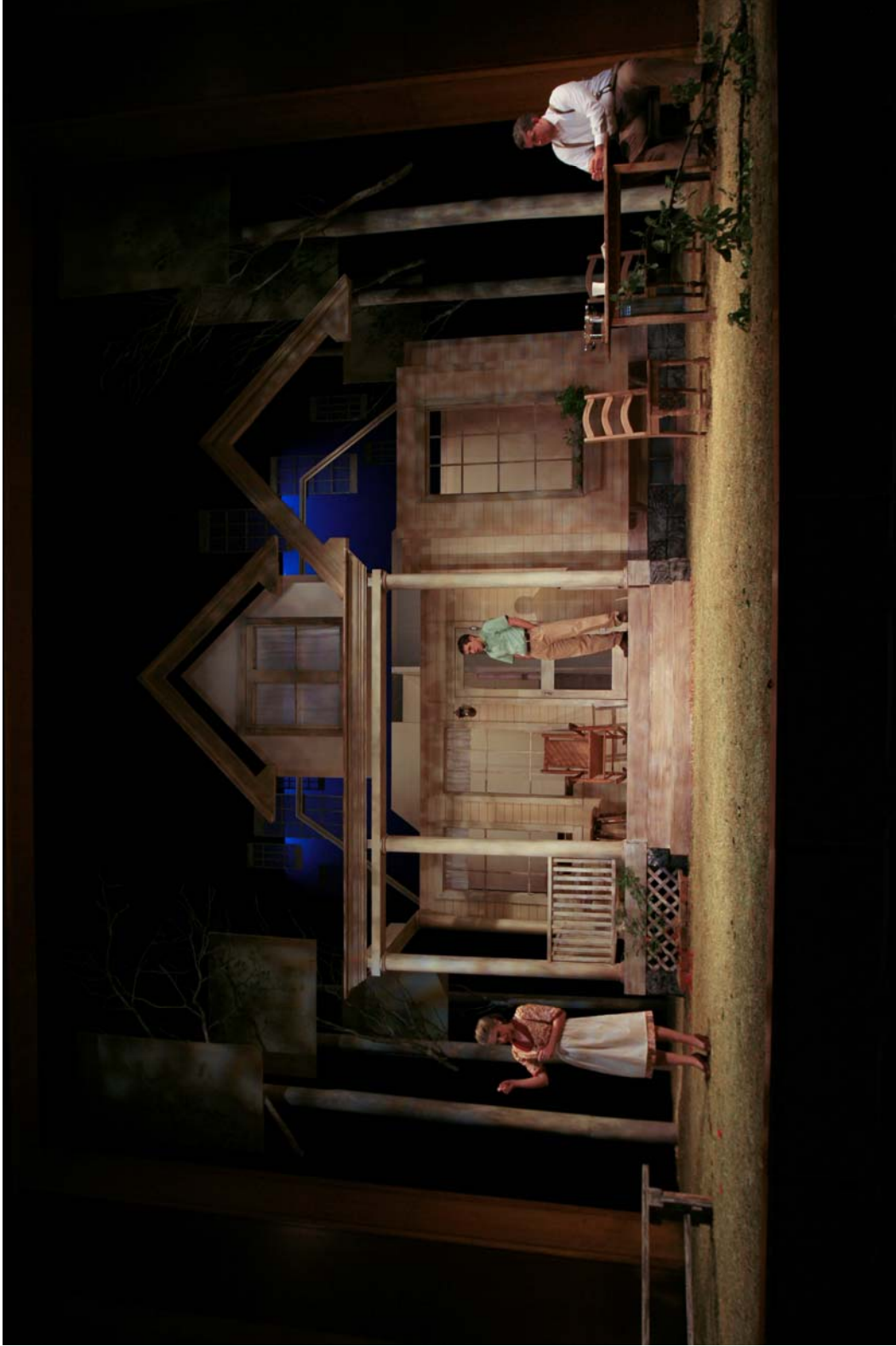
Future

One of my professors who has guided me in this process shared with me the discovery that she made for herself when writing her doctoral dissertation. She at first complained that no one had prepared her or taught her how to write a dissertation. The epiphany came that the only way to learn to write a dissertation is to actually write a dissertation. There are very few exercises that approximate the magnitude of the effort, and only by doing it can you truly understand how it is to be done. The same can be said for many projects whose size and scope is beyond that of daily experience, such as directing a full-scale production of a play. While directing a number of smaller scenes has prepared me to handle certain aspects of a larger production, only doing the large production has given me the knowledge, experience, and insights I will need to take my skills to the next level. It is the one experience of my academic career that I hope to

duplicate and build upon as I venture into the professional world. Future projects will most likely be without the safety nets that a university setting affords, but finally having experienced the complete process has given me a model by which to compare subsequent efforts. There are many things I still want to learn. For example, I would like to do more non-Realistic theatre, where human nature can be explored in other ways than textbook representations of behavioral psychology. I have a strong desire to become masterful in directing Shakespeare and other timeless classics and to be able to infuse them with vitality. There will be many more opportunities to expand my knowledge and skills in the theatre arts, and I hope to take advantage of each one to apply what I have learned as well as develop myself professionally. For now, though, I have fulfilled the purpose of my education and of this thesis project. I have learned how to direct a play.

APPENDIX

Production Photos



Color Plate #1: Act One set and lighting. © 2006, Baylor Photography – Robert Rogers



Color Plate #2: Act Three set and lighting. © 2006, Baylor Photography – Robert Rogers



Color Plate #3: George confronts Chris. © 2006, Baylor Photography – Robert Rogers

BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY

March 28, 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Robert Rogers, director of photography at Baylor, give Graham J. Northrup, theatre graduate student, permission to print the photos I took of his thesis production of *All My Sons* (Nov 2007) in his written thesis titled "Directing Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*."

Sincerely,



Robert Rogers

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