

Warehouse Theatre, Ilminster

'All My Sons' Arthur Miller

Wednesday 23rd May 2012

The Play

As you so rightly point out in your programme notes 'All My Sons' was the first Broadway success for Arthur Miller and it took him over two and a half years to complete. Over the years it has come to be considered as a classic. It is a play that works on many levels and has many subtleties, which should be examined by director and actors in order to give the audience a chance to experience the full depth and meaning of 'All My Sons'. Of course it is possible to interpret the script as a straightforward drama about a wartime crime and scandal, but it is so much more than this. It is a play that examines family ties and loyalties, responsibilities, greed, grief, envy, lost aspirations and destruction. It has a past, a present and leaves the audience with thought for the future. Arthur Miller, like Tennessee Williams, is quite prescriptive in his stage directions and individual characterisations and there must be a purpose to this, not just to give ideas as to setting and direction, costume moves etc. but to increase the depth of understanding of Miller's meaning and intention for this play.

The Production

I am not sure if this was the first time for directing for Cathy Stuckey or whether it was just her first time directing at Ilminster. It was a brave choice of play and one that was tackled well, giving the appreciative audience a good experience of amateur theatre at The Warehouse, which is certainly a little gem of a local theatre. The interpretation of the text of the play was good as far as the war time crime and scandal was concerned but I would have liked to have seen a deeper exploration of the characters and their relationships with each other. This is a play where the 'what has gone before and is not said directly' is really important in the portrayal of the characters. Whether as a directorial decision or as a discussion between actors and directors for a play of this depth I think it is important to include something on this in the rehearsal schedule. Kate, Jim and obviously Joe and even maybe Chris know there is a cover up and all have reasons for presenting as they do and I don't think this came across. The previous relationship between Lydia and George was not really noticeable and whilst I think that Jim Bayliss got us to understand the state of his relationship with his wife, I don't think it was reflected in Sue's performance. I wondered how you would manage the tree, it is such an integral part of Miller's stage directions and it was always going to be difficult to have a large stump of tree on the stage. The idea you came up with sort of worked but you needed to emphasise to each actor exactly where the fallen tree was, so that they all looked at the same spot when referring to it. A much larger branch with leaves and apples would have sufficed and this would have given you the opportunity to use larger logs for the beginning of Act 2. In not actually having a reasonably solid representation of the tree I think you again missed some of the subtleties of the play. The apple tree has been planted as a memorial and as such represents Larry, being cut down in his prime. It is also a symbol of American family life and traditions that have been destroyed by the actions of Joe Keller in this play. Of course it is also a symbol from

the Garden of Eden depicting corruption and deceit. You may well disagree with me in that that these things are important but I do think that they help to represent the sub text of the play and this is why Miller gave so much thought to providing this information in his text.

It is extremely difficult to get actors to deliver with the amount of pace and it is confidence in lines and sensibly planned rehearsal schedules that facilitate this. You did really well and the pace and cues never dropped. You chose some excellent furniture to use on your set, the cream cane porch furniture was perfect but I think it would have been better placed in the downstage acting area with the solid wood furniture and bench paced on the porch. This might have given you more options for moves which sometimes seemed awkward and were often quite a long way upstage, often restricted by the barrier created by the solid bench. The script gives a few lines of dialogue after the shot, I think this is a shame and for what it's worth I might have brought the curtain down straight after the shot with Chris running into the house and an anguished cry from Kate.

Cathy, this may seem a lot of criticism and it is all subjective, you should be really proud of your first show, I wish mine had been as good and I certainly look forward to seeing more offerings from you soon. You obviously loved the play, as you said from your programme notes and this really is the essence of directing in that you have a close connection with the script and a desire to interpret it with your own clear vision and this what you did.

Presentation

I really liked the set and according to the programme this was a one man effort of construction by Dave Goodall and all credit must go to him for the obvious hard work that was involved in this task as well as taking on a major role. One edge of the two story house was not complete, this worked for me on two levels, one that it made me think that the house was in fact much bigger and grander, as befitting the Keller's status and it also gave the air of impending destruction. I liked that you could not quite see into the house, but could vaguely be aware of people passing by the window. I might have made a little more of this with some characters being seen to look or listen to what was going on in the garden before their entrance, thus discovering secrets. It was a nice idea to have the solid black flats; I hope that they were meant to represent the poplar trees. As mentioned in the script they certainly created a sense of seclusion within the garden and gave you a really good opportunity to use them as entrances and exits from the house. Whilst you did this on occasion I think it was a trick missed as you could have dispensed with the noisy and difficult wooden gate which seemed to me to be out of keeping for an American yard and difficult for your actors to manage. It also meant that lots of entrances and exits were in the upstage corner. The set was sufficiently adorned with enough pots to give the overall impression of the garden in late summer. My husband assures me that one of the pots was 'plastic terracotta' although I have to say I did not notice this.

Your lighting and sound team did a good job. In Act 1 although we start at early morning the scene progresses through the morning and it would have been nice to have seen the day getting warmer and more oppressive with the late summer American sunshine. I really am not technically minded but I am sure this could have

been achieved. I would have liked to see more of a difference between the overall lighting in Act 2 (twilight) and Act 3 (2.00am) although I did appreciate the light in the upper room of the house being on and then turned off. The thunder storm, planes etc at the beginning of the play with Kate in a spot light were an innovative touch but for me did not actually add anything and actually became a distraction as I spent the first five minutes of the play wondering exactly what had happened and trying to decide what exactly the effects were and if they been too loud. It was a very warm evening and your lighting gallery is close to the audience and I was sat in the back row, but I did overhear a couple of conversations!! Tricky as I know communication is vital but I think it something to be aware of. Amongst many other things the art of good stage management is for the audience to not know they are there and for cast to arrive on stage at the right time with the correct props and for sound and lighting cues to be on time, this all happened, well done. The properties you provided must have been good as they were also unobtrusive!

Your costumes and hair mostly gave the impression of creating the right period atmosphere but there were some very noticeable modern adaptations and it may have been possible to have found some other relatively inexpensive modern alternatives to use. Dungarees, jeans, check shirts etc. are always a good start but the jeans could have seemed a little more in period with turn ups and daps rather than what seemed to be like trainers especially for Bert. I wondered if a jacket of some description could have been found for Dr Bayliss rather than that nice, modern green sweater. Overall I think you were more successful with your men's costumes and hairstyles, (although the men's were sometimes a little long and I don't think men sported beards) than your women's. Kate's Act 2 costume of the blue fitted dress with full skirt was right on the nail and nicely completed with the small hat but I was not so sure about her Act 1 costume. For me she looked a little too glamorous, I wanted to see her looking a little more care worn and tired. Perhaps a pinafore would have helped and I think I would have tried to find some flatter shoes rather than the high heels she wore. It would have been good if Ann could have been found another dress for Act 2, after all Chris does say "look she's dressed up already' and' you look nice'. However a good attempt and you managed to create the image of the period overall.

Acting

I cannot fault or criticise any of you in the learning of your lines, or in your pace and delivery, cues were picked up expertly and you all obviously enjoyed your on stage characters. I don't think that we necessarily have the time in amateur theatre to look deeper into our given roles and the relationships we have with other characters on stage. Sometimes this is of little importance but I think for a play such as 'All My Sons' it would have added an extra dimension and allowed you to turn a good production into an excellent one.

Dave Goodall - Joe Keller: Is not a bad man, he loves his family and whilst he may think he has got away with his crime it still troubles him. This was a very confident portrayal of this character. Your American accent slipped on occasion but I would rather that you got the character right and gave a flavour of the accent rather than the accent right and the character wrong. Your experience showed, your delivery was always clear and thoughtful and you kept good pace throughout. It was a well-

rounded performance. I wonder if it helped you in your characterisation that you had played Chris in the past as they have many similar characteristics?

Teresa Ravenscroft - Kate Keller: What an emotional part, and you played it really well, although I do not think that you completely captured the essence of Kate. I became overwhelmed by the constant strength of emotion and I would have preferred you to have built up to your emotional scenes rather than let it rip all at once which often seemed to be the case. Holding back would have given me the opportunity to see the inner torment of this woman, struggling to keep up the deceit of her husband's lies and actions, her desire to control others and to come to terms with the loss of her beloved son. The moment you cracked the part for me was very near to the end, after Ann showed you the letter, and you realised that Larry was dead. Your stillness, silent grief and anguish were heart felt and a pleasure (if that is the right word) to watch. You come across as a very giving actor on stage and worked really well with the other cast members creating very believable relationships, again pace and energy were excellent.

Chris Williamson - Chris Keller: from the moment you walked on the stage, in character, eating a doughnut, I enjoyed your performance. I was initially concerned that you looked a little young to play Chris but soon became swept up in your portrayal of the character. Even when not required to speak you were part of the action, observing, listening and reacting to the actions and words of others on stage. There were times when I felt that you missed the duality of the character in as much as Chris presents himself as an idealist, he is upset that the war has not changed anything but does not reject the money his father makes and says he will make Ann a fortune. It is this sort of thing that I mean by missing some of the subtleties and sub texts of the play but I think that for the entire cast this is because of directorial decisions rather than your interpretations of role. There was some extremely nice work with the other actors, particularly Ann and Kate. The proposal scene was lovely although I think there could have been even more awkwardness over the first kiss. Your final scene was powerful but again I think you lost some of the subtleties of the situation by not allowing the scene to build.

Paula Denning - Ann Deever I really enjoyed your performance, your portrayal of your relationship with Chris was confident. You moved around the stage well, although I do think that you had some uncomfortable moves which as I have previously said could perhaps have been made easier by a slight change in furniture. As with Chris, I thought your proposal scene was delightful and showed some really nice teamwork between you. I thought that you delivered lines crisply with a variety of tone and pace and that you listened and responded well to other characters. I also liked the fact that you were frugal with your hand gestures, which when playing an emotional part can be very difficult. You were a pleasure to watch.

Dan Packer – George Deever: in the main your performance was good and I particularly liked your scene with Chris and Ann although there were times that you seemed to display a lack of confidence. This was apparent in your body language rather than your delivery and I think it is something you may want to look at and overcome, as you should be pleased with what you achieve. Like most of the other characters I thought that you lost some of the nuances of character, for instance in your reaction to seeing Lydia for the first time in years, she had been your childhood sweetheart and this was not apparent. Sometimes rehearsal schedules are short and

the 'niceties' of a performance are difficult for the director to bring out and I am hoping that this was the case. Overall a good, performance.

Rob Graydon - Jim Bayliss: I hope you enjoyed being back at The Warehouse Rob. It was nice portrayal of the neighbour. He came over as thoughtful and caring and I actually understood what you felt about your life and your relationship with your wife during Act 3 when you said, 'and then she came, and she cried...' There were some tricky moves, which you handled well and as always I enjoyed watching you.

Lucy Driver – Sue Bayliss: I did think that perhaps you could have allowed the audience to see more of the character of Sue so that we could understand her bitterness (as in her scene with Ann) and the reasons why her marriage to Jim was not really successful. I do think it lacked tension at times as everyone in this play is really walking on eggshells. That said it was well paced, well delivered, well learnt so all in all a performance to be pleased with.

David Levi – Frank Lubey: A very small cameo role, which you played well, watch your delivery of lines as sometimes they can be a little fast, making them difficult to hear. However I am glad that you have been 'dragged out from behind the curtain' and I look forward to seeing you grow in confidence in other roles.

Jen Boxell – Lydia Lubey: I thought you were a little too young to play this role but your enthusiasm for your role was evident, I would have liked to have seen more reaction from you on your brief encounter with George but overall you came up with an endearing performance.

Tyler McKay – Bert: What a delight, you only had a few lines but you delivered them well and created a nice character, even coping well when the adults seemed to jump in on your lines, well done, I hope that this will be the beginning of a long involvement with amateur theatre for you.

Conclusion

Whilst I seem to have spent a lot of my adjudication saying that I felt that you did not pay quite enough attention to some of the subtleties of characterisation and plot within the script I really want to emphasise that I did enjoy my evening at Ilminster. I hope that you agree that the main reasons for putting on a play – are to enjoy working as a team, to develop friendships during the rehearsal period, to stretch and challenge yourselves as a group and as individuals and of course to enable audiences to have a good evening out and provide them with a thought provoking, thrilling or fun evening depending on the chosen play. Well done Cathy on your directorial debut, you certainly had some experienced actors/directors to work with and I am sure that you would have taken advantage of this expertise. It is not easy to 'take the reigns' and have to make the decisions for everything that goes on in a performance from lights, sound, interpretation, moves etc. and I thought that you really made a cracking first attempt. I look forward to watching you develop as a director, which I have no doubt you will. There is a talented group of people at Ilminster both onstage and off and this is something that should be nurtured and treasured. Thank you for inviting me.

Lyn Lockyer – May 2012