



THURSDAY, APRIL 25, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "ALL MY SONS" LACKS A FAMILY

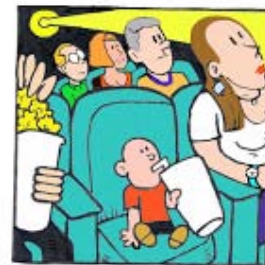
**ALL MY SONS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE**

The marvelous director Jack O'Brien comes a cropper on this deeply miscast revival of a lesser Arthur Miller tragedy. Every major role is played by an actor ill-suited to it, the show seems to have no sense of the play's conspiracy of silence or complicity and O'Brien even bizarrely places actors nearly out of sight behind an arbor when delivering a few lines. When two characters head to a car, they exit in the direction of a neighbor's backyard rather than going past the front of the main house. Don't they even know where the driveway should be? This *All My Sons* lacks a sense of direction in every sense of the word.

The play must have been a thunderbolt back in 1947. With the US flourishing after World War II, Miller dared to write a drama about manufacturers who knowingly deliver defective airplane parts, dooming dozens of young American men to their deaths. Two people ran the company, but only one of them went to jail. Joe, the other partner, convinced the courts he was innocent and is making more money than ever. Still, a shadow hangs over his home. Joe (Tracy Letts) had two sons and one of them was lost in the war. His wife Kate (Annette Bening) refuses to admit that child is dead, even after three years have passed and all hope is lost. Now his remaining son Chris (Benjamin Walker) plans to marry Ann, the sweetheart of his dead brother and the daughter of Joe's business partner now rotting in jail.

Ann's arrival carries many dangers. If Kate approves of the marriage, she'll finally have to accept her other son is dead. And if Ann marries Chris, will his loyalties remain with Joe or is it possible he might start to see the dreadful truth about his father?



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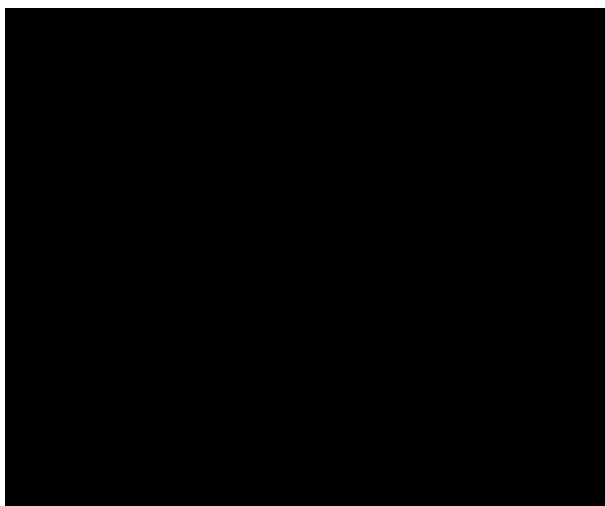
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Done right, *All My Sons* should have a cheerful surface and a dark, dark heart. Everyone is desperate to maintain the facade of a happy country, a happy neighborhood and a happy family. Everyone knows either directly or in their heart that Joe was just as guilty as his partner. But Joe is here and the partner is in jail, Joe is making money and employing people, Joe is a good neighbor and a good father and who wants to admit the roof over their head, the clothes on their back, the cheerful world they inhabit is a lie?

Each revelation by Joe's wife or his neighbors and finally himself that it's all a lie should be shocking. But you feel no frantic desire to deny the truth. Everyone is in on the secret, it seems and it all feels so matter-of-fact you wonder why they bother.



The central problem is casting. Good actors of course can play any role. And they can certainly surprise. I never imagined William Hurt could play a person who wasn't bright -- his innate intelligence always shone through. But there he is in *Broadcast News* playing a news anchor who is just smart enough to realize he's not that smart. Yet the truth is that actors often have a core characteristic and they wisely choose parts that suit them in some way. They don't deliver the same performance again and again, but they do know their wheelhouse. Barbara Stanwyck didn't play dumb broads who could be manipulated. Cary Grant didn't play losers. You get the idea.

Tracy Letts has a conniving aura about him and that turns Joe from a weak, desperate man into a Machiavellian figure. Instead of a man frightened his mask will drop and his son will learn the truth, you figure Letts set his partner up from the start and probably cackled with glee when he pulled it off. Annette Bening has tackled a vast array of women, but her best work is playing women with an iron core, or at least women who discover that strength in them. The ghost of a wife who denies the terrible reality in her life is not for her. I'm not sure yet what defines Walker as an actor, but a son who might collapse under the truth doesn't suit this towering oak of a man either. They're

#### ▼ April (10)

THEATER: "INK" STAINED  
WRETCHES GET THEIR  
DUE

THEATER: "TOOTSIE" IS A  
DRAG

THEATER: "ALL MY SONS"  
LACKS A FAMILY

THEATER: 'HADESTOWN'  
FINDS HEAVEN ON  
BROADWAY

THEATER: "BURN THIS"  
BARELY SMOLDERS

THEATER: THE PAIN OF "THE  
PAIN OF MY  
BELLIGERENCE"...

THEATER: QUESTIONING  
"SOCRATES"

THEATER: "OKLAHOMA!" IS  
OK THE SECOND TIME  
AROUND!...

THEATER: LESS IS MORE AT  
"MRS. MURRAY'S  
MENAGERIE"...

THEATER: "THE CRADLE  
WILL ROCK" PUTS YOU TO  
SLEEP

#### ► March (5)

#### ► February (1)

#### ► January (5)

#### ► 2018 (33)

#### ► 2017 (6)

#### ► 2016 (2)

#### ► 2015 (17)

#### ► 2014 (2)

#### ► 2013 (5)

#### ► 2012 (17)

#### ► 2011 (15)

#### ► 2010 (10)

#### ► 2009 (43)

#### ► 2008 (86)

#### ► 2007 (781)

#### ► 2006 (2412)

unsuited to these characters and never for a moment seem like a real family.

► 2005 (5)

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Scene after scene simply doesn't work. For example, Ann's brother shows up spitting fire. After years of refusing to speak to his shameful father, George pays a visit to his dad in jail, has a dramatic change of heart and takes the train to Ann so he can stop her impending engagement. He's ferocious and determined to tell the truth...until Kate offers him grape juice and Joe drops some reminders of their dad's weak nature. Suddenly George is giggling and smiling again as if all is forgiven or worse forgotten. What happened to the avenger who walked onstage just a minute ago?

We don't need this example of weak plotting by Miller (trumped by the even hoarier device of an unread letter) to know the show won't go smoothly. This *All My Sons* actually begins with the sounds of a storm and perhaps warfare. Did they worry saying the play was set in 1947 wasn't enough to remind people it takes place right after WW II? That's followed by footage of a plane falling from the skies, as if the audience might not be able to imagine the end result of installing defective parts. And then, lightning strikes. It flashes on the curtain onstage and then cheesily flashes all over the theater, with white lights bursting on and off and the lightning streaking over the ceiling and balcony and walls, like something you'd see in *Harry Potter*. It's the only moment in the show that truly smacks of desperation.

## THEATER OF 2019

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[Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\*\*

[Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\* 1/2

[Choir Boy](#) \*\* 1/2

[White Noise](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kiss Me, Kate](#) \*\*\*

[Ain't No Mo'](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Ain't Too Proud](#) \*\*

[The Cradle Will Rock](#) \* 1/2

[Mrs. Murray's Menagerie](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Oklahoma! \(on Broadway\)](#) \*\* 1/2

[Socrates](#) \*\*

[The Pain Of My Belligerence](#) \*

[Burn This](#) \*\*

[Hadestown](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[All My Sons](#) \* 1/2

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*entertainment news of the day with top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.*

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT [1:40 AM](#) 

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