

Theater & Dance

At Keegan Theatre, ‘All My Sons’ is a family circle of secrets

By Celia Wren

November 7, 2012

A white picket fence is all very well, but that emblem of middle-class aspiration can't shut out the past. And it's no defense against moral accountability.

Those thoughts might flit through your mind as you watch the Keegan Theatre's focused, well-paced production of Arthur Miller's "All My Sons." Capably directed by Susan Marie Rhea, the drama unfolds on a small-town, back yard set whose stretch of ivory-toned fence seems to underscore the vulnerability of the play's central characters, the Keller family, to obligations past and present. (Mark Johnson is set designer.)

In one forceful scene, young World War II veteran Chris Keller (Kevin Hasser) sits on a porch step, talking to his fiancée, Ann (Brianna Letourneau). Just moments ago, the two were shyly reveling in their new love. But now Chris veers into brooding bitterness. His expression darkens; his voice grows angry. Gesturing jerkily with one raised hand, he explains to Ann that, on the military front, a new sense of responsibility seemed to be binding humans together, "man for man." But, back in the United States, he found that the business "rat race" was ongoing and "nobody was changed at all."

Hasser's performance — including that abrupt but believable shift from happiness to angst — is a strength of this brisk, generally absorbing production: Now wearily and distractedly helping his mother, Kate (Sheri S. Herren), shell string beans; now acting as reassuring protector to Ann; now slipping into gloomy introspection, Chris seems to encompass layers of confidence, self-delusion, idealism and unease.

He's a more intriguing presence here than Joe, the successful manufacturer who is the Keller family patriarch. As played by Kevin Adams, Joe initially comes across as a shade too jovial and uncomplicated — qualities in view when, elated at Chris and Ann's engagement, he picks his son up and whirls him around like a small child. Starting with Act 2, though, Adams prudently incorporates more somberness and ambivalence in his performance, as the plot — involving defective airplane parts sold to the U.S. military during the war — sweeps ominously toward its conclusion.

The climactic scene in this production stays just a hair's breadth away from melodrama. And the show as a whole features some uneven performances in smaller roles: For instance, actor Bradley Foster Smith goes overboard on the skulking, panicked, perspiring mannerisms of George Deever, Ann's brother (who, admittedly, has just learned a terrible secret). Herren's resigned, long-suffering Kate can seem a

tad one-note. But Letourneau does a fine job tempering Ann’s earnest sweetness with gutsiness (she also looks swell in the demure 1940s dresses designed by costumier Erin Nugent). And, in a cameo, Allison Corke supplies a burst of energy and humor as the Kellers’ flaky neighbor Lydia.

Another neighbor, Dr. Jim Bayliss (Peter Finnegan), helps drive home the play’s message about the moral costs of pragmatism and compromise. Once, Jim yearned to do medical research; he then got married and became a family doctor, catering to self-absorbed hypochondriacs. “Now I live in the usual darkness,” he observes, baring his heart to Kate. It is a sign of this production’s effectiveness that, even as we watch a well-lighted stage, we understand what he means.

Wren is a freelance writer.

All My Sons

by Arthur Miller. Directed by Susan Marie Rhea; assistant director, Timothy H. Lynch; lighting design, Stephanie P. Freed; sound, Tony Angelini; set dressing and properties, Katrina Wiskup; hair and makeup, Craig Miller; original music, Matt Rippetoe. With Cate Brewer, Michael Innocenti, Billy Baldwin, Sean Baldwin and Calder Declan LeValley. About

2 hours 15 minutes. Through Dec. 1

at the Church Street Theater,

1742 Church St. NW. Visit www.keegantheatre.com or call 703-892-0202.

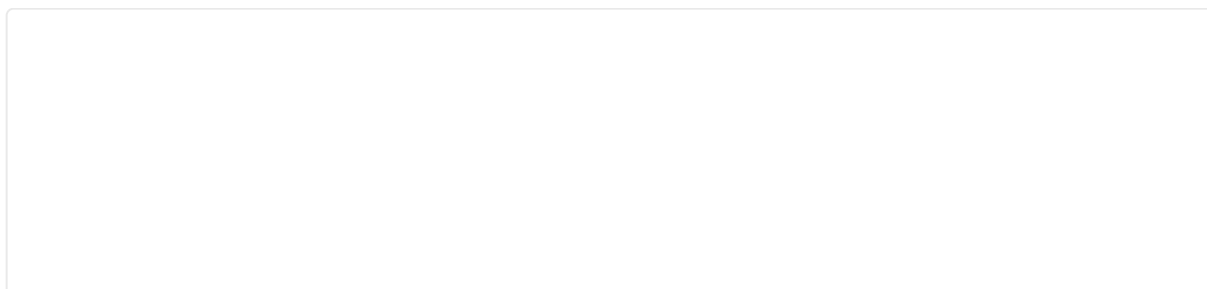
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