

Review

Tremendous new *All My Sons* Opens TN Rep Season

By: Evans Donnell, *ArtNowNashville.com*

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Last season, it was *To Kill a Mockingbird*; now, it's *All My Sons*. Tennessee Repertory Theatre has done it again.

What do I mean? To quote from my *Mockingbird* review, "Tennessee Rep's show reminds us live performance done properly makes a story new each time it's done." The ensemble led by Director René D. Copeland has accomplished that and more in a tremendous production of Arthur Miller's 1947 classic that opens the company's 27th season.

For those either unfamiliar with the play or in need of a refresher, here's the setup: It's a Sunday in August 1947. In a Middle-America backyard we see a toppled apple tree which has served to memorialize one of World War II's many fallen heroes.

That backyard is part of the Keller residence. Kate Keller (Ruth Cordell) watched the tree that was planted for her son Larry fall during an overnight storm; she has yet to accept that he's actually gone for good. Her husband Joe (Chip Arnold) is a successful businessman whose past is clouded by scandal; their surviving son Chris (Eric D. Pasto-Crosby) is a war vet who's struggling with survivor's guilt.

Chris wants to move on with his life by marrying his brother's former girlfriend Ann Deever (Emily Landham). Before that can happen, though, some secrets will come out that will profoundly alter the lives of all involved in this tale.

Before the play unfolds we see the incredible set that masterful designer Gary C. Hoff has created. It's another superb job of story-framing for Tennessee Rep's resident head of design, from the weathered paint on the Kellers' white fence to the brilliant sense of perspective that turns Johnson Theater's intimate black box into an entire neighborhood.

Trish Clark's period-appropriate costumes, Phillip Franck's naturalistic lighting and Paul Carrol Binkley's in-the-mood sound selections complete the show's assured look and feel. Tennessee Rep's high-quality design team once again bats the ball out of the park.

Copeland can certainly handle contemporary material well, as evidenced by strong productions of Steven Dietz' *Yankee Tavern*, David Auburn's *Proof* and John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* in previous seasons. But her ability to take stories that have been around for decades and make you feel like you've never seen them before may be unsurpassed in these parts.

As any director will tell you, most of the war is won or lost in the casting process. Copeland certainly tasted victory with the actors assembled for *All My Sons*; I doubt anyone could have assembled a better cast for this show.

The struggle between Joe's circle-the-wagons mentality and Chris's broader-responsibility views is a titanic emotional conflict. Arnold and Pasto-Crosby handle that struggle, and their characters' complicated relationships with others, with believable and gripping nuances. Their acting has long been excellent; this show adds further luster to their strong bodies of work.

Landham follows a wonderful turn as a title character in Nashville Shakespeare Festival's *Romeo and Juliet* with an equally engaging appearance as Ann. It's often said good acting involves good reacting; watching Ann's face as she listens and reacts to others is one of the memories of this production I'll savor, and I have Landham's skills and talent to thank for that.

The supporting players are also incredible. Holly Allen may be making her mainstage Tennessee Rep debut (she was part of the company's REPaloud Series reading of *August: Osage County* last season), but she's graced Nashville stages for several years and her performance as the embittered Sue Bayliss is pitch-perfect. Her character's husband, Dr. Jim Bayliss, is played with lyrically subtle notes by acclaimed playwright/actor Nate Eppler.

Another neighborhood couple, Frank and Lydia Lubey, are played by Peter Vann and Marin Miller. As they have so often in the past, both wield their artistic gifts so nimbly that we readily accept their characters as real people.

Patrick Waller appears relatively late in the proceedings as Ann's brother George, but when he does there's an explosion of anger born from betrayal that's fascinating to watch. With *All My Sons* Waller continues to build an impressive list of musical and non-musical credits.

Isaiah Frank turns in another memorably good performance as a neighborhood child named Bert to go with his fine work as Dill last season in *Mockingbird*. I hope this young performer will continue to provide us with the talent and beyond-his-years ability he possesses.

Last, but definitely not least, there's Cordell's incandescent performance as Kate. This veteran actor has a splendid list of credits on the boards and in front of the camera. But knowledge of that background, and the pleasure of watching several of her previous roles, didn't prepare me for my emotional reaction to her portrayal.

Kate's sorrow and anger became so real to me that I started to cry during Act II when Kate confronts her husband and son with the heavy mental and emotional burdens she's carrying. The personal connection I felt to Kate is such a beautiful gift from a consummate artist. I humbly thank Cordell for the privilege of receiving it, and all those involved with *All My Sons* for a night at the theater I'll cherish for a long time.