Commentary

Context

Social history

A play about war-profiteering opening in 1947, when the Second World War had so recently ended, must have been pointedly painful to the audience, considering how many had experienced similar losses of a son, a brother, a fiancé. Of course, even for those whose circumstances did not resemble *All My Sons'*, the play's lesson is that they are 'all our sons' and thus that the grief and culpability are communal. The play's shocking revelations and Miller's insistence that we must take responsibility for our actions provide a lesson about the destructive self-interest and the greed that drives capitalism, sacrificing human values to material values. This moral force resonates in whatever the current social context is, although it must have been additionally vivid for people who had recently endured the Great Depression as well as the Second World War. In his Introduction to *Plays: One* (1988), Miller writes that *All My Sons* was 'conceived in wartime and begun in wartime . . . at a time when all public voices were announcing the arrival of that great day when industry and labor were one, my personal experience was daily demonstrating that beneath the slogans very little had changed' (22).

In gauging the temper of the times further, it is interesting to note that in 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ratcheted up industrial mobilisation for the war, requiring, among other equipment, 60,000 new aircraft. In one of his famous 'Fireside Chats' radio broadcasts in 1942, he said, 'In the last war, I had seen great factories; but until I saw some of the new present-day plants, I had not thoroughly visualised our American war effort . . . The United States has been at war for only ten months, and is engaged in the

enormous task of multiplying its armed forces many times. We are by no means at full production level yet.' By 1943 the government raised the production goals to 125,000 new aircraft. This is the source of the pressure Joe Keller felt; George explains his father's version of what happened once the defects were discovered and he telephoned Joe to come to the plant: 'No sign of Joe. So Dad called again. By this time he had over a hundred defectives. The Army was screaming for stuff and Dad didn't have anything to ship. So Joe told him [. . .] to cover up the cracks in any way he could, and ship them out.' Joe explains this same desperation near the end of the play: 'I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; [. . .] your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell's it to them?'

In Miller's 1944 *Situation Normal . . .*, which he called 'a book of reportage', he wrote, 'A man who has known the thrill of giving himself does not soon forget it. It leaves him with a thirst. A thirst for a wider life, a more exciting life, a life that demands all he can give. Civilian life in America is private, it is always striving for exclusiveness. Our lifelong boast is that we got ahead of the next guy, excluded him. We have always believed in the fiction – and often damned our own belief – that if every man privately takes care of his own interests, the community and the nation will prosper and be safe.' In *Timebends* (1987), his autobiography, Miller's comment on this is significant: 'Though unable to define it in words, they [soldiers] shared a conviction that somehow decency was at stake in this grandest slaughter in history' (277).

In 1947, after *All My Sons* opened on Broadway, Miller's name appeared in an ad in the newspaper the *Daily Worker* (published in New York by the Communist Party) protesting against the treatment of Gerhard Eisler, an anti-fascist German refugee. Miller auctioned off a manuscript of *All My Sons* to support Progressive Citizens of America. During this same year, the Civil Affairs Division of the American Military refused to allow the production of *All My Sons* in occupied Europe, citing its negative criticism of American

society. In *Echoes Down the Corridor* (2000), Miller noted that 'I wrote *All My Sons* during the war, expecting much trouble, but the war ended just as I was completing the play, leaving some room for the unsayable, which everyone knew – that the war had made some people illicit, sometimes criminal fortunes' (xi). Similar to this is Miller's recollection of seeing the play in Jerusalem in 1977: 'the audience sat watching it with an intensifying terror that was quite palpable. On our right sat the president of Israel, Ephraim Katzir, on the left the prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin', who explained what Miller felt to be 'an almost religious quality' in the audience's attention: '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).

There are two accounts of the source of the play's plot: one is that Miller read about the Wright Aeronautics Corporation of Ohio (the state where the play takes place); the company affixed 'Passed' tags on defective airplane engines, having bribed Army inspectors; the other source is a story Miller heard in his living room, when 'a pious lady from the Middle West told of a family in her neighbourhood which had been destroyed when the daughter turned the father in to the authorities on discovering that he had been selling faulty machinery to the Army. The war was then in full blast. By the time she had finished the tale I had transformed the daughter into a son and the climax of the second act was full and clear in my mind' (*Plays: One*, 17). It is worth noting Miller's shift from daughter to son: perhaps nothing marks twentieth-century American drama more than the highly charged and very male family battles between sons and fathers, brothers and brothers; note that, like O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Shepard's *True West*, Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* – an obviously abbreviated list which nevertheless stretches through the entire century – the controversy is almost always between men and always about money. Like all these plays, *All My Sons* is also about two brothers and their father

and money, as are two of Miller's own subsequent plays, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Price*.

In *Timebends*, Miller remembers asking his cousin, 'What did your pop want?' His answer: 'He wanted a business for us. So we could all work together [. . .] a business for the boys' (130). Miller realised that his uncle Manny, a 'homely, ridiculous little man had after all never ceased to struggle for a certain victory, the only kind open to him in this society – selling to achieve his lost self as a man with his name and his sons' names on a business of his own'.

In the course of Act One's opening desultory conversation, all three men reveal a reflexive and cheap cynicism about the news: weather reports are automatically discounted as inaccurate, news is automatically assumed to be bad. Note that this is in the ease of post-war America; we can assume that only a few years earlier, during the war, the news was bad in an entirely different way, specifically when it reported the scandal of Joe's factory having shipped the faulty airplane parts that led to the planes crashing and deaths of twenty-one pilots – the newspaper account which caused Larry's suicide. Note that later in Act One, when Chris tells his father that their dishonesty in not discouraging his mother's false hope that Larry is still alive and will return home has been a mistake, Joe's reply is 'The trouble is the goddam newspapers', referring to reports of other missing soldiers who have come home.

The contemporary world has no shortage of bad news. Public endangerment scandals re-inform the play with each re-reading or revival, from the destruction of the spaceship *Challenger* due to faulty O rings, to the twenty-year Canadian Red Cross blood-distribution disgrace which infected people with HIV, to the 2008 outrage in China over milk tainted with melamine causing 300,000 infants to sicken, to the 2009 US epidemic of salmonella caused by peanut butter shipped despite contamination warnings. And, most spectacularly, the global economic crisis begun in 2008 and Bernard Madoff's role in it[1]; his scam wrecked hundreds of

[1] The trusted Wall Street broker whose $50 billion Ponzi scheme cheated investors around the world.

thousands of lives, institutions, and corporations, and it is worth noting for our purposes of comparison to *All My Sons* that Madoff's two sons, who ran the company's market-making and proprietary units, said that their father kept them in the dark about the secret business, a 'dark' which may resemble Chris's willed ignorance. Money, as Miller's play warns us, is always likely to triumph over decency until the world learns that they are 'all our sons'. As Miller wrote in *Timebends*, 'I could not imagine a theatre worth my time that did not want to change the world.'

Theatrical history

In the stream of the history of great American dramatists, Miller follows Eugene O'Neill. But where O'Neill's tragic vision suggests that people are doomed – by temperament, by events they cannot control, and by the weight of the past – Miller's is a fighting play, insisting that we can live more moral lives if only we acknowledge our place in the family of man. The tragic lesson is always that that understanding comes too late. Whether this means that *All My Sons* is to be read as a tragedy largely depends on the reader's (and, in production, the director's) optimism: *can* we 'be better'? In the wider, longer stream of the history of great Western dramatists, Miller follows Ibsen, whose plays show that the societal context inevitably influences individual lives and that social context can be altered by social action; thus, although the issues of women's rights and, indeed, all human rights have not been solved in the nearly 150 years since *A Doll's House*, significant changes in both ethics and legislation have achieved some social progress.

In theatrical production, *All My Sons* requires a tricky combination of ensemble work – the cast must seem to be a family, a neighbourhood, creating the comfort of people who are familiar with each other on a daily basis, while also creating a sense of alienation, the very opposite of ensemble. *All My Sons* is about what Miller called 'unrelatedness', the mistake of believing that responsibility stops at the edge of your back yard. And, unlike O'Neill, Miller writes realistic,

grounded language, creating speakable dialogue that allows the audience to identify further with the characters in a crucial emotional as well as thematic arc. They sound familiar. They sound like an old-fashioned version of us.

In *Timebends,* Miller recalls his disappointment when Herman Shumlin, Lillian Hellman's producer and director, having read *All My Sons* said he 'didn't understand it' (268). Miller defines himself, from this early moment, as a 'social playwright', like Hellman, an identity that continues in his pursuit of a production and a director, so he was naturally thrilled when both Elia Kazan and Harold Clurman, 'creators of that thirties mixture of Stanislavsky and social protest which was the real glamour' (*Timebends*, 270) were bidding for the script. When it opened on 29 January 1947, Brooks Atkinson, the powerful *New York Times* critic, praised Miller as a 'genuine new talent' and added, 'there is something uncommonly exhilarating in the spectacle of a new writer bringing unusual gifts to the theatre under the sponsorship of a director with taste and enthusiasm'; the director was Elia Kazan.

As Miller's first successful play on Broadway, *All My Sons* launched the great career and established Miller as America's social critic, the voice of a collective conscience telling us, as Chris tells his father, 'You can be better!' *All My Sons* also established Miller's style as realistic, thereby launching a commonly held error, since the plays that follow *All My Sons* depart from realism. This becomes especially interesting in the light of subsequent productions of *All My Sons*, influencing set design, lighting, sound, etc. As Miller wrote, 'No, I am not really interested in "realism". I never was. What I'm interested in is reality . . . Realism can conceal reality, perhaps a little easier than any other form, in fact' (Roudané, 362).

Themes

Time

In *Timebends*, Miller writes about 'the hand of the distant

past reach[ing] out of its grave', an image which defines the plot of *All My Sons* (as it defines the plot of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, for example), like the iron hand of the past clamped on the present and the future in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. In *All My Sons*, this hand of the 'distant past' substantiates Miller's theme that actions have moral consequences, and essentially builds the structure of the play on a series of surprising revelations. It is worth noting that, like O'Neill's family drama which is also about two grown sons, *All My Sons* is also, temporally, a long day's journey into night, a play which begins with the sunny optimism of morning and ends in grim darkness. Similarly, *Death of a Salesman* is a play about past events which govern the present, but in *Salesman* scenes from the past slice through the scenes in the play's present, refusing the chronological linearity of *All My Sons* and creating a visible psychological landscape.

References to time appear throughout the play: all that happened in the past – not only Joe's decision to save his business instead of lives, but also all that happened to Chris in the past in the Army. We learn about his military experience, his leadership and how his squad's self-sacrificial generosity became central to his ethics and values, and his shock and disgust at returning to a post-war world where it was business-as-usual. There is constant mention of how long Larry has been missing, how long Ann has been single, how long Chris has been waiting, how long Steve has been in prison, how long Jim's time of impassioned medical research lasted, how long the poplars have been growing, how long since Larry's memorial tree was planted.

Significantly, when George arrives, wrecked by the war, enraged by his visit to his father, brimming with accusations as well as self-recrimination, his anger and resolution are quickly defused by Kate's grape drink and her insistence that all is as it was: 'None of us changed, Georgie. We all love you.' Awash in nostalgia (the word means 'homesickness'), George caves in to her affectionate manipulation.

Imprisonment

Much of the history of modern drama could be written in scenes of entrapment; if it is the emblem of modern man's sense of impotence in the face of the enormous forces facing him, trapped as he is by history, psychology, genetics, economics, etc., then the modern stage is, necessarily, a claustrophobic arena. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sartre's *No Exit* are the paradigmatic examples. An interesting set design will allow the audience to interpret the issues central to the script: it evokes atmosphere and speaks meaning, without ever explicitly telegraphing to the audience what the play is going to be about. Although the setting often echoes the theme by trapping characters in one room (increasingly a thrifty as well as meaningful development in modern set design), in *All My Sons*, the setting is not an indoor room but a back yard. But rather than create a feeling of openness and fresh air, it fences in the family and divides neighbour from neighbour. Even as the barriers between the Kellers' yard and the Bayliss's and the Lubeys' yards are permeable – the neighbours enter and exit constantly – Miller's stage directions nevertheless specify that the 'stage is hedged on right and left by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere'. Note that when Ann arrives after three years in New York, she runs to the fence and says, 'Boy, the poplars got thick, didn't they?' How symbolic this setting becomes will be reflected in the many possibilities for design choices.

The scene with Bert in Act One is a microcosm of the entire play: Bert's curiosity about the promised jail in the Keller house prompts Joe to say: 'Bert, on my word of honor, there's a jail in the basement. I showed you my gun, didn't I?' Note how much is packed into this seemingly playful line: the house is, truly, a prison; Joe's gun will be the instrument of his shame-filled and repentant suicide; and Joe's 'word of honor' is, we will learn, worthless. The scene with Bert concludes with Joe telling the boy, 'mum's the word', an unwitting comment on the family's policy of silencing the truth, and thereby denying the guilt that has festered under the surface.

Steve is, literally, in prison. Note, too, that when Sue explains to Ann why she hopes once she and Chris marry they will move away, Sue says, 'it's bad when a man always sees the bars in front of him. Jim thinks he's in jail all the time . . . My husband is unhappy with Chris around' (47). Jim's capitulation to his imprisonment – however pragmatic, however cynical, however sad – is revealed late in Act Two when he reassures Kate about Chris's storming out of the house: 'We all come back, Kate. These private little revolutions always die. The compromise is always made. In a peculiar way, Frank is right – every man does have a star. The star of one's honesty. And you spend your life groping for it, but once it's out it never lights again. I don't think he went very far. He probably just wanted to be alone to watch his star go out.' But Chris's star of honesty does not 'go out' even though he may be imprisoned in other ways, especially by his own need to be good, a need that demands that others 'be better', as he tells his mother at the play's end.

Materialism and the American dream

The first instance of the phrase 'the American dream' occurs in James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1933); he defines that 'dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or his achievement [….] The American dream that lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores [. . .] has not been a dream of merely material plenty. [. . .] It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman [. . .] unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations . . .'. And even in 1933 (the Great Depression had surely challenged the American dream in unprecedented ways), Adams laments the erosion of the values which had constituted the societal understanding of that dream: 'we came to insist on business and money-making and material improvement as good in themselves […to] consider an unthinking optimism essential, [. . .] regard[ing] criticism as obstructive and dangerous [. . . to]

think manners undemocratic, and a cultivated mind a hindrance to success, a sign of inefficient effeminacy [. . . and] size and statistics of material development came to be more important in our eyes than quality and spiritual values . . .'. The eerie aptness of Adams's assessment, so many decades after it was written, suggests that the critique may be timeless.

Destructive to society as well as to the individual, materialism is what Miller called 'the petty business of life in the suburbs'. In *All My Sons*, the context is the essentially amoral post-war American prosperity (1947's economic and physical landscape was very different in Europe to what it was in the US). Chris's long speech to Ann tries to explain the shock and dismay he felt when he came back from the war: 'there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a – bus accident . . . I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator' (38). The sense of corruption related to material success is also eerily apt: Joe Keller, in Act Two, says, 'A little man makes a mistake and they hang him by his thumbs; the big ones become ambassadors.' Compare this cynicism to a nearly identical remark in O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*: 'For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks.'

Martin Esslin points out that the fundamental premises of the Theatre of the Absurd, as set forth in his landmark book (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1962; 3rd edn London: Methuen, 2001), go far towards elucidating the differences between the American and the British societal environment. In brief, they include: 'the sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions' (23) and that such Absurdist plays 'express [. . .] the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. [. . .] The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the

absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is in terms of concrete stage images' (24–25).

Esslin argues that the 'dearth of examples' of Absurdist drama in the US is due to the fact that the Second World War did not happen there, since Absurdism 'springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in life which has been characteristic of countries like France and Britain in the years after the Second World War. In the United States there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose. The American dream of the good life is still very strong' (311). Instead of despairing, Chris rails against this loss of 'meaning and purpose', refusing to relinquish belief in American progress: 'Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of . . . responsibility. Man for man.'

Joe senses this in Chris's reluctance to 'use what I made for you . . . I mean, with joy, Chris, without shame [. . .] Because sometimes I think you're . . . ashamed of the money' (41). In their horrific showdown near the play's end, Joe tells his wife, 'you wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn't you?' She replies, underlining her complicity in all this, showing that no one is pure or blameless: 'I didn't want it that way.' And Joe comes back with, 'I didn't want it that way, either! What difference is it what you want? I spoiled both of you.' Jim Bayliss's comment to Kate early in Act Three seems significant, equating materialism with madness: 'Nobody realises how many people are walking around loose, and they're cracked as coconuts. Money. Money-money-money-money. You say it long enough it doesn't mean anything. Oh, how I'd love to be around when that happens.' Kate's realistic response is, 'You're so childish, Jim!' (79).

Like *Death of a Salesman*'s Willy Loman, Joe Keller has subscribed to a set of wrong-headed and self-defeating values: the American dream has been corrupted by materialism, and those who believe in that corrupted version of the dream are, according to Miller, doomed to failure – a failure which both Joe and Willy respond to with

suicide. For Willy his suicide is his last sale: his life for the insurance money to launch Biff into his 'magnificent' future; while for Joe the suicide is penance for the material greed he yielded to in the past. One could argue that Joe's death is an easy way out: an escape from repentance, guilt, apologies, years of denial of culpability, in addition to burdening his son with the guilt of having driven him to death.

Other dominant themes are discussed elsewhere in this commentary; these include:

Moral responsibility: a group of related ideas about responsibility to self and to society.

Family loyalty: this is exclusive and tribal, destructive to the universal family of man, and, as a corollary to this, the maternal is seen as primal, ruthlessly protective of the nuclear family unit.

War: Chris discovers the real nature of loyalty in the brotherhood of self-sacrificial soldiers. It is worth noting that this is not a conventional anti-war play.

Denial: the psychological self-protective device that enables self-interest. As Joe says, 'I ignore what I gotta ignore.' This theme is, obviously, fundamental to the entire play.

Fathers and sons: (Joe and Chris, Joe and Larry, Steve and George) one of the central relationships of American drama. This is a pattern particular to American drama (see p.xxvii) as well as to Miller's plays: consider the similarities to *Death of a Salesman* and *The Price*. The corollary to this theme is the theme of brothers (also dominating the aforementioned plays), often struggling – physically and/or emotionally – with each other.

Characters

Chris Keller
As one of the central and pivotal characters, Chris makes all

the plot's events happen, and thus is, perhaps, the character most representative of the playwright, whose task it is to make the play happen. On the surface, Chris is the hero: courageous in war, modest in peace, and entirely decent, a man deserving of his community's affection and admiration. But despite having been back home for several years, working in his father's factory (we never find out what it is he does there – sufficient to say that he is deeply connected to the Keller business and we presume his is a white-collar job), he seems to be merely one of the 'sons', somehow still a boy, despite his history of military bravery. The soldiers in Chris's unit, under his command, 'didn't die; they killed themselves for each other', as he tells Ann, and when one of them gave him his last pair of dry socks, he takes that as an emblem of their self-sacrificial generosity, and thus their tribute to him as their leader is, for Chris, an emblem of their goodness rather than his own. He is still troubled by their deaths, but he never indicates any inner torment about the enemy deaths he must have caused or the horrors he must have seen. He admires unselfishness, as opposed to the more aggressive, fiercer forms courage might take. His mildness extends to his love life, as we see in the scene where he kisses Ann; he is a sweet rather than a sexually passionate man. Significantly, he achieves manhood when he stands up to his mother when she tries to drive Ann away. Miller indicts the American idea of manhood as Joe defines it in his attempt to explain his past actions to Chris: 'You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business' (76). Chris is not 'in business', and thus is not 'a man'. Although Joe is the designated guilty party, they are all culpable. Chris's refusal to 'see it human', as Joe pleads, is telling; his acknowledgment that Joe is 'no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father (89)' shows an idealism which seems both laudable and at the same time adolescent: he is unable to view his parents as people separate from their relationship to him. That confrontation near the end continues significantly: Chris says, 'I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself!' He then 'turns away, unable to

face Keller' (89); and that small stage direction may be Miller's largest clue as to Chris's unacknowledged guilt.

So many grown men in Miller plays – and in American drama generally – seem to be stuck in an arrested adolescence: living in their parents' home, without wives or children of their own. The Kellers' neighbour, Frank Lubey, stands as a foil to Chris; always a year away from being drafted into the army, he now has a wife and three children, with a house of his own. Worth noting, too, is George's lack of a family. As Chris tells his mother, specifically referring to Larry's death but generally speaking of his own condition, 'We're like a railroad station waiting for a train that never comes in' (21). The train, it turns out, will arrive in a few minutes: enter Ann, and with her the incontrovertible evidence of Joe's guilt and the promise of adult life for Chris.

Chris is adored, not just by the soldiers he commanded, but by friends and neighbours – with the significant exception of Sue, the doctor's wife, whose self-interest, financial as well as emotional, is undermined by Chris's idealism: 'Chris makes people want to be better than it's possible to be.' She feels he tempts her husband away from the practicalities of supporting a family with the ideal of medical research, i.e. towards self-sacrifice and away from self-interest, towards altruism. But despite Chris's apparent idealism, he has clearly accepted the materialistic values of his society and the conventional male role of provider; when Ann accepts his proposal of marriage, he is thrilled and expresses his joy by saying, 'Oh Annie, Annie . . . I'm going to make a fortune for you!' (38).

Chris's name is significant, since he seems to be not only the embodiment of Christian virtues but perhaps the embodiment of Christ. Sue tells Ann, 'I resent living next door to the Holy Family. It makes me look like a bum, you understand?' As Joe will plead with him near the end, 'Chris, a man can't be a Jesus in this world!' Miller has Chris, the ultimate son of the ultimate father, reverse the theological roles and demand self-sacrifice from his father as penance for all the deaths; just before he reads Larry's letter

aloud, he says 'I know all about the world. I know the whole crap story. Now listen to this, and tell me what a man's got to be!' Larry is an offstage surrogate Jesus, having been, in effect, sent to his death by his father when Larry read the newspaper story. Larry has, in effect, died for the sins of Joe Keller, representing the twenty-one downed pilots. The second son is the one who must bear the burden of moral decision, always the central burden in Miller's world view. It seems unlikely that Chris will be able to follow his mother's advice: 'Don't take it on yourself', since she already knows the theological framework, despite her denial of it: 'God does not let a son be killed by his father.' Here we witness a father killed by both his sons. George, another son, also bears this burden, and Chris chastises him with, 'George, you don't want to be the voice of God, do you?' (58).

Another aspect of Chris's central role in the play is his embodiment of the theme of denial; his is a far more complex psychological portrait than Kate's protective denial or Joe's consciously defensive denial. Chris never admits to himself what he knows; it isn't until his mother confesses for Joe, even before he reads Larry's letter, that he consciously realises what his father has done. But Miller has provided significant clues throughout: why is Chris so uneasy about Joe wanting to change the name on the plant to 'Christopher Keller, Incorporated'? When Joe blusters about Steve, suspecting that he sent Ann to 'find out something', Chris retorts angrily, 'Why? What is there to find out?' When George asks for ten minutes' conversation with Joe, 'and then you'll have the answer', Chris evades the showdown. Perhaps the most damning of all the clues is Kate's saying to Jim, 'I always had the feeling that in the back of his head, Chris . . . almost knew. I didn't think it would be such a shock' (80). As George says to him, 'You know in your heart Joe did it' (60) and then adds, moments later, the heartwrenching line, 'Oh, Chris, you're a liar to yourself!' (61). This element in Chris's character calls for enormous subtlety from the actor: possessing an open face and an open nature, he must remain something of a mystery to his parents ('I'm beginning to think we don't really know

him. They say in the war he was such a killer. Here he was always afraid of mice' (83). Worse, he remains a mystery to himself, as most Miller characters do. From Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* to Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge*, from Quentin in *After the Fall* and Victor in *The Price*, to Lyman Felt in *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* – they all appear to be self-searchers but are also self-deluders. John Proctor in *The Crucible*, Miller's most powerful moral hero, may be the exception, although there are those who find his moral clarity oppressive, and sanctimonious, just as there are those who find Miller's moral clarity oppressive, and sanctimonious, as some of his protagonists even resort to suicide, and therefore self-condemnation.

Joe Keller

Miller's Everyman is both an individual and an archetype, 'a man among men' as the stage directions introduce him to us. The play demonstrates that this Everyman needs to be replaced: he is 'nearing sixty' (although in explaining his desperation to Chris he says he's sixty-one). Joe's values belong to a pre-war world, where strength was defined by physical power and making money and where loyalty was defined by caring for one's family. Note that he has no sense of loyalty to Steve, his business partner, neighbour and longtime friend, although Chris feels deep loyalty to the men he fought in the war with – loyalty that will ultimately supersede his loyalty to family. Joe's is a world where a man supports his wife and children, where he builds a legacy for his sons, and where material prosperity and conspicuous consumption are the gauge of success. Uneducated, he is not inclined to think about the world (note his wonder at the newspaper's want-ads as well as his refusal to read any news) or to introspection, and has swallowed society's values whole. Joe is a man who has not heard the Socratic dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living, and it is his tragedy to examine the moral principles by which he has lived only to discover, too late, that he has followed the wrong path.

Nevertheless, Joe's style as 'a man among men' is bluff, good-natured, and confident enough to have faced down the neighbours – his long walk down the street after he was exonerated is both hubristic and impressive – and to have won them over, so that despite their knowing he is guilty, they enjoy his company enough to play cards, to chat about what's in the newspaper, to talk and joke about families. Joe is crass and despite his white-collar success, he remains distinctly blue-collar and working-class in his manner.

His shrewd ability to handle people is clearly demonstrated when he suggests to Ann that her father could come back to work at the factory once his prison term is over; Joe is clearly trying to subvert any of their family's impulse towards revenge, and what seems like generosity is self-protection: 'I like you and George to go to your father in prison and tell him . . . "Dad, Joe wants to bring you into the business when you get out,"' Ann, 'Surprised, even shocked' replies, 'You'd have him as a partner?' Joe qualifies his offer, explaining, 'nervously', 'I want him to know that when he gets out he's got a place waitin' for him. It'll take his bitterness away. To know you got a place . . . it sweetens you' (53). Although Ann is amazed, we should recall that only a page earlier she has said, 'You're not so dumb, Joe.' Chris's rejection of Joe's notion is angry and forcible, eventually provoking Joe's outburst, 'A father is a father!' (53), a remark which seems so fraught with meaning that Joe himself is appalled.

Joe tries to explain his guilt – both to Chris and to himself – by asking that he 'see it human'. He replies to Chris's insistence that he should be in jail with the pragmatism of capitalism: 'Who worked for nothin' in the war? When they work for nothin' I'll work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price?' (89).

Kate Keller

Although she seems to have the smallest role of the family, she is the paradigm of the play's deepest psychological anguish, revealing the cost of her values as well as the cost of

her repression of the truth. She is unable to grieve straightforwardly over the death of her son and fabricates an elaborate self-consolatory fiction by which she lives for three years. Harold Clurman noted that 'If there is a "villain" in the piece, it is the mother – the kindly, loving mother who wants her brood to be safe and her home undisturbed' ('Thesis and Drama', *Lies Like Truth: Theatre Reviews and Essays*, New York: Macmillan, 1958). Frank Rich's *New York Times* review of the Broadway revival in 1987 calls Kate 'an unwitting monster who destructively manipulates everyones' guilts, enforces the most conformist social values, and attempts, with intermittent success, to disguise psychotic impulses as physical ailments and familiar self-martyrdom'.

We don't meet Kate until the middle of Act One when she steps on to the porch. Miller describes her as being 'in her early fifties, a woman of uncontrolled inspirations, and an overwhelming capacity for love'. It is worth noting that her dialogue in the script is ascribed to 'Mother' and, although she is referred to by her name by the characters, Miller clearly sees her as a maternal archetype more than as an individual. She occupies the conventional role of mid-twentieth-century suburban housewife, having devoted herself to husband and children and house; one aspect of her relationship to her husband is sarcasm; after Joe mistakenly throws away a bag of potatoes, believing it to be garbage, he says, 'I don't like garbage in the house.' She replies, with tart wisdom, 'Then don't eat' (18). Chris comments on this exchange: 'That settles you for the day', to which Joe remarks, 'Yeah, I'm in last place again.' This mild bickering is clearly a marital habit, and represents a passive-aggression understandable in women whose lives are completely defined by husbands who may strain their loyalty and the expected wifely admiration. The garbage exchange is also telling in that Kate is metaphorically reminding Joe of cause and effect: there are consequences to everything.

Miller's subtle portrayal of Kate's manipulative nature, shows her bending the men around her – Joe, Chris, George, Larry, Jim, Frank – to her will by making them

worry and protect her; she brings out their gallantry and eagerness to please. The younger generation, especially the unmarried Chris and George, she infantilises, reducing them to the boys they were by making them nostalgic for the innocent pleasures these battle-scarred men used to enjoy. When George appears in the middle of the play, she speaks for the America Miller indicts: 'You had big principles, Eagle Scouts the three of you; [. . .] Stop being a philosopher and look after yourself' (67). It is worth noting that the women in the play – Ann and Sue and Lydia – are not susceptible to her charm or manipulation and resist her for their own survival. These gender lines are drawn early in the play and offer a compelling picture of sexual politics at mid-century, as well as the particular pathology of a woman trapped by truths so intolerable that the only way she can deny them is by distorting her personality. How much this denial rises to the conscious surface – and how to reveal that – is the problem every actress playing Kate must solve.

Kate cannot sleep – we hear of her late nights in the back yard and the kitchen – and is, as well, tormented by disturbing dreams when she does sleep; she has headaches, which we, unlike the family, understand to be symptoms of her repressed knowledge, both of Larry's death and Joe's guilt. If she admits to herself that Larry is not coming home, that he is dead, she must also admit to herself that her husband bears some responsibility for that death. Further, if she admits her husband's guilt, she must admit her own complicity – both in keeping silent when Steve went to prison and in enjoying the material benefits of her husband's ill-gotten prosperity. Neither Chris nor Joe do anything more than merely worry about her symptoms which seems to be further indication of their own repressed knowledge and guilt. Despite looking like a 'normal' family, the Kellers are deeply troubled, a family who only seems to be 'functional'. By the end of the play, Kate's wifely loyalty shifts to maternal loyalty: no longer able to protect her husband, she must now protect her son by forgiving him: 'Don't dear. Don't take this on yourself. Forget now. Live' (91). Her sobbing is the play's final sound.

Ann Deever

Ann is introduced to us by Miller in a puzzling way: 'Ann is twenty-six, gentle but despite herself capable of holding fast to what she knows.' The implication seems to be that this wholesome, lovely woman – it is clear from everyone's reactions to seeing her again that she has grown into a beauty – is also self-assured and determined. She understands Kate's power over Chris and, with startling clarity, attempts to strike a quid pro quo deal: 'You made Chris feel guilty with me. Whether you wanted to or not, you've crippled him in front of me. I'd like you to tell him that Larry is dead and that you know it. You understand me? I'm not going out of here alone. There's no life for me that way. I want you to set him free. And then I promise you, everything will end, and we'll go away, and that's all' (84). Kate refuses Ann's terms, forcing Ann to produce Larry's suicide letter. Ann's insistence on their all knowing the truth is more for her own benefit than for any higher morality: she wants Chris for her husband and she wants him free of his mother's psychological oppression. Sue Bayliss says that Ann is 'the female version of [Chris]' (49), though her motivation is purely self-interest; it could, however, be argued that everyone in the play is similarly motivated.

When Kate reads the letter, saying, over and over, 'Oh, my God . . .', Ann's reply ('Kate, please, please . . .') is said, Miller's directions tell us, 'with pity and fear'. These emotions suggest the classic Aristotelian definition of tragedy. If Joe is the tragic figure whose death comes as a result of wisdom gained too late, then Ann's tragic emotions mirror ours; the girl next door, who is both insider and outsider, is our surrogate. Once she insists that Chris read the letter – she 'thrusts' it into his hand – she has fulfilled her dramatic role and is silent for the last intense moments of the play which belong exclusively to the family.

George Deever

George Deever is an interesting character, although the role

seems minor. George is Chris's Laertes: the foil to the complex hero, the son whose relation to his father throws the play's central father/son relationship into high relief. (Note, too, that Laertes' father, Polonius, is pivotal in *Hamlet*'s plot just as Steve is pivotal to *All My Sons* in that Polonius is seen to be weak and easily misled.) George's arrival is anxiously discussed before he finally appears; we have been keenly aware of his presence 'in the car', i.e. offstage, as the struggle about his surprising visit continues on stage. When he ultimately enters, Miller provides this information: 'George is Chris's age, but a paler man, now on the edge of his self-restraint. He speaks quietly, as though afraid to find himself screaming' (55). Like Chris, George is a veteran; unlike Chris, he was seriously wounded – enough to spend a long time in hospital, and long enough to have been studying law while recuperating. 'When I was studying in the hospital it seemed sensible, but outside there didn't seem to be much of a law. The trees got thick, didn't they?' (59). Although that last sentence seems to be merely a quick and nervous shift in subject, it is, in fact, causal: the trees have indeed grown, enclosing the backyard, shielding the family from the outside world. When Kate first sees him she greets him with 'Georgie, Georgie' and with sad sympathy takes his face in her hands and says, 'They made an old man out of you [. . .] He looks like a ghost' (63). Significantly, she reminds him that when he was drafted into the military she told him, 'don't try for medals'. She insists that 'You're all alike', implying that, like Chris (and by extension Larry), George was too self-sacrificial. 'Relishing her solicitude', he succumbs to her pity and maternal concern, demonstrating once again the way the Kellers' charm has always worked.

Although we understand that brother and sister shared a view about their father's guilt, we learn, as Ann does, that something has radically changed George's attitude; their joint rejection of him – not a word, not a visit, not a Christmas card – George now sees as a 'terrible thing. We can never be forgiven' (59). That 'terrible thing' was not only to have abandoned him to prison, but also to have abandoned him as family, accepting, without question, the

public view of the crime. When Chris wonders, 'The court record was good enough for you all these years, why isn't it good now? Why did you believe it all these years?', George's powerful reply, often oddly buried in the scene's commotion, is, 'Because you believed it . . . That's the truth, Chris. I believed everything, because I thought you did' (61). Thus, Chris's denial of the buried truth has caused even larger collateral damage. This also indicates the truth of what Sue Bayliss points out to Ann: Chris's charismatic idealism is dangerously persuasive.

We learn how determined Ann has been to marry Chris; not only had she told George she was going to marry Chris before Chris's proposal, even before the visit, before their first kiss, but George then felt obliged to break the years' silence and visit his father for the first time to tell him the news. Trying to imagine the motivation, there seem to have been equal parts of love and spite in his decision, just as there are in his decision to come and prevent Ann marrying Chris: he arrives demanding she collect her things and leave with him, that 'she's one item he's not going to grab. [. . .] Everything they have is covered with blood' (61).

The grim and desperate mood is broken by the arrival of Lydia with a hat she has made for Kate, whose lack of tact and sensitivity in the ensuing scene is a gauge of her crassness and her self-protectiveness: nowhere else in the play does she show how much like Joe she is. Lydia was 'Laughy' in the old days and she is repeatedly embarrassed by Kate's insistence that George should have married her; her three babies and her husband Frank having escaped the war, as well as her new womanly beauty, all make George understandably envious. Kate relentlessly pursues this theme, harping on George's seriousness with remarks like: 'Don't be so intelligent', and 'While you were getting mad about Fascism Frank was getting into her bed' (67). Despite what may well seem like Kate's cruel mockery, George succumbs to Kate's charm again, '(*laughing*). She's wonderful' (67). Part of what is so painful in this scene is the way it reveals George's nostalgia, his need for both maternal solicitude (we never learn what his relationship is with his

own mother) and the ease of the past when he lived next door. Nostalgia, the longing to go back to an unrecoverable past, is an inevitable theme in a post-war play, and George embodies that theme. While Chris and Ann look forwards to a future, George, stuck in an intolerable present, looks back to a happier, more innocent past. His heartbreaking remark 'I never felt at home anywhere but here' (71) is emblematic of the hopelessness of nostalgia and the sense of alienation and anomie that marks post-war America.

Joe's approach to containing the danger George represents is to browbeat him with the past, pointing up example after example of his father's weakness. His most revealing accusation 'There are certain men in the world who rather see everybody hung before they'll take the blame' is, ironically, a self-accusation. When he accidentally reveals the lie of his 'flu' on the day of the fateful decision at the plant, George, Miller's stage directions tell us, '*stands perfectly still*' (72). The ensuing suspicion is apparently lost in Frank's arrival with Larry's horoscope, then in the cab's honking, waiting to take George to the train station. Chris and Ann seem on the verge of a showdown; George says to his sister, 'He simply told your father to kill pilots, and covered himself in bed!' Chris threateningly says, 'You'd better answer him, Annie. Answer him' (74), but this climax, too, is undermined by Kate's declaration that she has packed Ann's bag, trying to evict her from their lives. But Chris rises to Ann's defence, indignant at his mother's highhanded interference, and the moment is subsumed: 'Now get out of here, George!' George tries to pursue Ann's confrontation of the truth, and we hear their voices arguing offstage as George leaves. Unlike the main characters, George is the only one whose life is unresolved; he is, perhaps, the most modern of the play's characters: damaged, guilt-ridden, rendered aimless by his existential crisis, and exiled to a life bereft of family, friends, and meaning.

The neighbours

The Baylisses and the Lubeys serve to create a sense of neighbourhood, living as they do on either side of the Kellers' house; they also provide a spectrum of personality types, serving as foils both to each other and to the central characters. Early in Act One Frank tells Jim, 'The trouble with you is, you don't *believe* in anything', and Jim replies, 'And your trouble is that you believe in *anything*' (6). Not only do they represent distant ends of the philosophic spectrum, from optimism and credulity to pessimism and cynicism, but Frank Lubey's interest in astrology is set against Jim's medical science, which has in itself deteriorated to, as he sees it, the hand-holding of hypochondriacs.

The two couples, along with the Kellers, provide a portrait of the institution of suburban, mid-twentieth-century marriage: while Frank seems to be cheerfully married to a good-natured woman, Jim is grimly married to a sniping, unhappy woman. It's worth noting that Jim and Sue Bayliss are older than Frank and Lydia, perhaps implying that their disillusionment is yet to come. Although Kate had once thought Lydia would be George's wife, he replies, 'sadly' and with obvious regret, 'she used to laugh too much' (67) – and clearly she still does. The Lubeys' little tiff about repairing a toaster is entirely pleasant, while the Kellers' little tiff about Joe's throwing out the potatoes elicits a more biting response from Kate; and the Baylisses' about the patient on the telephone is distinctly mean-spirited.

Frank is seen as an affable, puppy-ish man, likable, but not respected or admired. His happy life may be due to his innocence as well as to good luck: he beat the draft (as a result of the year in which he was born: no wonder he is addicted to astrology), escaped the war, and got the girl. That girl, Lydia, now the mother of three children, is a 'robust, laughing girl of twenty-seven' who knew George and Ann when they were all young together. Lydia, like Ann, is literally 'the girl next door', wholesome and easily amused.

Jim's wife Sue, is a former nurse; as Joe tells her, 'You

were a nurse too long, Susie. You're too . . . too . . . realistic' (8). Sue seems both disappointed and resentful, not only of her husband's attitudes but at having lost her youth and looks; when Joe tells her that Ann has arrived and that 'she's a knockout', Sue replies sardonically, 'I should've been a man. People are always introducing me to beautiful women' (9).

Jim is the one of the four neighbours Miller is most interested in: he has the largest role and, not insignificantly, the bleakest outlook on life. No longer willing to participate in his family (maintaining it is too hot to drive to the beach, despite his having just driven to the station to pick up George), he resents the compromise marriage requires; no longer the idealistic researcher, he is now embittered and resigned to supporting them by doing medicine of the most pedestrian kind. His resignation gives his character the most depth and intensity; as he tells Kate, 'I live in the usual darkness; I can't find myself; it's even hard sometimes to remember the kind of man I wanted to be' (80), which gives him a profound and tragic modernity. Jim's cynicism would be summed up years later by the American comedian George Carlin who said, 'It's called the American dream 'cause you have to be asleep to believe it.' He also said, 'Inside every cynical person, there is a disappointed idealist', a perfect description of Jim.

Structure

As the legendary director and critic Harold Clurman shouted out after sitting through a rehearsal of *All My Sons*' first production, 'Goddamit, this play is *built*!' The architecture of a play, its structure, is what shapes the plot, links scene to scene, works towards (or refuses to, as is the case with some modern/contemporary plays) a decisive, climactic event. *All My Sons* is Miller's most conventional play structurally, and, like his early plays which immediately followed it, *Death of a Salesman, The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge,* it raises the controversial question of the possibility

of a modern tragedy. In his 1949 essay 'Tragedy and the Common Man' (*Theatre Essays*), he argues against the Aristotelian assumption that tragedy befalls only the great; Miller wrote: 'I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were…I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity…Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.'

As regards *All My Sons,* these remarks raise the question: is Joe a tragic hero? This can, perhaps, be answered in Miller's own terms since the essay goes on to argue that, 'Tragedy enlightens – and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies.' That last sentence could function as a summary of *All My Sons.* Tragic dramatic structure always begins in order and disintegrates into chaos, while the comic dramatic structure begins in chaos and moves towards order, an order which acknowledges the possibility of a stable future (thus comedies often end in weddings). 'Too late' is the classic tragic lesson, and like classical tragedy, Miller's protagonist discovers what he needs to discover too late to rectify his moral error. The analysis becomes more complex if we consider that Chris – hiding from the truth of what he has known all along – is the tragic figure, rather than Joe whose error is an act of will, an incorrect moral choice. Modern thought is steeped in both psychology and sociology, and both tend to diminish the stature of the individual who, for reasons of nature or nurture, could not help doing what he did. Because Miller optimistically believes that human beings can be better than they are, he believes that life can be remediated; this is fighting drama, like Ibsen's, lacking the bleak finality of Lear's definitive 'Never, never, never, never, never.'

To trace the structure of the play, we watch the peace of Act One dented by intimations of trouble: the fallen tree,

Kate 'getting just like after [Larry] died', the arrival of Ann, 'Larry's girl' as Kate sees her, *must* see her. Each family scene threatens to – or actually does – turn ugly until a neighbour arrives to lighten the mood; this is a pattern established throughout the play. There are expository speeches built naturally into the dialogue – Ann explains why she isn't married, Chris describes his experience in the war and its effect on him, and, just when Chris and Ann declare their love and kiss, George telephones to say, mysteriously, that he will be arriving shortly, creating suspense to carry us through the first intermission.

Act Two postpones George's arrival while Joe attempts to assert his authority, his seeming generosity to Steve, and thus enlist Ann as an ally; Chris's anger at Joe's willingness to forgive Steve (entirely self-serving, but in ways we do not know about yet), demolishes the conciliatory atmosphere. Enter George, with 'blood in his eye', and once again the action alternates between anger and affection, as it does over and over again. When the showdown between Chris and George nearly reaches its climax, Lydia arrives from next door with the hat she has made for Kate, defusing the tension again. The pivot of the plot appears so inconspicuously that we barely register it as the staggering revelation it is; George is yielding to the nostalgic tug of the place when he says, 'I never felt at home anywhere but here [. . .] Kate, you look so young [. . .] You too, Joe, you're amazingly the same. The whole atmosphere is.' Joe fatefully replies, 'Say, I ain't got time to get sick', and Kate makes a dreadful misstep: 'He hasn't been laid up in fifteen years . . .', to which Joe quickly replies 'Except my flu during the war' (71). This is the inadvertent disclosure that will bring the whole false structure of their lives crashing down. This time Frank's bumptious entrance with Larry's horoscope only fuels the flame, and the passionate, heartbreaking confrontation between Joe and Chris ends Act Two as Chris storms off. Act Three brings its own startling revelations: Chris returns, Ann reveals Larry's suicide letter, and Joe accepts his guilt. The structure of the conclusion of the play is based entirely on exits.

In his Introduction to the Methuen Drama volume *Plays: One,* Miller notes that in his first produced play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, he had tried to write a sense of the 'amazing': 'I had tried to grasp wonder, I had tried to make it on the stage, by writing wonder' (15). After the failure of this first venture, Miller returned to that master of wonder, Dostoevsky, discovering the effectiveness of the Russian novelist's structure: 'the precise collision of inner themes during, not before or after, the high dramatic scenes'. Miller turns then to Beethoven and discovers another crucial lesson in structure: 'the holding back of climax until it was ready, the grasp of the rising line and the unwillingness to divert to an easy climax until the true one was ready. If there is one word to name the mood I felt it was *Forego*. Let nothing interfere with the shape, the direction, the intention' (16).

Acknowledging 'the shadow of Ibsen', Miller points out that 'as in Ibsen's best-known work, a great amount of time is taken up with bringing the past into the present' (20). Although he acknowledges that this kind of structuring may be out of fashion, he writes that '*All My Sons* takes its time with the past, not in deference to Ibsen's method as I saw it then, but because its theme is a question of actions and consequences, and a way had to be found to throw a long line into the past in order to make that kind of connection viable' (20). When Kate tells Ann why she's certain Larry is still alive, she says – finding the only way she can to deny a truth that is too terrible to admit – 'Because certain things have to be, and certain things can never be. Like the sun has to rise, it has to be. That's why there's God. Otherwise anything could happen. But there's God, so certain things can never happen' (29). The point, of course, is that here randomness would be a comfort: Larry's death is not meaningless but meaningful, the iron-clad logic of cause and effect; here the cause – Joe's immoral act – has created this terrible effect – Larry's suicide and the deaths of twenty-one other young men.

Finally, the structure of the play rests on Miller's vision as he expressed in *Timebends*: 'Whenever the hand of the distant past reaches out of its grave, it is always somehow

absurd as well as amazing, and we tend to resist belief in it, for it seems rather magically to reveal some unreadable hidden order behind the amoral chaos of events as we rationally perceive them. But that emergence, of course, is the point of *All My Sons* – that there are times when things do indeed cohere' (135). Thus, the hints and clues about who knows what need to be fully available to us without revealing too much too soon; it is not simply a matter of our suspense, but of the characters' suspense: the connections are not merely 'between the present and the past, between events and moral consequences, [but also] between the manifest and the hidden' (*Timebends* 24).

Productions

A few key productions

1947 *All My Sons* opens on Broadway, directed by Elia Kazan
1976 Production in Jerusalem directed by Hy Kalus, starring two of Israel's leading actors, Hanna Marron as Kate and Yossi Yadin as Joe. Miller attends (in 1977) with both the President and Prime Minister of Israel, where the play has a record-breaking run.
1981 West End production in London, directed by Michael Blakemore.
2000 Production at the National Theatre, London, directed by Howard Davies (four Olivier Awards).
2002 Production at the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, directed by Joe Dowling.
2008 Revival on Broadway, directed by Simon McBurrey.

Screen adaptations

1948 Universal Studios, directed by Irving Reis.
1986 American Playhouse (television), directed by Jack O'Brien.

Productions are, necessarily, interpretations of a script. The director makes choices and decisions, the actors make

choices and decisions, as do the designers of the lighting, sound, and costumes. When reading a play, the reader makes all those choices, consciously or not, as we see the play happen in our mind's eye. It is crucial to read all the stage and set directions, and not to skip the italicised portions of the script eager to get on with the story.

Actors, directors, and other playwrights have much to say about Miller: for example, Patrick Stewart, the powerful British actor (who will, to some degree, always be Captain Jean-Luc Picard of *StarTrek*) said during an interview while starring in Miller's late play *The Ride Down Mount Morgan:*

> He [Miller] likes actors. Not all playwrights do, which may be surprising. But Arthur does and when I began to realize that, it's very relaxing. On numerous occasions, he said to me [sudden shift to American accent], 'I don't know how you do it! I sit there and I watch and I don't know how you do it!' [Switch back to own voice and accent] Well, that's so *charming*. [Switch back to American accent] 'I couldn't do it, it would kill me!' He likes actors, he knows that a play is not complete until it's been given flesh and blood and sometimes that flesh and blood requires that there's input from the actors and the director. (*Arthur Miller's America*, 178)

Rosemary Harris played Kate in *All My Sons*, in the 1981 production in London; it ran for a remarkable nine months at Wyndham's Theatre. She recalls:

> One of the fascinating aspects of playing Kate is the question of how much she really knows or suspects. It is a very thin line. The hope of Larry's return has to be kept alive at all costs and some of the profoundest feelings I've felt on a stage I felt during Ann's reading of Larry's suicide letter. It's hard to describe: a complete and utter emptiness engulfed by grief. I was always awfully jolly after the curtain came down but I used to wake up in the morning with a curious sense of heaviness and sorrow. After all, 'my husband' and 'my son' had killed themselves the night before. Playing Kate has been one of the joys of my theatrical life . . . I am grateful to Arthur for that character and all the people of his imagination. And I retain more than memories. All these years later I still have the costumes from that play. (*Arthur Miller and Company*, 50–1).

Making this admiration mutual, Miller told the critic Mel Gussow:

> Nobody like Rosemary Harris had ever played that part, except once, in, of all places, Jerusalem . . . She was fantastically *there*. Rosemary and Blakemore [Michael Blakemore, the production's director] didn't assume at all that the basic thing was a father and son play [. . .] with Rosemary Harris, it wasn't simply narrowed down to the conflict. She created an ambience there that you could cut with a knife. It was quite wonderful. (*Conversations with Arthur Miller*, 100–1)

The original Broadway production in 1947 won two Tony Awards: Arthur Miller for Author of Best Play and Elia Kazan for Best Direction, as well as the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award (winning over Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*). Brooks Atkinson, the powerful *New York Times* critic, wrote that Miller

> brings something fresh and exciting . . . Told against a single setting of an American backyard, it is a pitiless analysis of character that gathers momentum all evening and concludes with both logic and dramatic impact. Beth Merrill as the neurotic and tired mother gives us the impression of an inner strength that dominates at least one corner of the crisis. As Joe Keller, Ed Begley dramatizes the whole course of the father's poignant ordeal without losing the basic coarseness of the character. As the son, Arthur Kennedy is giving a superb performance with great power . . . [Miller is] a playwright who knows his craft and has unusual understanding of the tangled loyalties of human beings. (30 January 1947)

Miller felt that it was Atkinson's 'campaign for *All My Sons* that was responsible for its long run and my recognition as a playwright' (*Timebends*, 138).

The British production in 2000 won four Olivier Awards: Howard Davies for Best Director, William Dudley for Best Set Design, Ben Daniels for Best Supporting Actor and Julie Walters for Best Actress. In the *Independent* David Benedict wrote:

> The overwhelming passions of Julie Walters, James Hazeldine and Ben Daniels are shockingly convincing . . . At root this is a 'what did you do in the war daddy?' drama in which retribution

> comes to call . . . All the five main characters fill the theatre with tension as if holding five sticks of lit dynamite. (8 July 2000)

In the *Evening Standard* Patrick Marmion wrote:

> It is an intense, immaculately conceived production packed with compelling performances . . . Miller's writing is packed with wit and wisdom and follows an Ibsenite dramatic procedure of stripping away layers to reveal previously dormant, now deepening conflicts. Not only does Howard Davies create a vivid sense of this particular family's life, he also creates a subliminal sense of the whole community, illustrating the warring themes of responsibility and self-interest. William Dudley's design, meanwhile, creates an environment best described as wrap-around theatre. He lays a real grass lawn, canopied with a curtain of weeping willow. To this he adds naturalistic sounds and smells emanating from all around the theatre. But with the stage perfectly set it is the acting that blows you away. (7 July 2000)

In production, the design decisions most obvious and influential to the audience are those affecting the set. The audience can 'read a set', which is to say that the set tells you what the play is about. The great American playwright Edward Albee, talking about sets, observed 'It is impossible NOT to have a set – even the total absence of a set is a set. The only requirement is that the set be right for the production – there are many possibilities for a play, as long as the designer understands the play. I'm very leery of a set that wants to tell you what the play is about – a set is a container' (Toby Zinman, *Edward Albee*, University of Michigan Press, 2008, 3–4). Miller's set directions, on the other hand, describe the Kellers' back yard in minute detail, even down to the presumed real-estate value. Miller specifies an apple tree, although a cherry tree must have been tempting. (American apocrypha: George Washington, America's first president, chopped down a cherry tree when he was a boy. When confronted by his father, he said, 'I cannot tell a lie. I did it.') The apple tree also has its source in Miller's life: after the stock market crash of 1929 in which his father lost a great deal of money, the family moved to Brooklyn, New York, and in the new back yard, Miller, then

a teenager, planted an apple tree and a pear tree; the apple tree was later knocked down in a storm. But an apple tree has unavoidable biblical associations, suggesting that the Kellers' suburban back yard is Eden, and the choice of an apple tree thus tells us what the play will be about: the loss of innocence, the acceptance of the knowledge of good and evil and thus of moral responsibility; and, further, that this pre-lapsarian world is doomed. But this is a faux Edenic world: the Kellers' fall into error happened years before the play begins, and it only remains for the denials, ignorings, and self-protective delusions to be stripped away.

Everyone *in* the play reads the apple tree as a symbol, too: for Kate the storm's wreckage signifies that it was too early to memorialise Larry's death, that it's a sign he's still alive. When she says at the start of Act Two, 'You notice there's more light with that thing gone?', we feel that she means one literal thing, while Miller means another, metaphoric, thing. When George asks about the apple-tree stump and Chris tells him, 'We had it there for Larry', George replies, 'Why, afraid you'll forget him?' It's worth noting at this point that *Timebends* ends with Miller's evocative declaration: 'the truth, the first truth, probably, is that we are all connected, watching one another. Even the trees.' Miller's 'secluded atmosphere' is created by 'closely planted poplars', trees that, we will learn, have grown taller and denser over the years, and thus symbolically as well literally seclude the back yard even more. Seclusion, of course, keeps in, imprisoning, as well as keeping out, protecting and isolating.

Historically, Miller's directions for this play invited the most realistic of sets, but almost always the realism is laced with symbolism. The original set was designed by Mordecai Gorelik for the 1947 Broadway premiere; Gorelik organised his sets, as Miller explains in *Timebends,* 'around a metaphoric statement condensing the central image of the play'. He had designed a back yard with a bump, and Miller worried the actors would fall over it. 'What's the point of it, Max – a rise like that in the middle of the stage?' The reply was, 'You have written a graveyard play and not some factual report. The play is taking place in a cemetery where their son is

buried, and he is also their buried conscience reaching up to them out of the earth. Even if it inconveniences them [the actors] it will keep reminding them what the hell all this acting is really *about*. The bump stays!' (275).

Looking at photographs of a dozen productions reveals that they are all remarkably and interestingly similar: the same back yard, the same wooden lawn furniture, the same fretworked gazebo. There have been productions where the back yard was picket-fenced, as though to signify the bars of a prison, picking up Joe's ongoing game with the neighbourhood boys who believe there's a jail in the house, as well as implying the real prison Steve is in and Joe should be in. The possibilities for easy symbolism are all remarkably similar.

John Lee Beatty, the pre-eminent set designer, acknowledged that his inspiration for the 2002 Guthrie production in Minneapolis was the Grant Wood painting *American Gothic*; what he hoped to achieve was an 'ironic twist', wanting it to seem 'attractive and yet, oddly, a little bit off, not quite realistic'. Beatty noted that 'underlying that painting and through his other work, [Wood] explores solid philosophical and aesthetic backgrounds having to do with American identity. His idyllic images of America are rendered through a potently ironic perspective.' In his comments to his actors and staff early in the rehearsal process, Beatty quoted Miller saying that 'nothing should interfere with its artifice'. His interpretation aimed to avoid the 'nostalgically naturalistic'.

The American playwright John Guare recalls an uproarious lunch with Miller:

> I told Arthur how my feelings about him as a writer had changed. I had at one time thought him the enemy, consigned to the poetry-free pits of naturalism Hell. Not until I saw *The American Clock* did I realise how shot through to its very bones the play was with surrealistic imagery and that this surrealism was indeed responsible for that which was most powerful about the play. I subsequently saw a conventional revival of *All My Sons*. I closed my eyes and simply listened to the play's madness and realized one day some visionary director will find

> a way to liberate Arthur's plays from their cage of traditional psychological realism. (*Arthur Miller and Company*, 223)

Simon McBurney would be that director. His production opened on Broadway in 2008. He was the least likely director for this American classic, being both British and wildly experimental (he is the artistic director of the anti-realist company Complicite). McBurney was asked by Rebecca Miller, Arthur Miller's daughter, to direct *All My Sons*, and he remembers Arthur Miller telling him in 2001, 'In America I've always felt that people have either tried to honor it [the play] too much to the letter or there has been this heavy hand of naturalism on it, and nothing has been taken to the hilt.' As a *New York Times* interview noted, there is no better guide to the hilt than McBurney who said that rather than adding to the play, he wanted to strip it down, which turned out to mean removing the written set directions. In Tom Pye's set design there were no wings where actors could hide in order to preserve the realistic illusion on stage, no poplar trees, and not even a house: the upstage wall was an immense weathered wood construction, dwarfing the actors, with one small window set eerily far above the normal height of an upstairs room.

The production made other intrusions on the naturalistic perspective: Keller (played by John Lithgow) enters the stage carrying the playbook from which he reads the opening stage directions; a free-standing screen door signified entering and leaving the house; a pay-phone was stuck on to the proscenium arch; and huge cinematic projections punctuated the action with memories and highlighted historical context. The result was not a back yard, but a stage.

McBurney began the play earlier than Miller does: the tree is still standing, the storm occurs, Kate comes out in her robe, reaching up to the heavens, and the tree is knocked over. At the National Theatre in London in 2000, Howard Davies's directorial choice began the play with Kate watching the lightning strike the apple tree. McBurney, like Miller, but unlike Davies, does not seem to want to shift the burden of responsibility to the cosmos; his inclination is, like Miller's, far more on the human, the psychological, and the ethical.

Dismantling the furniture of realism yielded surprising meaning, making this play both more interesting – which is to say less moralistic – and more clearly and persuasively connected to the vision and the style of Miller's late plays: *The Ride Down Mount Morgan, Resurrection Blues,* and *Mr Peters' Connections*. This is a valuable kind of rereading, starting from the end and looking backwards. *All My Sons* battles through the human tug-of-war between destiny and free will – the human question inherent in the myth of Eden, and thus fundamental to Western culture – and this production emphasised that battle. And as the Edenic drama in Genesis shows us, the hardest thing for human beings is to take responsibility for our actions. The Judeo-Christian implications of *All My Sons* are immense, but if we read this production set, we feel what McBurney, interpreting Miller, wanted us to feel. McBurney said that: 'Miller is creating a modern American tragedy here . . . it's attempting to find the explosive animal questions of humanity in the play, which of course are the questions at the heart of Greek drama' (*American Theatre,* December 2008, pp. 88–9). A case made, in this instance, partly by the set design.

Rebecca Miller said of the McBurney production: 'the raw power of the play has never been unleashed in this way . . . It is the purest manifestation of the play I can imagine. I hope this will open the door to more extraordinary, unexpected productions of Miller plays' (*American Theatre*, December 2008).

The films

The first film version makes every Hollywood mistake in adapting a successful play to the screen. Directed by Irving Reis in 1948 and rewritten by the producer, Chester Erskine, the film 'opens up' the play to many settings; we go inside the house, out to dinner at the shore restaurant, to the Keller factory, to the prison to hear Steve's actual version of the fateful day (his name is changed to Herb), and on a romantic, moonlit drive. This undermines the effect of imprisonment of the play's single set and the significance of

the hedged-in back yard. Further, almost all the ambiguities of character stemming from denial have been erased, and the motivations, by being flattened out, make much less sense, all, apparently, in the interests of making the moral lesson overly explicit. For example: Chris tells Joe, 'If it turned out you weren't telling the truth, I'd kill you', which is a far different and less persuasive foreshadowing of the conclusion than Joe's line in the play, 'I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head.'

Edward G. Robinson's Joe is grim and self-important; he is particularly unlikable at the poker game, where he treats people like lackeys, wins everyone's money and gloats, although this behaviour seems to win everyone's admiration, including Chris's. The film's old-fashioned mores startle, especially Joe kissing Ann on the lips. Burt Lancaster as Chris is earnest throughout, never suspicious, always eager to please his parents; his face registers little emotion. All the war stories and the resentment he feels about post-war America have been erased from the screenplay. Like Chris, Ann seems to lack a vivid personality, providing only for the requirements of the plot.

Kate was Mady Christians' last film performance, and her Austrian accent and Germanic hairdo lend the role an unsettling old-time movie-villain quality. We see her eavesdrop (accompanied by spooky music) on Ann's phone conversation with George (Howard Duff), and her affection seems too blatantly predatory and cloying. The Baylisses have been transformed into a high-spirited, sexy couple.

The 1986 made-for-television film is, on the other hand, faithful to Miller's script. Under Jack O'Brien's strong direction, the actors find every nuance within a vivid naturalistic style. Filmed in unobtrusive colour, acknowledging the breaks between acts, this production is passionate and deeply moving. Aiden Quinn (as Chris), James Whitmore (as Joe), Michael Learned (as Kate), Joan Allen (as Ann), and Zeljko Ivanek (as George) all turn in impressive performances.