

entertainment/arts

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Otterbein's 'Sons' suffers from young cast

By Dennis Thompson
SNP Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre gives an old play to a young cast that is not quite ready for it.

All My Sons was Arthur Miller's first successful play.

It won the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award as best play of 1947, two years before *Death of a Salesman* firmly entrenched Miller in the annals of the American Theatre.

Sons tells the story of Joe Keller, owner of a factory which sold defective airplane parts to the army during the war.

Twenty-one pilots were killed and his partner went to prison.

THE PLAY revolves around the aftermath of that event and its effect on the two families.

Miller shows even with this early work he knew how to set up a story.

He builds it tier by tier, slowly revealing plot and character information until we are tightly wound in the web of intrigue.

What slows the play is Miller's tendency toward ponderous monologues in moments of crisis.

It is at these moments when his characters seem to step out of realism and sound like a playwright's vision of angst.

Regular attendance of Otterbein productions will see in this production the pass-



ing of the torch.

Many in the cast are making their first mainstage production in an Otterbein production.

While this is the natural order of college theater, their inexperience shows.

At times it seems we are viewing a collection of scenes from an acting class. For every moment of power, and there are many, there are awkward moments because of the limited stage background.

OFTEN ACTORS appear to be talking at, rather than listening to, each other.

Many seem primarily concerned with being ready to deliver their next line.

Much of the movement has not evolved from the early rehearsal mechanics of "move on this line and sit on that one."

Still, there are some stellar performances.

Ron Thomas is superb as Joe Keller. He has the slow, easy assurance of age and authority.

His soft, low key manner masks the calculations he has made in life.

Thomas creates a total, complex character. He stays true to Keller's essential nature and avoids an actor's

temptation to seek out moments to "emote." His is a measured and vital performance.

Tirzah Wise shines as Ann Deever, whose character must grapple with a variety of emotions.

She has maintained ties with the Keller family even though it was her father who was sent to prison instead of Joe.

Having loved the Keller's son, Larry, who was lost in the war, she now returns to marry his brother, Chris.

Wise handles these incongruities with vibrancy and a warm vulnerability. She is both sensible and sensitive.

AS ANN'S brother, George, Jonathan Hagmaier puts much effort into his indignation, but it appears in fits and starts.

He is most successful in

his subdued moments of confusion as he grapples to reconcile his new found hatred with his genuine affection for the Kellers.

Jason Morrisette contributes a strong turn as Jim Bayliss, the neighbor doctor who is weary of watching his dreams fade away.

Julia Averill is inconsistent in the pivotal role of Kate Keller. She has strong moments of quiet poignancy, but also fading moments when she is just quiet.

Brian Fox never quite captures the equally pivotal role of Chris Keller. He rants when he has to, but it is all vocal. We don't completely buy into his struggle.

We are told of many strong characteristics of Chris that are not seen in Fox's stiff performance. Again, it's a matter of inexperience rather than lack of talent.

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• 'SONS'

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perience rather than lack of talent.

The rest of the cast struggles as well, but the stage is where young actors must ultimately learn. Otterbein draws a patient audience and they are rewarded with a story that draws them in despite the rough edges.

Otterbein College Theatre's *All My Sons* continues through Sunday at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., in Westerville. Performances are Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$9 for Friday and Saturday, \$7.50 for Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday. For more information call, 898-1109.

Otterbein revival of 1947 'Sons' sparkles with intensity, clarity

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

All My Sons, set in 1947, opened in 1947 on Broadway. Today, Arthur Miller's powerful postwar drama is more of a period piece. The immediacy that initial audiences felt is gone.

Yet Miller's first award-winning play, which opened last night at Otterbein College, packs a timeless punch.

Sons focuses on a family haunted by moral evasions. Joe Keller's factory produced faulty parts that led to the deaths of 21 fighter pilots during World War II. Joe denied his guilt, while an employee went to jail.

His wife, Kate, denies another painful truth: that their son, declared missing in action three years ago in the Pacific, is dead.

Even in our post-Cold War era, *Sons* squarely addresses vital themes: honesty, responsibility, pride, guilt and shame.

Otterbein's superior revival paints Miller's unflinching portrait with quiet intensity and clarity.

Poignantly presented, here are the issues that would be dramatized even more powerfully in Miller's later masterpieces: *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *The Price*.

Director Dennis Romer keeps the tone low-key in the expository first act. All the better to build a stronger dramatic arc in the confrontational second act and shorter,

THEATER REVIEW

All My Sons, Otterbein College's student revival of Arthur Miller's drama. Directed by Dennis Romer.

Joe Keller.....Ron Thomas
Kate Keller.....Julia Averill
Chris Keller.....Brian Fox
Ann Deever.....Tirzah Wise
George Deever...Jonathan Hagmaier
Superior student cast proves that Miller's 1947 drama is still powerful
Performances are at 8 tonight through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. Feb. 4-6 and 2 p.m. Feb. 7 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets: \$7.50 and \$9. Call 898-1109.

but equally powerful, third act.

Critics often fault college productions for casting students in middle-aged and older roles, but there's nothing wrong with the young portraying the old persuasively.

Only a little makeup ages their hair and faces, yet Ron Thomas' Joe Keller and Julia Averill's Kate Keller are fully believable as a middle-aged couple in crisis.

Best of all is Thomas, who invests tremendous authority in his understated, avuncular role. Thomas' slow-moving, compromised, middle-aged presence is the play's reliable center of gravity.

Averill's challenge is harder.

She must project strength, as the wife who struggles to protect her husband, and weakness, as a mother who hopes against hope that her eldest son is still alive. She meets the challenge.

Brian Fox glows with decency as Chris, the Kellers' idealistic son. His apple-cheeked innocence gives way to outrage, then cynicism when his worst suspicions are confirmed.

Tirzah Wise is remarkably transparent in the complex role of Ann Deever, the young woman torn between two families. She loved the Kellers' eldest son but now cares for Chris — despite the fact that Chris' father left her father to rot in jail.

As attorney George Deever, Ann's long-lost brother, Jonathan Hagmaier II needs to project more anguish and feverish intensity. His opening scene, in particular, seemed spacey last night. But Hagmaier does find the requisite anger about the scape-goating of his father.

Otterbein's fine production is enhanced by Katie Robbins' apt period costumes, Rob Johnson's sunset-filtered lighting and Rob Shaffer's small-town backyard set.

Although some cast members strain to reach the third act's dramatic level of confrontations and revelations, Otterbein's revival achieves its purpose of introducing a lesser-known work by a major playwright to wider audiences.

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JUN-20-92

ONSTAGE

Season's best needed no bells, whistles 89

Simple can be magical.

The simplest form of theater is a lone actor onstage. By using words, glances, gestures and a minimum of props and scenery, a single actor conjures living characters and complex worlds out of a willing audience's imagination.

It is the simplest theater that I remember best as I reflect on the local performances that defined the highs and lows of the 1992-93 season.

Stellar solos. Lynn Redgrave was spellbinding in *Shakespeare for My Father*, the season's best touring play. So were Brooks Almy in *Shirley Valentine* at Players Theatre Columbus and Lynne Wilde in *The Belle of Amherst* at New World Theatre.

Redgrave conceived, wrote, directed and performed her autobiographical play, now reaping plaudits on Broadway. Her enchantingly modest piece weaves crisply delivered excerpts from 19 Shakespearean roles and revealing flashbacks from her youth as an aspiring actress overshadowed by her famous British father's legacy.

Almy, in the season's best professional performance by an actress, charmed audiences in her juicy title role and as more than a dozen other amusing and convincing characters — male and female, young and old. Almy's lovable British housewife made *Shirley Valentine* one of the season's highlights.

Wilde's Emily Dickinson was the season's best performance by an actress in a semiprofessional production. Wilde's gentle *Belle* shed light on the translucent, ever-green soul within the New England poet.

Best actor: Allan Leatherman, a veteran Cleveland character actor, stood out as the wheedling, weak-willed grandfather in New World's superior *Buried Child*.

Runner-up: Ed Vaughan, horrifyingly amoral and creepily funny as the cane-wielding father in Contemporary American Theatre Company's challenging revival of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*.

Honorable mentions: Jim Zvanut's mannered but haunted Scrooge in New World's *A Christmas Carol* and T.J. Harler's conniving, demented Baron von Bluebeard in Reality Theatre's fun *Bluebeard*.

Best actor, musical: Mark Baker, a mesmerizing and macabre Emcee in Players' *Cabaret*.

Best supporting actress: A tie! Lynne Roth, a master of the



MICHAEL GROSSBERG

Best supporting actor: Tom Fortman, endearing and wistful as *Prelude's* mysterious Old Man.

Runner-up: Ron Thomas, a college student who gave a persuasive middle-aged aura to the morally compromised father in Otterbein's powerful revival of *All My Sons*.

Honorable mentions: Jonathan Putnam and Michael Harper, whose uncanny body language made their canine impersonations so slyly on-target in Putnam's impish *Dogs Do* at CATCO. And Steve Weiss, fierce and pathetic as *Buried Child's* crippled son, deserves an award for "best theater critic in an on-stage supporting role."

Best supporting actor, musical: Jackie Patterson, whose exuberance and gleeful tap-dancing enlivened Players' *Sophisticated Ladies*.

Runner-up: Jerry Chapa, a Columbus newcomer with a big voice and ample stage presence who made a splash with performances at Players (*Assassins*), Spotlight Dinner Theatre (*Some Enchanted Evening*, *Chicago*), Gallery Players (*Fiddler on the Roof*) and Villa Milano Dinner Theatre. When will somebody give this guy the lead?

Best supporting ...? Wesley Campbell Coleman's imperious, hilarious Lady Bracknell was almost unclassifiable, but that's what made it such a scream in Actors' Masterworks Series revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Coleman's persuasive impersonation

zingy punch line, showed off her mastery again as the quirky mother in CATCO's *Prelude to a Kiss*. And Gail Griffith was funny, cranky and soberingly real as the world-weary prostitute in Shadowbox Theatre's one-act, *Snowangel*.

Best supporting actor: Tom Fortman, endearing and wistful as *Prelude's* mysterious Old Man.



Brooks Almy
... a "Valentine" to remember

ranks as the season's most unusual casting choice. And it worked!

Saving graces. A good supporting performance can't save a play that doesn't succeed for other reasons, but it can offer refreshing relief.

Five examples: Harold Eisenstein's good humor as the Jewish neighbor in Gallery Players' *Cantorial*; Angela Barch's vivaciousness in Actors' *Doctor Faustus and Earnest*; Jim Azelvandre's lunacy as a divine messenger in Spotlight's *God's Favorite*; and Robert Pivetta's songwriter and Mark Passerello's buddy in Gallery's *Doubles*.

The best was Jonathan Beck Reed's zany scene-stealing in *Balancing Act*, Dan Goggins' banal musical at Players.

Best ensemble, play: Players' *Lips Together*, *Teeth Apart* wouldn't have been so wise and witty without Linda Cook's smarter-than-she-sounds chatterbox, Malachy Cleary's snotty but scared husband, Thomas Nahrwald's homophobic but human brother and Kimberly King's grief-singed painter.

An honorable mention, recommended by *Dispatch* critic Tim Feran, goes to the "almost uniformly excellent" student cast in the world premiere of Judi Ann Mason's race drama at Ohio State University.

Best ensemble, musical: Players' *Assassins* brought together the best of central Ohio's semiprofessional actors and nine fine Equity actors. Together, they more than met the demands of Stephen Sondheim's vaudeville-style serio-comedy about the American dream's dark shadow.

Runner-up: The rousing student ensemble of Otterbein College's *Big River*. Director John Stefano added nuances of tone and texture to the musical's picaresque sweep by encouraging the 28-member cast to play more than three dozen roles with sly humor and confidence.

Worst ensemble: The hammy actors in Mystery Cafe's gimmicky *Killing Mr. Withers*.

Michael Grossberg is *Dispatch* theater critic.



Wesley Campbell Coleman
... imperious impersonation