Back to Ray Luo's Reviews

All My Sons

A different type of thinking goes into understanding someone interpret another person rather than listening to the person herself. Lost amongst Chris's climactic speech to his father Joe in Ruskin Group theatre's production of Arthur Miller's "All My Sons" is how Joe took it to heart without telling anyone about it. After losing his innocence due to recent knowledge of how the family money was earned, the morally absolute Chris summarizes the world as "the land of the great big dogs" that "just happened to kill a few people this time." Joe's real psychology seeps through while disputing how to treat his henchman Steve, who is in jail for a crime Joe committed. Should he pity a man who knowingly shipped out parts that would crash an airplane: well "a father's a father." And a father would never kill his own children.

Edward Edwards' production of Miller's arguably best work shows the nuances of words unsaid, giving us a glimpse into the private lives of Miller's characters by providing subtle hints about how they interpret each other's speeches.

The play takes place in post-world-war-II Ohio, where arms manufacturer Joe Keller (Paul Linke) lives with family. Joe's son Larry disappeared during the war three years ago, and his mother Kate (Catherine Telford) is constantly thinking that he'll be back, despite everyone else in the neighborhood proclaiming his most likely death. People in the neighborhood, including the researcher-turned-clinician Jim Bayliss (Jonathan Levit) and his wife Sue (Shae Kennedy), also think that Joe was at fault for shipping out faulty cylinder heads to the US airforce during the war despite finding cracks in them during production. Joe's right-hand-man Steve Deever had found those cracks and had telephoned Joe, who claimed to have had pneumonia. When subsequently twenty-one planes came down because of those cracks, a trial on Keller and Deever led to the former's acquittal and the latter's prison time. Most people think that Joe saved his own skin and allowed his friend Steve to go to jail for him, except Joe's son Chris (Dominic Comperatore), a morally righteous man who lost his entire regiment during the war and came back to work for his dad Joe because he thinks Joe was not at fault.

The story begins with the arrival of Ann Deever (Austin Highsmith) from New York to Ohio to see the Kellers. She refused to see her father Steve in jail after the cylinder shell debacle, because she believes he was a little man who did not take responsibility. Her coming here is in an effort to see Chris again so they can get married, much to the chagrin of Kate, who thinks that she is Larry's girl and thus should wait for his return. Soon Ann's brother George (Maury Sterling) calls from Steve's prison near Columbus. George, a lawyer, wants to come take Ann away from a marriage to blood money. However, Kate and Joe's carrot-and-stick hospitality is so great (grape juice!), George ends up being converted to the Kellers until Kate's own slip of the mouth, for Joe has been sick before afterall, during the faulty parts fiasco. Chris is still glued to the innocence of this father, but soon, even that faith is called into question, and the group must also confront the meaning of a letter written by Larry himself to Ann before he disappeared.

Some funny stock characters abound in this production, including the role of Frank Lubey (Chad Wood), a materialist businessman who lucked out in not having to go to fight, and ended up marrying George's ex-sweetheart Lydia (Katie Parker). This pair makes a couple of canonical small town neighbors, with Lydia making her own clothes and giving birth to three babies. Bad-news-bringing Frank, meanwhile, dabble in

astrology, claiming that Larry could not have died, because he would have had to die on his favorable day. This brings a comment from Kate that “some superstitions are very nice,” hinting at a mutual understanding. The neighborhood kid Bert (Tucker Reilly) also look the part, ironically playing policeman with Joe, who has him arrest the other boys in town who use foul language. Finally, Dr. and Mrs. Bayliss confirm what we know about Keller’s neighbors. Jim used to study diseases in New Orleans before marrying, but now clinical medicine is keeping him busy, as he cannot “help humanity on a Warner Brothers salary.” He even tells Anne that when she marries she shouldn’t count her husband’s money. The Baylisses’ interactions with Anne shows us why she showed Kate Larry’s letter, although not much is said from her point-of-view. At one point, Sue tells Anne that when she marries, she should take Chris away, because he doesn’t want Chris’s idealism creeping into her husband’s mind, as he is considering going back to do research. Levit does the best job of the bunch in conveying the honest neighbor Jim. He is most memorable in a speech with Kate when Chris was away in which he confessed to have known all along about Joe.

Linke has a lot of fun with the bantering of Joe Keller, giving each joke an especially colloquial rendering. There's the comment about "the terrible concentration of the uneducated man," the "what is this, Labor Day?" comment catching seeing Chris kiss Ann (and next time, "what is this, Playland?"), the pronunciation of the word "brooch" as "broach," the calling himself "Joe McGuts" for returning to town with a letter of exoneration from court, the advice on technology "it's getting so the only dumb ones left are the bosses," the exclamation that "I wear the pants, but [Kate] beats me with the belt," and even the jolly singing of a song "come up and comb my Katie's hair." Yet some of his biggest moments are either self-rationalizations or down-right lies. There's the constant exclamation that his money is "good money," the attempts to recruit George and Steve back into his business to hide his guilt, the claim that "nothing is bigger than the family" and hence he did it all for Chris, the insistence that Larry never flew a P-40 plane, and the denial that he ever got a phone call from Steve Deever, whom he calls the "little man" who never takes responsibility. As the play goes on, Linke resonates louder and louder, and switches from a joking air to a "I-dare-you" mood of speaking. When Chris leaves, even Kate tells Joe to stop using the confrontational approach to solve problems, and instead, offer to surrender himself. However, Joe continues to bull his way through, telling Chris to burn the money or donate to charity if he thinks it's tinted, and finally, resolving to Larry to solve his problems: "if Larry were alive he wouldn't act like this." Behind this façade of righteous attitude is a guilt that Joe has been dealing with, but we as an audience never get exposed to. Linke does a great job here of understating the hurt feelings of Joe, covering them up with rationalizations but letting small shrugs of the head and expressions of regret slip by, subconsciously informing the audience. He was never really honest until the end, but we grow to like him because Linke was so likable throughout, despite his grandiose gestures and cheap way of talking.

If Linke's Joe was subtle, Comperatore's Chris is the polar opposite. Called "Mother McKeller" in the battalion, he came back from the war to live as if in "a bus accident." But his conscience is clear and he never tells a lie. He is awkward, even with his beloved Ann, whom he woos with "no imagination." The only joking he tries are calling his dad a Casanova and calling Charlotte Tanner as a date for George. Comperatore also makes a journey in this play. In his case, he begins with love and wooing and move towards frustration and anger, mirroring Linke's performance. He is best in moment of absolute futility, such as when Chris realizes that his father is at fault: "you're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you?" Linke's reaction is the typical blank stare, but we sense something inside him cringe as well. Yet, Chris's defining characteristic is the loss of innocence. As Kate explains how Chris might have "almost known," Dr. Bayliss describes the private revolutions that get snuffed out, much as his own zeal for research was supplanted by domestic needs. Jim says of Chris, "he probably wanted to be alone to watch his star go out." Whereas Chris felt need to speak out his frustration, Joe just lived with his. Paradoxically, the more reserved outward person (Chris) ends up hiding nothing in his speeches. The more sociable outward person (Joe) ends up hiding a lot that are waiting to explode. Chris's relationship of Ann, however, is the drive behind his intent, especially since he read Larry's letter. Ann wants Christ to be completely free to love her, and that involves eradicating Larry. Comperatore's cadence is perfect, from a clear and strong first part of the play to a compete breakdown to air out his frustrations. His dad doesn't tell us his frustrations, but Chris airs it out like he is reasoning with himself: "but now I'm practical, and I spit on myself." In some sense, it's like father like son.

“All My Sons” is performed by Ruskin Group theatre (http://www.ruskingrouptheatre.com) at Santa Monica, California, until 2nd of October, 2010.