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Wednesday, 17 October 2007 10:19

As the first act of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* nears its climax, the atmosphere is thick with tension and discomfort. A young man has proposed to the former girlfriend of his older brother, presumed dead three years after World War II. The boys' mother, convinced that her child is still alive, is on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The boys' father, obviously hiding some dark secret, appears deeply nervous about an incoming phone call. And in St. Ambrose University's Saturday-night production of this American tragedy, you could tell that its Act I closer was really working, because for a few brief minutes, the audience collectively stopped coughing.

The act had been working during its preceding hour, too - not that the numerous consumptives in the crowd seemed to notice. (Seriously, it was rare when more than five sentences passed without *someone* in the audience hacking violently, and there were at least a dozen hackers out there.) But the escalating drama at the act's end finally found everyone in the audience paying the drama the attention it deserved, and there was a palpable hush as *All My Sons*' patriarch (Louis Hare) grew more and more rattled by the telephone conversation happening beyond earshot, and his wife (Jovon Eberhart) walked onto the set's porch looking stricken.

This dramatic apex would have made for a strong segue into the intermission if it wasn't interrupted by another sound - that of a middle-aged audience member's cell phone, which rang three times, and loudly, before the phone's owner answered it, and proceeded to chat with her caller as she left her seat and walked up the aisle. Needless to say, my tension and discomfort levels increased *significantly*.

Since St. Ambrose's season-opener has already closed, a review is rather superfluous, so I hope I'll be forgiven for devoting so much space to Saturday's ruder (or dangerously unhealthy) attendees. But I think it's important to congratulate *All My Sons*' participants on so effectively triumphing over their circumstances. To their enormous credit, the actors - beautifully directed by Michael Kennedy - remained consistently focused and engaged with the material, and

appeared completely unruffled by those who seemed determined to audibly waylay the production.

Arthur Miller was arguably America's first master of modern realism, and St. Ambrose's *All My Sons* tipped its cap to Miller's realist bent even before the performance began; designer Kristofer Eitrheim's stunning set - the backyard of a two-story dwelling, complete with a fence, a fallen tree, and a lawn - felt as believably lived-in as you could possibly want. With *All My Sons* currently celebrating its 60th anniversary, though, a work that was once the pinnacle of modern realism has gradually become stylized in its own way - Miller's celebration and critique of post-war America feels very much like the product of a long-ago era. So it was wise of Kennedy to guide his actors toward a subtle (and occasionally not-so-subtle) stylization in their portrayals; the actors spoke with a clipped, slightly formalized diction, and their gestures were boldly outlined.

The effect, however, wasn't distracting - the show felt, as it was likely meant to, as if we had walked directly into a family drama from the 1940s - and what kept *All My Sons* from feeling like a museum piece was the passionate commitment of the performers; the raw immediacy of the emotions on display was frequently startling. (It's this emotionalism that continues to give *All My Sons* its dramatic punch.)

Two actors, in particular, proved to be extraordinary. Ryan Westwood played the surviving Keller son, Chris, as a cautiously optimistic family mediator whose growing understanding of his father's frailty becomes shattering; witnessing Westwood's heartbroken rage felt like watching the physical disintegration of the American Dream. And Eberhart's dazed melancholy, interrupted by bursts of furious resentment, was sublime. In a perfectly measured, ferociously honest performance, Eberhart never sought our approval or love, and created a figure of endless fascination.

Every once in a while, the play's stylization was too overt; a few readings by Hare and Seth Kaltwasser, as the Kellers' former neighbor George, were undone by clichéd, vaguely comedic '40s-tough-guy cadences. But both performers enacted their go-for-broke dramatic encounters with impressive abandon, and all throughout the production, wonderfully appealing performers - Jessica Sheridan (nee Stratton), Emily Kurash (magnificently mean-spirited), Dan Hernandez, Adam Burnham, Catie Osborn - added great humor and variety. Judging by the on-stage (and off-stage) talent on display in *All My Sons*, St. Ambrose's theatre department is entering its 2007-8 season in excellent, inspiring shape. But for the sake of fellow audience members who want to fully *appreciate* these talents in future productions, please remember to bring a few lozenges. And leave your damned cell phones in the car.