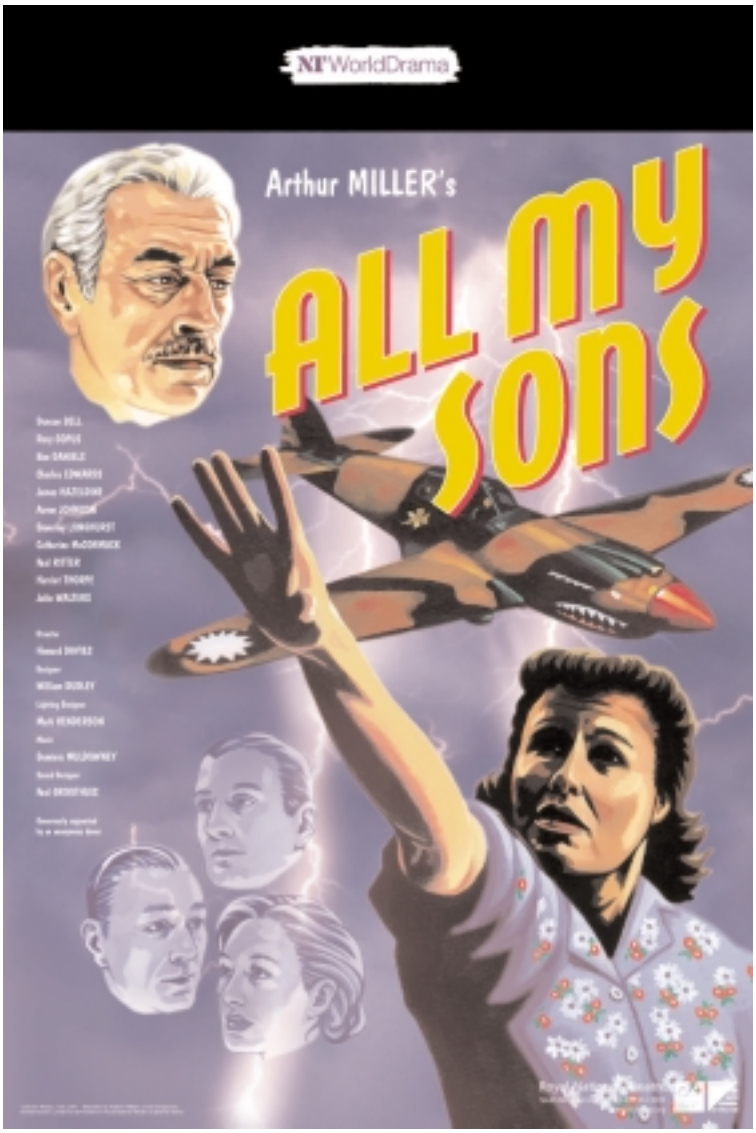
NT Education Workpack

All My Sons



All My Sons
by Arthur Miller

This production opened at the National's Cottesloe Theatre on 6 July 2000

See www.nt-online.org for further production details

Director
Howard Davies

Designer
William Dudley

Lighting Designer
Mark Henderson

Music
Dominic Muldowney

Sound Designer
Paul Groothuis

NT Education

Royal National Theatre
South Bank
London SE1 9PX

T (020) 7452 3388
F (020) 7452 3380
education@nationaltheatre.org.uk

Workpack written by
Christopher Bigsby

Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia, author of *Contemporary American Playwrights*, and editor (with Don Wilmeth) of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*.

Editor
Dinah Wood

Coordinator
Sarah Nicholson

Design
Patrick Eley

The play

Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller was born in Harlem, New York City, in October 1915. At that time the area was largely Jewish and Italian. His father, who had emigrated from Poland at the age of eight, had built up a sizeable company manufacturing women's coats. He was the epitome of the American Dream, which proposed that America offered the opportunity to rise from rags to riches, a dream whose material thrust Miller would later question both in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*.

The family was rich, with an expensive apartment and chauffeur-driven car. They lost much of their money, however, in the Stock Market crash of 1929 and moved to the then less fashionable borough of Brooklyn, just across the river from the tip of Manhattan. The Depression which followed made a deep impression on Miller and echoes throughout his work. Together with the Civil War of the 19th century, it was, he believed, the experience that touched the lives of most Americans. He himself learned that it was possible suddenly to lose everything, a lesson later reinforced by the treatment of the Jews during the war, and it is worth remembering that Miller is Jewish. When you know you can lose everything you have to decide what really matters in life, what is fundamental. In many of his plays, including *All My Sons*, he would insist that human relationships and obligations take primacy, that it is necessary to accept responsibility for your own life, your own actions, but also to accept that you live in the world and that therefore you are responsible for and to others.

The Depression also forced Miller into manual labour in order to earn enough money to get to university. He delivered bread at four in the morning, drove a delivery van, worked in an auto parts warehouse. This, in turn, gave him a respect for those who also struggled on a daily basis.

At University, in Michigan, he became radicalised. This, after all, was a radical decade, with the Spanish Civil War raging in Europe (several of his friends went there and died) and strikes and labour unrest in America. He also began to write, winning a series of prizes for plays which also had radical themes.

After University he made his money by writing radio plays, often on patriotic subjects, and by working on a film script about army life, eventually made under the title *The Story Of GI Joe.* He tried to enlist but an old football injury kept him out of the services so, while writing his plays, he worked as a fitter in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He was to draw on this experience as background for *A View from the Bridge* in 1955.

His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck,* was a failure. It closed after four days. In despair, he turned to the novel and wrote *Focus*, which took as its subject anti-semitism in America, a remarkable choice given the fact that America had been engaged in a war against Nazism abroad. It was published in 1945 and was a considerable success. He decided, however, to have one last assault on the theatre. The result was *All My Sons*. It had previously taken him three months to write a stage play and eight weeks to write a radio play. *All My Sons* took two and a half years.

Ben Daniels
Catherine McCormack
photo Ivan Kyncl

The play

Background to All My Sons

The story of *All My Sons* has two origins, one historical and one literary. Arthur Miller's then mother-in-law drew his attention to an article in an Ohio newspaper which described a young woman's decision to inform on her own father who had supplied faulty parts to the military. To this he added elements from *The Wild Duck,* a play by Henrik Ibsen, a writer who was to prove immensely influential throughout his career.

A few years later and he might have chosen to focus on the act of informing, since it lay at the heart both of *The Crucible* and *A View From a Bridge*. America, in the 1950s, was in the grip of an anti-communist witch-hunt in which the strangely named House Un-American Activities Committee (a Committee of the House of Representatives) required people to inform on their friends for their supposed radical views and actions. Miller rejected this but betrayal remains a central theme, betrayal within the family and, more importantly, betrayal of those values without which there can be no functioning society. He also chose to write about fathers and sons, rather than retain the daughters from the original story, feeling that he knew more about that relationship.

From Ibsen's play he derived the idea of two partners in a business, one of whom is made to take moral and legal responsibility on behalf of the other. Also in *The Wild Duck* he found a character whose idealism was the source of cruelty. This becomes a minor but important theme in *All My Sons*, never fully developed but a disturbing presence. More significantly still, he learned from Ibsen the importance of the past which exerts its pressure on the present. One of his central concerns, he has said, is how the chickens come home to roost.

Julie Walters
Catherine McCormack
photo Ivan Kyncl

The play

Synopsis

The story of *All My Sons* concerns a decision by Joe Keller, whose company manufactures parts of aircraft engines, both to allow a batch of faulty cylinder heads to be supplied to the Army Air Force (with disastrous effects) and to allow his partner to take moral and legal responsibility for this. Joe goes free on appeal; his partner goes to prison. Meanwhile, one of his sons, Larry, goes missing in the war, a fact that the boy's mother, Kate, will not acknowledge, while the other, Chris, returns from the war and, after a time, decides to propose to Larry's fiancée, Ann Deever, daughter to the imprisoned man.

As the play unwinds, so suppressed anxieties and concealed truths work their way to the surface. Finally we discover that Joe had knowingly allowed the faulty parts to leave the factory and that Larry, on reading newspaper accounts of the trial, had committed suicide, crashing his own plane, ironically echoing the fate of those other airmen to whom his father had acknowledged no responsibility. Suddenly facing the truth of what he has done, Joe shoots himself. But this does not neatly round off the play. Just as Joe precipitated his own son's death so Chris Keller now has precipitated his father's. Does he do so because he feels that Joe should take responsibility for his actions, or is it partly out of his own sense of guilt for failing to acknowledge his doubts, for refusing to accept that he has compromised the very idealism to which he had pledged his faith? The question hangs in the air.

Ben Daniels
James Hazeldine
photo Ivan Kyncl

Design

Following the failure of *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, a fable which, like some of his earlier plays, had moved away from realism towards the poetic and the lyrical, he determined that *All My Sons* would at least appear realistic. Certainly we enter a realistic set. What he was after, Miller explained, was a sense of "undisturbed normality", a world in which people mowed their lawns and cleaned their cars on lazy Sunday mornings, "the petty business of life in the suburbs." The National Theatre production, in 2000, provided just such a lawn, together with a familiar American clapboard house, that is a house faced with wooden planking.

To Miller's mind, it is the very ordinariness of the setting, and the slow-moving actions of the first part of the play, that made "the deepening threat of the remainder more threatening." Already, indeed, there is a foreshadowing of this change in that a storm has snapped an apple tree planted to commemorate the missing son, but otherwise everything seems resolutely normal.

It is high summer, the apogee of the year. Ahead lies the fall. In the garden are plants "whose season is gone". Ahead, in other words, lies a bleaker time. And since the play is described as taking place in "August of our era" this is a play about America, also at a point of balance, emerging from an idealistic period into something more crassly material and self-interested.

The action takes place over a few hours but it does so as bright day gives way to sunset which in turn gives way to the small hours of the morning in which all colour is bleached from the set as from the lives of those who inhabit it.

In an early version, the crime had taken place in Toledo, Ohio, and the family had moved away to a small town. In the final version both the crime and its aftermath occur in the same

The play

place, thus increasing the social pressure, the oppressive and hermetic atmosphere which traps this family, behind a row of trees, in their own past. The static nature of the set reflects lives which have been arrested. This is not a family that can yet accept that they live in a world of consequences, in which past events have present results.

Themes

America was isolationist in the early part of the European war; Ohio, where this play is set, more so than most, at least according to Miller. Miller himself thought of the war at first as merely one more imperial conflict. That is to say, America decided to be responsible only for its own. Joe Keller takes a similar view on a personal level. The family is all that counts. In the course of the play he learns otherwise, and it is a truth he cannot bear. He has killed not only his son, who commits suicide, but all his sons.

It is a fundamental tenet of Miller's drama that the private and the public world are intertwined. As he is fond of saying, the fish is in the water and the water is in the fish. But so, too, are the past and the present. We are, he insists, responsible for one another, responsible for our actions, for who we are. *All My Sons* stages that truth.

James Hazeldine
Julie Walters
photo Ivan Kyncl

The play: characters

Joe Keller

Joe Keller lives on denial. As Miller has said, "The truth and mankind are cousins, not brothers and sisters." He is a survivor doing what he has to, to get by and, to Miller, that is an entirely recognisable, if, finally, unacceptable, motive. In an early draft we are told that Keller had been poor until 1938, a victim of the Depression. The war had thus made him and he knew what it was to have nothing. That fact is removed from the final version but not the fear of losing everything. Nor was he the only person cutting corners during the war. In small ways many people were compromising, cheating on rationed goods, even profiting from the conflict. It is worthwhile recalling that Miller began this play during the war and expected it to be produced during the war. He thought, therefore, that he would merely be speaking aloud what everyone knew on a daily basis, though he suspected that the play might cause something of a furore.

Joe Keller justifies his actions in terms of the family, to which alone he acknowledges responsibility. Like so many of Miller's characters, he wishes to leave his mark on the world, to justify his existence, and how else but by passing the business onto his sons. He forgets, however, that he has a responsibility which extends far beyond the family. Indeed, in some senses, this had been a central theme of the 1930s literature with which Miller was so familiar. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was about the need to look beyond the family, as was Clifford Odets' play *Awake and Sing.* For Karl Marx, the family had been a primary hindrance to social justice and Marx had been a point of reference for many in the 1930s.

Joe Keller denies his guilt in public. How far does he also deny it in private, deny it, that is, to himself? Certainly he seems to be a man for whom appearances matter more than reality. It is clear, however, that he no longer exercises true power in the family. That has moved to his wife, Kate.

Kate Keller

Kate carries the burden of knowledge. She knows, and yet denies, that Joe is guilty. She denies that her son, Larry, is dead. She does so partly as any mother might resist such a truth but also, perhaps, because if she acknowledges his death she might also have to confront the death of those other airmen who died because Joe supplied faulty parts.

She has stopped the clock, and that has consequences. Her other son must not marry, or at least not marry Ann. Her husband must be made to play the part of an amiable fool, infantilised so as to be free of responsibility. She turns herself into an actress, performing the role in which she has cast herself. It is her strength, however, or at least her determination, which sustains the illusion of a carefree family. But only just below the surface, barely suppressed, is a truth that can destroy them all.

The other side of her determination, however, is cruelty. Inclining to one son she disregards the needs of another. She fights to drive Ann out, and with her a reminder of Larry's death and her husband's guilt. She is fighting for her survival and the survival of a family which, in truth, no longer exists. At the end, she has lost everything: both sons and her husband. She is bereft. In struggling to sustain her version of the family she has destroyed it.

Chris Keller

Chris Keller comes back from the war having seen men sacrifice themselves for others. There, he feels, was a functioning idealism. But in the name of what did men fight and die? He returns to find a world going on as if nothing has happened, to discover people dedicated to nothing more elevated than making money. In an original draft we learn that he had concealed the fact of his family's wealth, guilty that they were profiting from the war, and this before there was any question of fraud. He returns shocked by the huge plant that has been built up. Those details disappear from the final text but there is still a sense of unease which eventually deepens into a confession of guilt.

The play: characters

He is an idealist, and sees himself as such, while oddly suggesting that he has always had to stand back, to sacrifice his needs for those of others. There is, however, a cruelty in this man, as in so many of the other characters. In an early draft he was unforgiving in the war. Where others would let enemy soldiers go, he was unrelenting. Indeed he was known as "Killer Keller". Again this is stripped out of the final version but that relentless cruelty is, finally, what drives his father to his death. It is not George Deever, son of the imprisoned man, who precipitates Joe Keller's suicide: it is Chris Keller. Beneath the social play, there is an elemental Greek drama being enacted here as fathers and sons destroy one another and society trembles.

Ann Deever

In a play in which people are afraid of losing their good names, Ann is about to change hers. She has come to this house to declare Larry dead and announce her wedding. She will become a Keller, and that entails coming to terms with the family and what it means. She is the girl next door grown up into a practical woman. Nor is she free of the cruelty observable in the others. She has refused to visit her imprisoned father. Joe Keller asks his son to "see it human." He fails in this and so, surely, does Ann. She also brings with her a letter in which Larry explains that he is about to commit suicide because of his father's actions. Why does she bring it? She says that she wishes to set Kate's mind at rest but it is not a letter that can ever do that and she flourishes it, finally, perhaps, to serve her own ends, to secure her future. She, too, is determined to survive. She has Kate's strength, but like Kate's it is a morally ambiguous strength.

James Hazeldine
Catherine McCormack
photo Ivan Kyncl

George Deever

Miller has said that George represents the return of the repressed. It is he who breaks into this apparently happy family, bringing with him the past, except that the past has never been laid to rest. He, too, has been guilty of cruelty in abandoning his father, and comes to insist on justice. In the end, however, he is easily deflected, pulled into the play that Kate scripts and stage manages. Though he appears to be the figure who can smash the apparent serenity of this embattled family, he is no more than a catalyst. He lacks the relentlessness of his sister and of Kate.

The Neighbours

The neighbours are a chorus, commenting on the action, but they also resonate the central themes of the play. Frank, we are told, is "uncertain of himself…thirty-two and balding;" Jim, a doctor, "wry, self-controlled… but with a wisp of sadness that clings to his self-effacing humour". There is an air of disappointment, of failed aspirations, regret. They contain in themselves the conflicts at the heart of the play, acknowledging, as they do, a tension between the pragmatic and the ideal, and recognising the compromises that seem an inevitable aspect of daily living. Marriage itself, on the basis of those in this play. offers an image of such compromises, a fact that will surely cast its shadow over the proposed relationship between Chris Keller and Ann Deever. The doctor, especially, has sacrificed his idealistic vision of his profession for hard cash and the word 'money' echoes through the text.

Practical exercises

Improvise on those scenes we do not witness but which are referred to in the play.

1
Hot Seating is used as a device to explore a character in more depth by creating past events and events outside of the text. One person chooses to be a character in the play and is asked questions, which challenge either events in relation to the story or outside the text. The person being hot seated must form their answers based on their knowledge of the play.

Hot Seat one of the unseen characters *e.g.* Larry (Kate and Joe's son).
What insights do they bring to the characters and the story?
Write a diary entry based on the story that materialises from this exercise.

2
Look at the beginning and end of scenes. Characters are often in the middle of a conversation or action. Improvise around these moments and what might have happened beforehand.
How does this inform the scene you're playing?

3
Focusing on one of the relationships:
In groups of 4 create an imaginary incident from the immediate past, prior to the events in the play, that adds to the animosity George Deever feels for Joe Keller.
Pinpoint moments in the play where the tension between these two characters occurs and explore these scenes further. In pairs choose one person to deliver the lines in this scene and the other person to deliver the subtext; expressing the inner-most thoughts of the character.

4
All My Sons is about a family. The following are a few of the most obvious and important themes that come to light:

Trust
Betrayal
Justice
The Family
Denial

In Pairs
Exploring one of these themes, choose which you are going to represent first and together form a sculpture expressing it. Slowly move into another sculpture expressing the opposite theme. *i.e.* Justice and Injustice, Ideal and Real family, Acknowledgement and Denial.

5
In Pairs
You are a mother and a father. Your son is missing. The person playing the mother is frantic with worry. The father is acting suspiciously as if he may have something to hide; he's assuming their son is never coming home. You both then receive a visitor who knows the truth and the father's behaviour changes.

Develop this scene and explore the idea of trust and betrayal.

For discussion

Examine the role of time (actual and fictional) in the play.
Note the events that are mentioned in the play and chart the history of the family's story.
Create a time chart based on real and family events.

Other related materials

Arthur Miller, ed. by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publisher, New York, 1987

Arthur Miller and Company, ed. by Christopher Bigsby, Methuen, 1980

Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller, ed. by Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 1997

The Portable Arthur Miller, ed. by Christopher Bigsby, Penguin, USA, 1995

File on Miller, compiled by Christopher Bigsby, Methuen, 1987

Arthur Miller and Company, ed. by Christopher Bigsby, Methuen, 1990

The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller, ed. by Robert A Martin and Steven R Centola, Da Kapo Press, New York, 1996

Conversations with Arthur Miller, ed. by Matthew C Roudané, University Press of Missippi, 1987