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Tom Jacobs

Arthur Miller masterpiece poses ethical questions that still resonate today

“All My Sons” is a morality play. If that makes Arthur Miller’s 1947 masterpiece sound old-fashioned, that may be precisely why we need to revisit it today.

This propulsive, well-crafted drama about a defense contractor who is forced to deal with the consequences of his deceit asks the sort of questions we have been largely ignoring in recent years. What are we willing to sacrifice for the common good? Where do we draw the line and declare some action unacceptable? How do we justify unethical behavior in our own minds?

“Our society has become so complex, it’s easy to take ourselves out of the moral equation,” noted Sara Rademacher, director of the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance production of the play, which runs Nov. 12–15 in the Performing Arts Theatre on campus. “In contrast, the play zooms in on the notion of personal accountability.

“The main character makes a choice: Is his responsibility the success and survival of his family, or is he obliged to consider the impact of his actions on the greater society? I think we do that every single day!”

Loosely inspired by a true story, “All My Sons” focuses on the Keller family. Patriarch Joe runs a manufacturing company that, during World War II, sold airplane parts to the military. At one point, he discovered a batch of cracked cylinders. He shipped them off anyway, rationalizing that he had to keep production humming to stay in business and support his family.

The play is set two years after the war. The government determined that 21 pilots died due to the defective cylinders, and put Joe and his partner on trial. Joe managed to convince the jury that he was out of the loop, and his partner is in jail as the play begins.

Meanwhile, his wife Kate is in deep denial about the fate of their oldest son, an Air Force pilot himself who disappeared while flying a mission. She keeps insisting he is still alive — a certainty that crumbles when their younger son uncovers the truth about both his sibling and his father.

“Arthur Miller’s writing is rich and real,” said Kelly Brenya, an undergraduate in the BFA acting program who plays Kate in this production. “It’s American poetry. And it still resonates.”

Miller modeled the play — his first success, written a few years before “Death of a Salesman” — on the works of Henrik Ibsen, especially “The Wild Duck.” But Rademacher sees a direct line between “All My Sons” and Greek tragedy.

“It’s classically well-structured,” she said. “It has the unity of time and place, the three acts, and the hero with the tragic flaw.

“Greek tragedies deal with issues of politics, society and morality. They were meant to provoke public debate. This play is doing the same thing.”

Importantly, Miller’s characters are fleshed-out human beings rather than wooden spokespeople for various points of view. Indeed, Brenya finds the role of Kate — who Rademacher played in a high school production years ago — quite emotionally rich.

“I think she is clinging to hope,” she said. “If I lost someone close to me, I feel I would be in the same place. Rather than thinking of her as someone who is trapped in delusion, I see her as someone who is looking for signs that will enable her to

keep going. She has to believe in order to survive."

"Kate has to hold onto the dream that her son is still alive, because if she recognized the reality, she would be destroyed," added Rademacher. "She is doing what she has been brought up to do: Holding this whole world together for all of the people in it."

The director sees all the characters as playing roles that were assigned to them by the way American society was — and perhaps still is — structured. Joe's actions, she argues, can be seen in a more sympathetic light if you realize he thinks of himself, first and foremost, as the family breadwinner. Other considerations — even ethical ones — are secondary.

"The economic structure is what it is," she said. "Can you fight a system within the system? While we're living in a different time, we're dealing with the same problem."

Rademacher pointed out that we all make ethical choices every day, even if it's by default. For instance, how many of us think about the well-documented problematic conditions in Amazon warehouses when we buy things from the online retailer?

"We can't!" she said. "We don't have the capacity! Some days you're able to be more resistant to things you morally disagree with, and some days you aren't."

"Deep down, the play is about the amount of denial people go through every day," added Brenya. "I think that has only increased in modern times. We can see on our phones all the destruction taking place in wars overseas. What's your moral responsibility for that? Do you just keep scrolling?

"That kind of question is raised in this play, which makes it really matter today."

"All My Sons" will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 12–15 and 2 p.m. Nov. 14 in the Performing Arts Theatre on campus. Admission is free, but reservations are suggested.

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