

THE FAIRFIELD WEEKLY READER

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THEATER REVIEW *BY AL CONSTANTINEAU*

All My Sons at Riverside Theatre – Iowa City

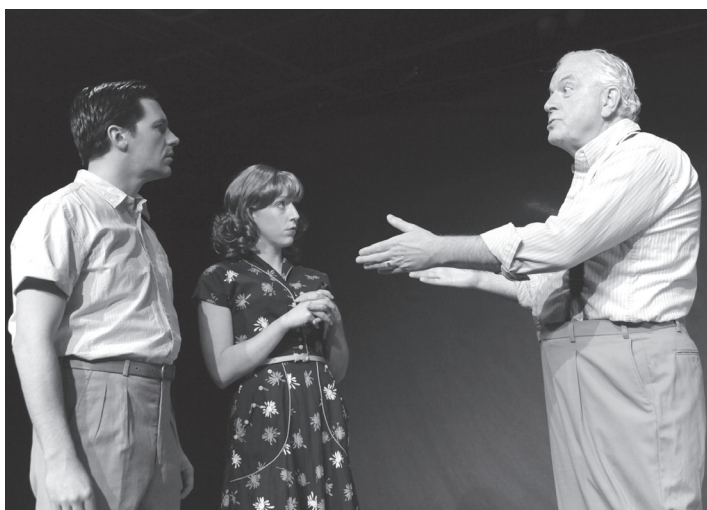
I thought I'd be clever and kill two birds with one trip to Iowa City last week by seeing *The King's Speech* and, a few hours later, the Riverside Theatre's new and shattering production of Arthur Miller's classic American family play, *All My Sons*. The poor movie, Oscar-bound though it may be, stood no chance against the majestic emotional sweep of director Mark Hunter's masterful production.

The play takes place in 1947 in the Ohio backyard of the Keller family. The family patriarch, Joe Keller (Ron Clark), has been acquitted of wrongdoing in the selling of cracked engine blocks to the Army that resulted in the deaths of 21 pilots in World War II. His business partner and neighbor, Steve Deever, though, was convicted and imprisoned. One of the Kellers' sons, Larry, was a pilot declared missing in the war and his mother Kate (Jody Hovland) staunchly holds to the fantasy that he may still be alive and may come home again.

The other Keller son, Chris (Scot West) has returned from combat to work in the family business. Chris has invited their neighbor's daughter, Ann Deever (Cristina Panfilio), to come visit. Ann is both the daughter of the Keller's jailed business partner and the fiancée of the missing Keller son, Larry. Chris has decided to ask Ann to marry him, to the horror of his mother, who thinks Larry could be coming home any day now.

The show revolves around two mesmerizing, planet-sized performances by Clark and Hovland as the grieving and self-deluded parents. They equal their very best work here, which is saying a lot given that the Riverside is celebrating its 30th year of producing quality professional theater in Iowa City. Beneath a bluff, jovial manner, Clark superbly lives Joe Keller's desperation to somehow process his guilt for the airmen's deaths, while Hovland is, by turns, a delicate bird absorbed in her maternal fantasy and a gritty, no-nonsense warrior defending her family's interests. Hovland is particularly heart-rending as she is bent, and nearly physically broken in two, by the play's ultimate revelations.

Scot West gives us a nicely-nuanced Chris Keller, the dutiful son who is pulled in eight different directions by his problematic marriage intentions and his unfortunate ability to see right through his troubled parents. Cristina Panfilio is delightfully



Scot West as Chris, Cristina Panfilio as Ann and Ron Clark as Joe Keller in the Riverside Theatre's production of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, now playing in Iowa City.

awkward at first as Ann, but she pulls the cover back and displays enormous power at the play's climax, when she makes an absolutely hair-raising request of the grieving mother, Kate.

Unlike *The King's Speech*, which is set on a broad historical stage but seems tight and mundane in scope, *All My Sons* is set in a commonplace suburban backyard, although each character seems connected to one of the earth's enormous tectonic plates, and as the plates shift and grind against one another, driven by the force of Miller's superb writing, seismic emotions on the scale of the Greek classics are inevitably unleashed. When the fateful ending finally heaves into view, the world seems to stop in its tracks. The night I saw it, the audience was almost too stunned to applaud the actors in the curtain call.

Riverside's motto is "Big Theatre in a Small Place." No kidding! It's a wonder that the walls of their intimate Gilbert Street space can contain emotions this big and this powerful. To say that *All My Sons* is well worth a trip to Iowa City is to make the understatement of the year. Go see it!

All My Sons continues until Feb. 20. Tickets are \$12-26 at riversidetheatre.org, 319-338-7672.