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.

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 selfinterested.

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