

Heroes, Stars (and Stripes)

A story about heroism in Knocknacarra

We hear about heroes all the time. We all have our sporting heroes, (most of whom we never meet these days because they're on TV or way down there on the field, even behind the glass of the corporate box). We watch films about war heroes, love heroes, even tragic heroes ... all of whom rise above the call of duty in some way and are somehow willing to sacrifice the self for the greater good...

When times are tough there can be a genuine need for a hero; a role model to guide society through periods of social upheaval or national uncertainty. But when times are good, in a country with a booming economy, the news-starved media tends to force-feed us a gluttonous diet of 'heroes' – a confusion that is the cult of mere celebrity.

But days of economic boom need their true heroes too. Just as much, or even more so than days of hardship. And they are much harder to find ... or maybe just to see. The hero is in the eye, and the mind, of the beholder.

Knocknacarra Amateur Theatre Society presents



ALL MY SONS

by Arthur Miller

directed by Paddy Henry

main sponsor: Joyce's, Knocknacarra

An Talbhdhearc, Middle St. Ph: 091-562024

Tue 20th to Sat 24th Feb, 8pm. Tickets €16/€14

Preview: Mon 19th Feb. All tickets €10

"It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace... What's clean?"

KATS is Knocknacarra Amateur Theatre Society. Having recently qualified for the All-Ireland Finals for the third time, KATS has many heroes. But it was my pleasure to see true heroism in the past few days from two of our youngest members: Arron Nestor and Tara Spellman. They are heroes in the most true, simple, honest, humble sense. Their stars shine bright, for anyone lucky enough to behold.

Arron is 10 years old, and a star of this year's festival production, All My Sons, by Arthur Miller. He plays the part of Bert, a young boy who waltzes in to play 'cops' with (it so happens) the tragic hero of the play, Joe Keller (played by Sean Smyth). Arron plays with confidence and aplomb, and the praise lavished on him by adjudicators and audiences alike is not a patronising praise; it is praise for his star acting ability, on an equal footing with the more senior cast around him.

This acting talent is proven (as if 'stripes' were needed to confirm stardom) by the recent Adjudicator's Award Arron received at Claremorris Drama Festival. No, not just praise, not just a star – a stripe to prove it as well!

But what none of us knew at Claremorris, was that Arron was already feeling a discomfort that was heralding the onset of appendicitis! For the sake of the show, of course, as the true professionals would do, he didn't want to mention it. But the following day (St. Patrick's Day) it was worse, and by Monday morning he was being wheeled into the operating theatre at The Regional to get his appendix out (his mom, Cliona, beside him, reiterating that, "no, this theatre isn't about acting, Arron!").

I visited him that evening and our hero waved bravely with a hand plugged with catheters. I brought him photos from the show to cheer him up, but he was groggy and sore, so they served instead just to take his mind off the pain. I knew he was also worrying about the next show in Claregalway. What would the cast do without him?

"Don't be thinking about the stage now, Arron", I insisted. "Focus on getting better..."
"I always think about the stage!" He cut across the advice with all the force his weakened body could muster. I should have known, of course.
"Well, even if you can't stop thinking about the stage, don't be worrying about missing the next show," I continued. "Be proud of winning this award" – I lifted the trophy that Sean Smyth had brought to him earlier which he collected at the awards ceremony – "and be proud that you contributed to a winning show in Claremorris that got us into the All-Ireland."
- "Okay".

If not adequate consolation, that, at least, seemed acceptable for now.

As I drove home I marvelled at the bravery of a 10 year old boy, clearly in pain and subdued, but with a spirit shining as bright as when he confidently takes to the theatre stage to play his part..

But as everybody knows, the show must go on. So then there's Tara. Also aged 10.

How many people would take on a part in a big play, in a competitive festival, with a few days notice, and a few hours of rehearsal? Only heroes accept challenges like that. But accept that challenge and embrace it fully is what Tara did. And she played the part seamlessly. There was no need for apologies about the fact that "someone was standing in, so..." 'Somebody' was not standing in. Tara Spellman was standing in, and she performed with equal confidence and aplomb. And again the praise was for an equal on the stage, and the audience applauded the performance for what it was, and the adjudicator praised Tara's performance for its beauty.

So I will remember this month, March 2007, for having brushed shoulders with heroes; real heroes. Stars with stripes. I thank them for their indomitable strength of character, and for showing me that human spirit (and heroism) is alive and well in Knocknacarra.

Finally, if you want to see a play about heroes: true, tragic and otherwise; performed by heroes (all true!), come along to An Taibhdhearc, Middle St, Galway at the end of April (watch local papers and news for exact dates). It will be the last Galway staging of All My Sons before going on to the All Ireland Finals in Athlone in May.

- Lorcan Mannion.



Bert (Arron Nestor) has a confidential chat with Joe Keller (Sean Smyth) about criminals, policing, and other important matters...



Tara, Sean and Arron have a laugh in the Galway sun after the dramatic events. (Photo taken by Galway Independent photographer Reg Gordon for a newspaper article in the same paper on Wednesday March 28.)