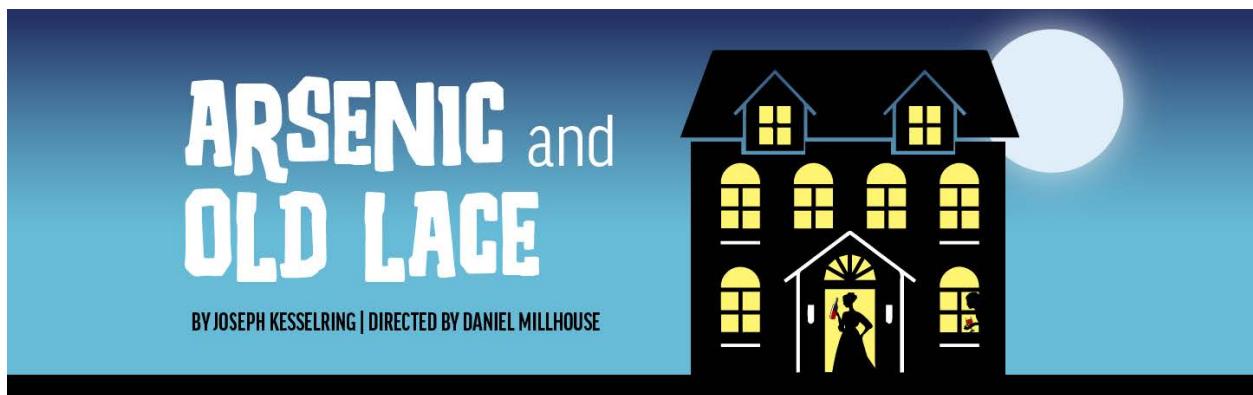


College of DuPage Theater Department

Presents

Arsenic and Old Lace

By Joseph Kesselring



Directed by Daniel Millhouse

The College Theater Department sincerely thanks the library for research support, for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

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Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis

Famed for their hospitality, spinsters Martha and Abby Brewster are adored by their neighbors and guests. When their nephew, Mortimer, arrives to announce his engagement, he discovers a corpse in his aunts' home only to learn that his aunts not only know about the body – they were the murderers! What follows is a hilarious chain of events in this classic dark comedy where the only thing more deadly than poison is family.

Time and Place

The entire action of the play takes place in the living room of the Brewster home in Brooklyn.

Time: Early 1940's

Act I - An afternoon in September

Act II - That same night

Act III: Scene I - Later that night

Act III: Scene II - Early the next morning

Characters

Abby Brewster
The Rev. Dr. Harper
Teddy Brewster
Officer Brophy
Officer Klein

Martha Brewster
Elaine Harper
Mortimer Brewster
Mr. Gibbs
Jonathan Brewster

Dr. Einstein
Officer O'Hara
Lieutenant Rooney
Mr. Witherspoon

Note: Contains adult themes and language

***Arsenic and Old Lace* Director's Note**

Spring 2024

Welcome to a world full of charming oddities and dark deeds! *Arsenic and Old Lace* blends dark humor and farcical chaos, with just a pinch of romance, and a dash of murder.

Prepare to meet the eccentric Brewster family, a bizarre clan with secrets lurking beneath their seemingly charming facade. The Brewster sisters, Abby and Martha, serve their elderberry wine (laced with a touch or two of something... extra) to lonely old men, all in the name of misplaced charity. Meanwhile, their nephew, Mortimer, a drama critic with a picture-perfect life, stumbles upon the evidence of their crimes.

Through the lens of comedy, we explore the complexities of familial love and the blurred lines between morality and mortality. *Arsenic and Old Lace* invites us to ponder the boundaries of identity and acceptance. We see how far the lengths of love can stretch, impairing our judgement of right and wrong in the name of protecting those we hold dear.

This production is a celebration of dark humor, quirky familial bonds, and the enduring power of theater. It is a testament to the power of humor in navigating adversity and the importance of accepting individuals for who they are, flaws and all. Join us on an adventure full of unexpected twists, delightful surprises, and a touch of the macabre!



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Spring 2024 Production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*
Costume Design by Kim Morris

Pictured (from Left to Right): Lynn M. Borge as Abby Brewster, Alexander Wisniewski as Mortimer Brewster, and Lynnette Myers as Martha Brewster

About the Author: Joseph Kesselring

Source: "Joseph Kesselring." *StageAgent*, stageagent.com/writers/2913/joseph-kesselring.

Joseph Otto Kesselring (July 21, 1902 – November 5, 1967) was an American playwright known best for *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a hit on Broadway from 1939 to 1944 and other countries as well. He was born in New York City to Henry and Frances Kesselring. His father's parents were immigrants from Germany. His mother was an English Canadian. Kesselring spent much of his life in and around the theater. In 1922 he began teaching vocal music and directed stage productions at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas a Mennonite school. After two years, Kesselring left teaching and returned to the stage, working for two years with an amateur theatrical group in Niagara, New York. He began working as a freelance playwright in 1933, completing 12 original plays, of which four were produced on Broadway: *There's Wisdom in Women* (1935), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1939), *Four Twelves are 48* (1951), and *Mother of that Wisdom* (1963). *Arsenic and Old Lace* was his masterpiece. It ran for 1,444 performances on Broadway and 1,337 performances in London, and became a staple on the high school and dinner theater circuits. The movie version released in 1944 was also a comedy hit.



Articles for your Consideration

A Play About Plays

BY HEIDI MADSEN

Source: Madsen, Heidi. "A Play About Plays." *Utah Shakespeare Festival*, www.bard.org/study-guides/a-play-about-plays/.

A somewhat unsuccessful and inconspicuous playwright by the name of Joseph Kesselring wrote an insane frolic and christened it *Bodies in our Cellars*—the title suggests a tale of horror—and truly, malefaction and macabre accounts of torture were to be found amongst the script's pages. This script, in its original state, was sent to the residence of producer Howard Lindsay (*Anything Goes*, *The Sound of Music*) actually in hopes that Lindsay's wife, actress Dorothy Stickney would play one of the "dear, demented old sisters whose method of showing compassion to lonely elderly men is to solace them with a drink of poisoned elderberry wine." However, it caught the attention of Lindsay, who then sent a copy and the following wire to his partner and collaborator Russell Crouse: "Shake your head, take a cup of coffee and read further. Have just read play about two charming old ladies who go around murdering old men. Very funny. How would you like to be a producer?" To which Russell wired back, "Buy it."

As he lovingly stamped and mailed the envelope containing this auspicious work, author Kesselring probably never anticipated the evolutions his play would undergo, or to what heights of theatrical success his play would soar—at least, that altered semblance of his own original infrastructure of authorship and composition.

The script was revolutionized by the voraciously creative duo of producers who saw irresistible potential in the black comedy *Bodies in our Cellars*. It was to become *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and Joseph Kesselring, despite the extreme care taken to give full credit at all times to the playwright, was more or less overrun and ultimately left behind in the dust of obscurity. Fascinating renovations and additions were installed, until, in the end, it was more a play about plays—a satire on theatre and its genres and histrionic elements, how themes are developed, and through what devices and characters.

In *Arsenic and Old Lace* everybody does theatrical things in one way or another. Jonathan, partly through his own evil inclinations and partly through chance, winds up playing a Boris Karloff character in real life; Teddy's insanity takes the form of pretending to be Teddy Roosevelt—one of the greatest showmen who ever occupied the White House; Doctor Einstein's job is to see that people can enter the Brewster house with one face and leave it with another (plastic surgery in lieu of makeup); and Aunt Abby and Aunt Martha are perhaps the most consummate actors of all—seemingly sweet old women who kill as many men as their criminally insane nephew. Perhaps the most interesting message from this mix of stage techniques and traditions is that most of these performers manage to convince themselves of their own truthfulness, no matter how far from reality they wander.

Einstein: “You shouldn’t have killed him Johnny. He’s a nice fellow—he gives us a lift—and what happens?” Johnny: “He said I looked like Boris Karloff!” A hesitant Boris Karloff, famous for his frightening screen personification of Frankenstein and other chilling roles, was recruited by Crouse and Lindsay to play the nightmarish Jonathan (who has had his face, though not intentionally, lifted to resemble that nefarious face of Karloff’s). The actor too, was “enchanted by the idea of making fun of himself,” but to play the part he had to put aside his fear of the stage and of acting in front of a live audience.

Arsenic and Old Lace opened at the Fulton Theatre in 1941, and ran in New York for over three years. Reviewers and drama critics raved. Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times wrote, “Let’s not exaggerate! At some time there may have been a funnier murder charade than *Arsenic and Old Lace* . . . but the supposition is purely academic. Joseph Kesselring has written one so funny none of us will ever forget it.” The New York Post said it was “guaranteed to make even dramatic critics care about theatre.” The lead player, Mortimer Brewster, is of course a dramatic critic—an occupation that is some cause for concern for his future father-in-law, although Aunt Abby Brewster entreats him not to think harshly of poor Mortimer because “somebody has to do those things.” Russell Crouse and Harold Lindsay never allowed the show to get stale. They frequently visited even road productions “using their finely tuned ears to fix spots, where, because of an actor’s carelessness or through a shift of emphasis, the laughs no longer worked.”

In 1944, Frank Capra directed a motion picture version with Cary Grant and Josephine Hall. Though Grant believed that he overplayed his character, Mortimer, the film also was a tremendous success and has ensured the immortality of, rightfully, Joseph Kesselring’s fabulously sinister *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

In Conversation: Director Ron OJ Parson, Celeste Williams, and TayLar **BY CAMILLE OSWALD**

Source: Oswald, Camille. "In Conversation: Director Ron OJ Parson, Celeste Williams, and Taylor." *Court Theatre*, 16 Dec. 2023, www.courttheatre.org/about/blog/in-conversation-director-ron-oj-parson-celeste-williams-and-taylor/.

Associate Director of Marketing Camille Oswald sat down with Director Ron OJ Parson and the Brewster sisters—TayLar and Celeste Williams—to find out what they love about the classic comedy Arsenic and Old Lace.



Photo of Ron OJ Parson by Joe Mazza

What attracted you to Arsenic and Old Lace?

Ron: *Arsenic and Old Lace* is a classic! I knew about it as a movie, before I knew of it as a play. A lot of times, when I'm watching old classic movies, I'll look at the credits to check if it says, "Based on this play" or "Adapted from this play" and I've been doing that since I was a kid. I have a stack of old, classic movies that are based on plays that I want to do! So, I've been familiar with the play for a long time through the movie, and I've always felt that it'd be fun. Coming off of the pandemic, I knew I wanted to do something funny – I want people to laugh, and I want to laugh. I think that was at the crux of it.

I also wanted to show that, in this period, there were Black people. I didn't want this to be just colorblind casting where anyone was playing these roles: this is a Black family! Some people are ignorant and don't understand that, in this period, we weren't just slaves, butlers, maids, and this and that. We were people that had a culture that had affluence to it, and had issues, and had history. We're not getting up there and saying that, but even just us being onstage and doing the play this way – it's obvious. I think people need to realize that we were around in the same periods they were around.

This play is a classic and has been produced many times since its Broadway premiere. Why do audiences keep returning to this play?

Ron: It's interesting that you say that, because I really think of this as a forgotten play. It's a known title, but people don't know the play – they know the movie. And that goes back to what I was saying about the credits, "Based on the Broadway play." It's all about going back to the source. At Court, that's what we do all the time. Charlie [Newell] does that. He goes to the source of a production; the book, or the short story, and he takes it from there. So I think that will draw audiences – draw them to something different, draw them to source of the movie they know and love.

When I thought of doing it, I looked around and saw that it was mostly community theatres doing this production. For one thing, it has a lot of actors. Professional theatres nowadays are like, "Anything more than six characters, and we're not doing it!" [laughs] So, we looked at doubling and tripling up roles, and we're going to make each one of them really different. Use a beard here, make someone bald there, use accents. I think that's part of the appeal, is the fun of all the different characters. It'll be fun for the audience, but it's a way for the actors to have fun, too. I hired all of these actors who don't do a lot of comedy – we've got all of these serious, award-winning actors – because I don't want to do this show with obvious comedy. These two ladies are serious! They're serious about who they are and what they're doing, and I think the comedy lies in the fact that, for them, this is real. They think they're really helping these people, you know?

What do you love most about this play?

Celeste: What I love about the play is how it swings from a screwball comedy to a back-in-the-day, scary, Gothic thing, and then goes back to comedy. It does have that scariness, but it always swings back to goofiness.

Ron: Exactly. And that's why casting was so important, because an actor's got to be able to do all of those things. So you need someone who has the talent to do that.

TayLar: I like the irony of it, how the playwright has taken dark material and made it lighthearted by putting in laughable situations. The subject matter on its own is dramatic, it's nothing to laugh about, but he makes it really funny. I like the plot twists and the morbid humor of it all.



Photo of Celeste Williams by
Joe Mazza

Ron: Let me add something to that. When Joseph Kesselring first wrote it, it was a serious drama. He originally wrote it about a serial killer, it's a serious –

Celeste: It's based on a true story! It was one lady, it wasn't sisters, but it was one lady somewhere who was doing this crazy stuff!

TayLar: In Connecticut!

What does Arsenic and Old Lace teach audiences?

Celeste: This play makes me think about family and loyalty. The two sisters have been together forever, and they're taking care of their brother. They're the true ride-or-die family, when you think about it.

Ron: Rather than go to the police, Mortimer's trying to protect them. He could go to the police and say, "There's a body in my house!" but he doesn't. Instead, he thinks, "I can't have my aunts go to jail."

TayLar: Right. I think it also shows people that you can find humor in places where you never thought it existed. And I guess it's like what Celeste was saying, that family's always there for you. Sometimes we can go over and beyond what we should do, and we think we're helping, but we're actually doing more harm.

Celeste: It teaches us that we all have some secrets in the cellar, too, don't we?

What parts of your characters really resonate with you?

TayLar: For me, what resonates is my character's sincere, innate desire to help, to support. I'm always thinking of others, trying to make their lives better, but sometimes – with my kids – I'll try so hard to keep them from experiencing anything bad, that I get in the way. They need to make mistakes so they can learn. These women, these sisters, they're earnest in their intent to help – donating to charities, doing wellbeing checks – but their perspective gets a little twisted, so they end up doing more harm than good. In that roundabout way, I can see us having similarities. But I don't kill people! [laughs]

What do you want audiences to take away from this production?

Celeste: I want the audience to leave the theatre having experienced a couple hours of giggling, of laughing. I want them to have a little lightness.

TayLar: I want them to die laughing!

Ron: I want people, young and old, to be able to experience something different. I want people to be re-introduced to this play, and I want to show that people of color can do these things. It adds another element to it. It adds another layer.

If you had to be either arsenic or old lace, which would you be and why?

Ron: That's interesting...I don't know how to –

Celeste: That's like one of those old Barbara Walters questions! To me, lace suggests something delicate, and I don't think that's me, but I'll take it over being poison!

TayLar: I think I'd be a combination of both. As far as arsenic, I'm cool until you get on my wrong side, and then you've got to watch out; there's a little something poisonous in me. So I'm delicate, but, if you take me to a certain level, we've got an issue.

Ron: It's the same with the play. It's funny until it's not. Life right now – it's insane. It's a hard time to be doing any play, much less a comedy about killing people. That's why we have to have fun with it and make people laugh. Talkbacks are probably going to be really interesting. [laughs] But I think everyone needs to laugh sometimes – laughing at ourselves can be therapeutic.



Photo of TayLar by Joe Mazza

Arsenic and Old Lace: Madness in the Family

BY DAVID CAIRNS

Source: Cairns, David. "Arsenic and Old Lace: Madness in the Family." *The Criterion Collection*, www.criterion.com/current/posts/7952-arsenic-and-old-lace-madness-in-the-family.



Arsenic and Old Lace, the best film ever made about the construction of the Panama Canal, was shot in 1941 but then laid down, like a fine wine or an expiring body, for three years, until the source play finished its Broadway run. Warner Bros. fretted about backing a film they couldn't immediately profit from, and director Frank Capra would grouse about missing out on three of the war's box-office boom years, but in 1941 absolutely nobody worried that the film would age badly or that audiences would lose interest in Cary Grant, and such complacency was fully justified, it seems, because here we all are.

Grant had only recently solidified his star status. He likened the Hollywood pantheon to an overcrowded streetcar: "It took me quite a while to reach the center . . . Then Warner Baxter fell out the back, and I got to sit down." The actor was taking a break after his first Alfred Hitchcock film, *Suspicion* (1941), and trying to marry socialite Barbara Hutton, which involved complex legal maneuvering to confirm that she was actually single, a situation that finds an analogue in *Arsenic and Old Lace's* frustrated honeymoon.

Grant had been a freelancer since 1936 and would always remain one, enjoying his pick of projects from all the majors; Capra had recently ended his twelve-year alliance with Columbia—a studio he'd made respectable—and had tried his hand at independence with *Meet John Doe* (1941), but with war looming, he ducked back into the security of a studio project. He was drawn to the novelty of a movie without a message: during the thirties, he had become closely identified with a kind of populist social commentary. This time, he just wanted to have fun.

Capra would later recall that Grant "had a ball" on *Arsenic*. But his was a very creative memory. In reality, Grant fussed about the sets and costumes and quarreled with Orry-Kelly, his former roommate, now Warners' chief costume designer. At the root of it was the star's discomfort with his performance. But he was always prone to worrying: begging to be fired from *The Awful Truth* (1937), positively refusing to share screen time with a piglet in *Operation Petticoat* (1959), fretting that backlighting would make his ears glow while shooting *The Grass Is Greener* (1960).

It's hard to see why Grant was so embarrassed by his Mortimer. He claimed the broadness was the problem. "I simply cannot do this kind of comedy," he complained to Capra. As a young actor, he had closely studied movie comedians, and his favorites were Stan Laurel and Harry Langdon, who were rarely frenetic, more like the still centers of slapstick chaos. One supposes that, having built up a reputation for suavity, the former Archibald Leach might have been disconcerted by the prospect of spending a whole movie in a state of perspiring panic. But that, fortunately, is his problem, not ours.

In his book on Grant, Richard Schickel defends Grant's and Capra's bold choices, asking, "What's a man supposed to do when he finds bodies buried all over his maiden aunts' house? Arch an ironic eyebrow?" The playing is entirely appropriate to a character in such circumstances in a farce, even if, as Schickel concedes, it is "not Grant's most urbane performance."

Grant had played the Mock Turtle in MGM's *Alice in Wonderland* (1933), under heavy prosthetic makeup, but as the bodies in *Arsenic* pile up, his drooping eyelids and slack jaw make him resemble that mournful creature more than a rubber mask ever could. And, tumbling over an armchair, he demonstrates the slapstick prowess gained in his previous career as an acrobat.

Farces function by the accretion of subplots, and *Arsenic* has a doozy of one: the return of the family's other serial killer, the one-man Murder Inc. that is Mortimer's brother Jonathan. A drunken bout of plastic surgery has so arranged Jonathan's features that this Frankenstein mobster must identify to the other Brewsters using personal knowledge, like the prodigal Ulysses. It has also left him with a much-remarked resemblance to Boris Karloff, who, sadly, couldn't do the film because he was needed in the play. Raymond Massey, Karloff's costar from *The Old Dark House* (1932)—with its family of genteel maniacs, an *Arsenic* urtext—is an excellent substitute. All he lacks is the obvious in-joke joy of actually being Boris. Capra had tried to get Warners to loan Humphrey Bogart to Broadway so that he could extract Karloff—which suggests that Bogart must surely have been considered for the movie, an intriguing prospect.

By Jonathan's side is Dr. Einstein, master of quick face-lifts and slow torture, played by Bertolt Brecht's favorite actor, Peter Lorre. Like Grant, this egg-eyed homunculus is associated more with Hitchcock than with Capra, but he is magical, mesmeric: watch his small body bend like a bow as he retrieves his hip flask. Director Roger Corman has recalled how Lorre's discombobulated improvisation would drive the meticulously prepared Karloff crazy on *The Raven* (1963), but this is an earlier phase in his career, when he could still stick to a script, even while the pills and booze were raising hell with his metabolism. Master of the lachrymose wheedle, the watery gaze, Lorre would bring an uncanny innocent quality to myriad decadent schemers like Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* (shot the same year as *Arsenic*), a child telling a tale, wide-eyed with wonder at his own invention—solemn like a child, too, and hilarious, maybe because of that exaggerated, infantile sincerity.



Farces on the big screen often look, well, stagy: a lot of running about in overlit rooms. But *Arsenic* benefits from the handy visual style provided by the mock-horror-noir angle. Capra and cinematographer Sol Polito devise some thrilling chiaroscuro, shooting scenes by match light (one assumes Polito must be enhancing the glow with a spotlight, but the trick is undetectable) or using only the light coming under a door. Farces are all about fear—typically the fear of getting caught—but this one is so steeped in panic-terror that it can justify all manner of stylistic brio; it is Capra's most flamboyant job since *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932).

Polito was a Warners house cameraman, with whom Capra had never worked before and never would again; an all-rounder at home with swashbucklers, musicals, gangster pics; a fellow Sicilian. He seems to have adjusted happily to Capra's idiosyncratic approach—the multiple cameras, the hectic pacing—and helped carved out these distinctive moments: tiny pools of light in stygian ink-scapes. When the malignant Jonathan lays out his plans to Dr. Einstein, squatting on the stairs, Jonathan is merely the huge shadow of a head, dwarfing the doc, who squirms between the banisters as if gripped by enormous chopsticks. This kind of expressionism is a throwback to early talking pictures and even silents—Capra's technique was dazzling but always somehow fixed in some earlier period. All these tricks would come back, hard, when film noir took off after the war—too bad Capra never fully embraced that genre.

Much of the film's freneticism comes from Capra playing the dialogue of one group over the actions of someone else, so we get two stories at once. Delicate work, as it's axiomatic that you may tell only one joke at a time. Capra somehow keeps multiple comic balls in the air simultaneously, staggering the payoffs so they don't crush one another. He'd started shooting with multiple cameras in 1930, in order, he claimed, to get all of Barbara Stanwyck's angles in one take, since she was never as good repeating herself. (But wasn't everything shot with multiple cameras in 1930? Capra's big idea was to keep doing it after everyone else stopped.) This approach allows the actors to take their scenes at breakneck speed, yelling over one another if necessary, everything captured at once with perfect continuity.

Capra was permitted to borrow three of the play's most lovable leads: Josephine Hull and Jean Adair as the poisoning sisters, and John Alexander as delusional Teddy. And Warners supplied studio mainstays such as Priscilla Lane (captivating little punkin), Lorre (doleful imp), and Jack Carson (clod). This talent pool was freshened with the likes of Edward Everett Horton—all too clearly whittled from a parsnip, a study in twitchy dithering—and James Gleason, an exasperated shovel.

Hull, also admirable in *Harvey* (1950)—another classic play-film that was more popular with audiences than critics—brings a unique daintiness to the role of Abby, a tiptoe prance transforming her hefty torso into a bobbing balloon. Adair, who plays Martha, had been billed alongside Grant in vaudeville in Rochester, New York, back in 1922, and nursed the teenage tumbler through a bout of rheumatic fever. He remembered her fondly and was delighted to perform alongside her again.

The aunts' sweetness is both the disguise that enables them to function as successful poisoners, unsuspected for years, and completely genuine. Their only vice, apart from homicide, is a genteel bigotry—they're saddened by the way their Brooklyn neighborhood has changed, and horrified at the thought of Mr. Spenalzo, with his invented Italianate name, being buried in their cellar with the more respectably Anglo-Saxon kills. I can only imagine the immigrant Capra chortling to himself at this polite middle-class prejudice.

Mostly, *Arsenic* follows its playscript closely, save for the start and finish. The opening baseball riot is part of a witty intro narrated by title cards, incorporating snatches of newsreel reality, something nearly every Capra film of the previous decade had also done. It's an approved way of "opening out" a play—rather than blasting into a dozen locations, destroying all those careful Aristotelian unities you just bought, you start outdoors in the world of cinema, then slide into the play and basically stay there.

The rambunctious beginning leads into less violent shenanigans at the marriage bureau. Grant had insisted on having his role expanded, so screenwriters Julius J. and Philip G. Epstein—soon of *Casablanca* (1942)—make Mortimer a campaigner against marriage whose engagement to a minister's daughter could cause him professional embarrassment. This sequence feels more like pure Capra than anything else in the film, because it's the only crowd scene, thronging with seen-that-face-before bit players and alive with ethnic diversity. In many Hollywood classics, attempts at inclusion can feel stereotyped or condescending, but here it's rather sweet to see Chinese American and African American couples queuing together with our leads. Capra complained that the studios prevented him from using Jewish comics, for fear of supplying the Nazis with "ammunition." And, he told Schickel in 1973, "I remember having to give [Jewish comic] Benny Rubin little odd jobs—inserts of his feet and his hands—to keep him going." Of course he didn't have to. He chose to.

Priscilla Lane isn't really given the character and screen time of a true romantic lead. She's more of an adorable complication—and part of a trend in Capra's work, phasing out the firecracker dames (Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Jean Arthur) who sparked up his thirties movies, heading into a home-and-hearth period that feeds into the filmmaker's postwar decline, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) being the sole major exception. In a way, the shortness of the role excuses its relative blandness, as Elaine has the thankless task of personifying normality.

Years later, Lane wrote: "It was a great pleasure working with Frank . . . I remember everyone was quite impressed with the set of Brooklyn and with the streetcar running in the background. It was complete with the big bridge." The set is indeed a marvel, constructed on Warners' massive Stage 7, at the time thirty-five feet higher than any other in Hollywood, with a full-size house and cemetery, diminishing through forced perspective into a Lilliputian Manhattan. On-set pictures show Capra and Grant standing like colossi, munchkin gravestones at their feet, shoulder-high houses behind them, the Brooklyn Bridge overhead, easily as tall as a house. Big but small but big.

This trompe l'oeil wonderland makes a marvelous backdrop, quite convincing yet not too real, for the sinister Brewster family saga. Charles Addams had begun his macabre series of cartoons for the *New Yorker*, detailing the antics of a nameless clan of gothic creeps, and the same sense of grim twinkle sparkles through Joseph Kesselring's play and the Epsteins' adaptation. Nazism was about to make the pseudoscience of eugenics go badly out of style, but anxiety about criminal bloodlines, chromosomal psychopathy, and bad seeds was still endemic. The theme underlies *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), more subtly and benignly, but madness and nervous breakdowns and suicide are near obsessions with Capra, despite his sunny reputation. Perhaps it was Mortimer's anxiety about his mental inheritance that attracted the director in the first place. (His biographer Joseph McBride notes that he described his mother as "nuts." And she made wine in the basement too.) Though Capra always insisted that it was the chance to make something unserious for once that really seduced him.

He picked the right story, a taut farce with no redeeming social content. The structural precision and big laughs hold it together in lieu of thematic weightiness. The film handles serial murder with absurd delicacy, barely showing a glimpse of a corpse, though the sisters' trophy cabinet of gentlemen's hats may provoke a mild shudder in this era, when we're all experts on the behavioral patterns of serial killers and can register this once-quaint detail as uncomfortably authentic.

In the final weeks of shooting, two major events took place: Grant finally got engaged to Hutton, and the Japanese military bombed Pearl Harbor. Undoubtedly the second event cast a pall over the production, but it doesn't seem to show. Grant finished his work on *Arsenic* five days after the attack, and on the same day Capra joined the Signal Corps. But, luckily for us, he was granted a few weeks to finish postproduction on what would be his only black comedy, and one of the finest farces ever filmed.



Capturing *Arsenic and Old Lace*, in One Macabre Image

BY F. RON MILLER

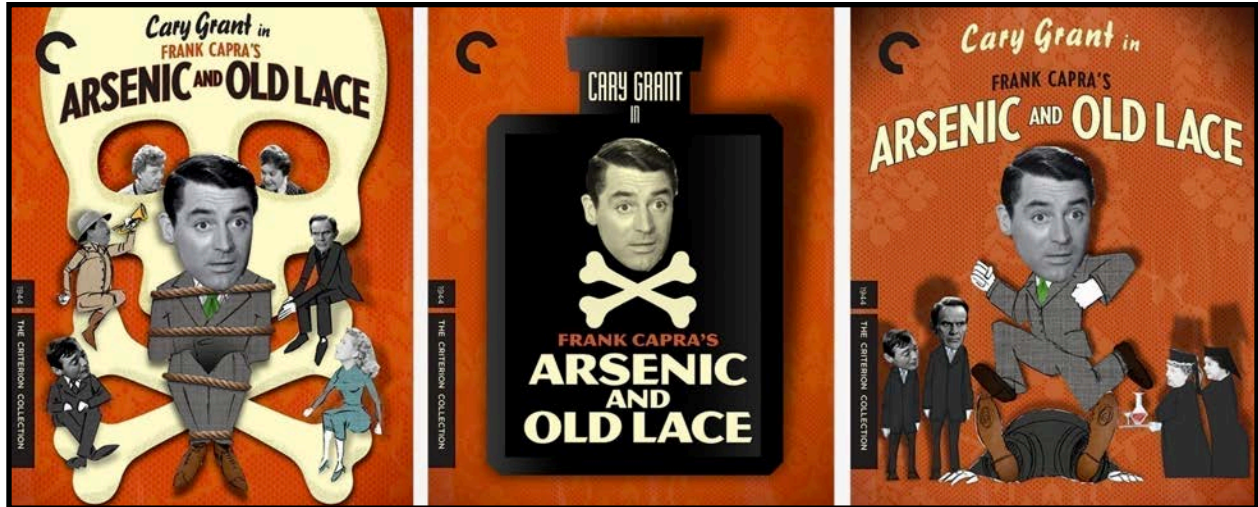
Source: Miller, F. Ron. "Capturing Arsenic and Old Lace, in One Macabre Image." *The Criterion Collection*, www.criterion.com/current/posts/7972-capturing-arsenic-and-old-lace-in-one-macabre-image.

Earlier this year, I got an email from Criterion art director Eric Skillman asking me to create artwork for an upcoming release of Frank Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944). He referenced a couple of Criterion covers that I had designed previously: *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Those courted an Old Hollywood–movie-poster vibe. This one, Eric said, should do the same—only with a hint of the macabre. That made sense. *Arsenic and Old Lace* is equal parts screwball comedy (in the vein of *Bringing Up Baby*) and pitch-black gothic comedy (shades of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*). He added, "If you could find the halfway point between Jacques Kapralik and Edward Gorey, that would be the sweet spot."

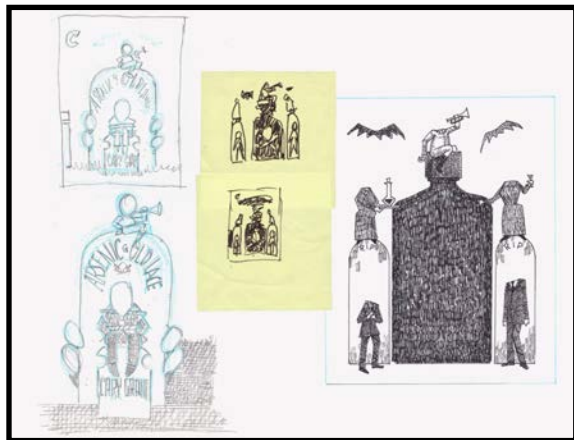
For anyone unfamiliar, Jacques Kapralik was an illustrator and caricaturist who designed posters and other promotional artwork, mostly for MGM, during the 1940s and '50s. If you don't know his work, seek it out. Kapralik didn't just draw his compositions, he constructed them three-dimensionally, using real-world objects, and lit them as tiny theatrical pieces that are so exuberant, they virtually come to life. Edward Gorey, on the other hand, was a twentieth-century American artist well-known for crosshatched pen-and-ink cartoons depicting vaguely unsettling Victorian scenes, on display throughout his dozens of illustrated books. Reconciling these two singular approaches was an inviting challenge.

I felt from the get-go that the cover ought to describe the movie as an ensemble piece. Sure, it's a Cary Grant movie, but *Arsenic and Old Lace* also showcases a who's who of character actors: Peter Lorre as an alcoholic plastic surgeon, the great James Gleason as an exasperated police lieutenant, Raymond Massey as Jonathan, the supremely creepy brother of Grant's Mortimer—the list goes on. I needed a hook, though. A black bottle, a skull and crossbones, and a decanter and glass of elderberry wine were the first elements from the film that I homed in on. From there, I sketched a few vignettes, my favorite showing the characters perched on a death's-head. I tightened those doodles, gussied them up into something Kapralik-esque, and sent them off to Eric as a way of asking, "This sort of thing?"





Eric felt the sketches were on the right track, although he wondered if there was other imagery that might work better than the skull and crossbones. (“On a bottle it clearly means ‘poison,’ but in the abstract the first thing I’m getting is ‘pirates,’” he wrote.) He also recognized the Kapralik voice in my layouts but wasn’t getting enough of the Gorey side. So I “gothed it up” on the second pass. I changed the secondary color from orange to purple. The orange, intended as a reference to the film’s Halloween setting, was coming off a bit too sunny. Purple, on the other hand—a Victorian-era color of mourning—seemed a moody complement to the emerging Gorey trappings. First, I reworked the skull-and-crossbones concept, proceeding to do a version with gravestones and bats. While sketching this concept, the visual similarities between a headstone and a bottle dawned on me. Something clicked. I scratched out some lines on a Post-it: a poison bottle flanked by two gravestones, along with the cast of characters. I liked it. It was more than an illustration of a scene. It had some metaphorical heft. I worked it up.



We had a solid cover direction. Time to find a title treatment. The typography up until this point was, for the most part, placeholder—there for flavor as the primary elements were developed. Eric and I agreed that the type on the second round was feeling a tad overworked. Perhaps something Old Hollywood would be in order?

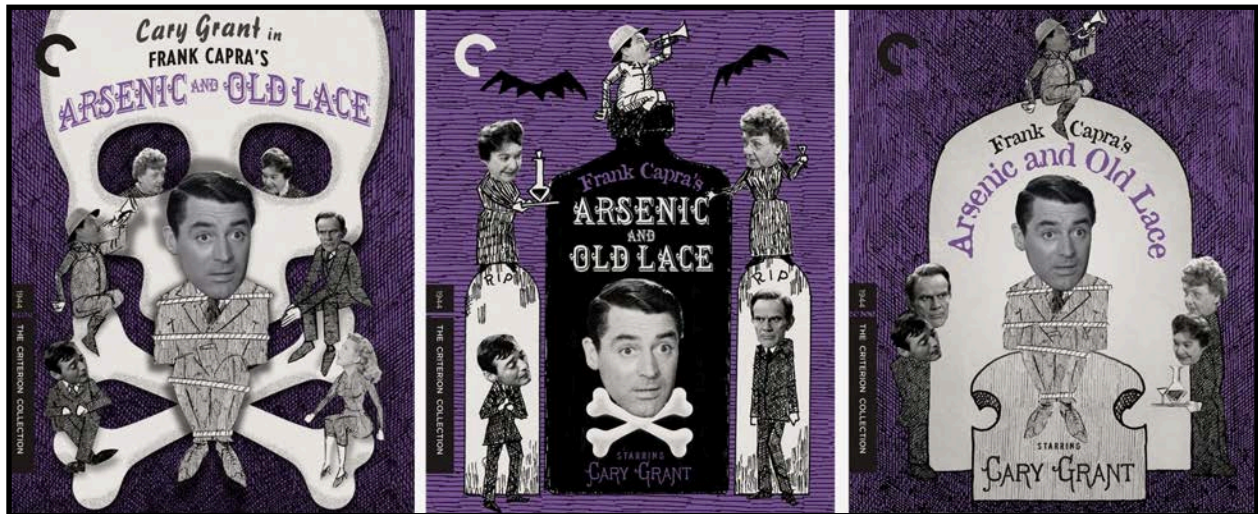
Knowing what type could work meant seeing it in context. I commenced “building a set”—hanging a backdrop, creating the scenery and playing with lighting, albeit in Photoshop, rather than in a photographer’s studio, as Kapralik would have done. I’d yet to consider costumes, so I worked with the figures in mannequin form. Kapralik liked to embellish his set pieces with doll-size versions of real-world objects, and I looked to do the same

by giving each character a plot-specific prop to handle. I left Jonathan’s hands free because, well, he’s a strangler and he might need them. The bats are vintage Halloween tchotchkes.

In the meantime, I was pulling type samples for the title treatment and credits that would appear on the cover. I considered a variety of possibilities, from straight-up 1940s-style to poison-label type to something with a hint of Victoriana—as long as it had qualities reminiscent of hand-lettered movie posters. I set up multiple treatments and tried them out in situ. There were a few strong contenders but one standout, whose distinctive sinewy letterforms harmonized ideally with the surrounding drawn elements, almost as if it all came from the same hand. It's the one we ended up using.

The final pieces were the figures, which were hand-drawn in pen and ink. At first, I drew the crosshatching in contour to suggest dimension, but I soon discovered that so much line work skewed the balance of the piece too heavily toward the Gorey side of the equation. What would Kapralik have done? Perhaps use cutouts of Gorey-esque hatching, just as he used cut-up pieces of fabric? I inked up a handful of hatched swatches and applied them to the drawings. The result was much more graphic and appealing.

It all came together looking as I'd hoped. The nods to both Kapralik and Gorey are present, yet one doesn't seem to overwhelm the other. There's still plenty of room for the image to be its own thing. I like to think we found that sweet spot.



Other Reviews

Remember ‘Arsenic and Old Lace’? It’s Back at Court Theatre, with a Talented Cast to Freshen Things Up

BY CHRIS JONES

Source: Jones, Chris. “Review: Remember ‘Arsenic and Old Lace’? It’s Back at Court Theatre, with a Talented Cast to Freshen Things Up.” *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago Tribune, 15 Sept. 2022, www.chicagotribune.com/2022/09/15/review-remember-arsenic-and-old-lace-its-back-at-court-theatre-with-a-talented-cast-to-freshen-things-up/.

Best remembered now as a 1944 movie starring Cary Grant, *Arsenic and Old Lace* was a big, fat, Broadway hit in 1941. In an era when long-running shows were far less common, Joseph Kesselring’s dark comedy ran for a whopping 1,444 performances and was a similar smash in London. And readers of a certain age likely will recall the title as a staple of the stock and amateur circuits throughout the midcentury decades that followed. The title once was so common as to be a cliché.

But in 2022, it’s a rarity. The last time I was the show was more than 22 years ago, when it was produced by the Drury Lane in Oakbrook Terrace. Renee Matthews and Ann Whitney, Chicago theater royalty, were the stars.

But Ron OJ Parson, Chicago’s currently essential director, has revived the corpse for a new era at Court Theatre. He’s cast a mostly Black cast in this story of two elderly Brooklyn sisters who poison 11 lonely men who were unfortunate enough to come knocking on their door and drink their elderberry wine. They then stuff their bodies in the basement.

Abby and Martha Brewster, played at Court by TayLar and Celeste Williams, are otherwise delightful company, holding court over an eccentric household that includes their brother Teddy, who believes he is Teddy Roosevelt and likes to dig the Panama Canal, and nephew Mortimer (Eric Gerard), the normative character, who is, of all things, a theater critic. So normative only goes so far.

People tend to think of *Arsenic and Old Lace* as a thriller, if they think of it at all, and that’s not true. It’s not a whodunit but a freewheeling satire. Kesselring got in his licks at critics (his character hates the theater), but also at Irish cops, Albert Einstein (Guy Van Swearingen plays a fictional “Dr. Einstein”), and a whole variety of other figures. It’s a wacky show: In Parson’s production, the incomparable A.C. Smith, playing a thinly veiled spoof of Boris Karloff originally, shows up with a face so disfigured you briefly worry for the actor’s health.

What’s cool about this production is the chance to see so diverse a cast in a show that does not relegate the Black actors to minor roles nor oblige them to hold the burden of performing a story about racial strife and struggle that confronts an audience. Rather, the show offers a slew of fun roles in which these actors surely would not have been cast a generation ago. You can feel their sense of relief flowing in waves from the stage and the casting is a reminder of the rewards that come when a director goes in this direction.

Parson’s shows invariably are infused by jazz and this production is no exception. He gives his actors room here and some of their work, especially in the first act, is screwball-good.

To be frank, though, I found some of the creaky eccentricities of the script eventually wore the production down. “Arsenic and Old Lace” is a long, three-act play and it’s full of sly jokes that were designed to play for the literary Broadway-goer in the 1940s, which fall a bit flat these days when the political and cultural references are not so widely understood. And by the end of the night, some of the fabulous initial tension in the show dissipates, as if the cast were just trying to find their way toward the final curtain. Snips were no doubt not an option, but Parson is known for fast pacing and I say kicking this one up another gear would serve the show well.

That said, both TayLar and Williams are just terrific, and Gerard shows some real farcical chops, as does Emma Jo Boyden as his long-suffering girlfriend. Smith is a sight to behold, roaming malevolently around John Culbert’s tricked-out setting with Van Swearingen as his crazy sidekick, the pair spitting out one truly weird line after another.

I’m not sure this production will convince everyone of the need to revive the script; I was entertained by the marketing materials describing the piece as offering “healing laughter,” which is a bit of a stretch for a caustic show with so many murders, not to mention a pair of assassins at the heart of the story.

Kesselring would have been amused by that, I think, and happy that old-school fans of his forgotten Broadway blockbuster will have a blast.



Photo of Eric Gerard, TayLar, Thomas J. Cox, A.C. Smith, and Celeste Williams by Michael Brosilow

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance

- In what ways do you think humor can be used to explore serious or dark subject matter? How might comedy be employed to address themes like family, morality, and societal expectations?
- Reflect on the role of laughter and levity in society. Why do you think it's important for people to find humor even in challenging or absurd situations?
- How might the theatricality of seeing a live performance rather than a movie enhance your experience as an audience member? What aspects of live performance do you think will contribute to the overall enjoyment of the play?
- How would you react if you found out one of your relatives was hiding a deep-dark secret? Would you protect them, help them, or call the cops?
- What are the benefits of helping others? What does it take to be selfless? What responsibilities do we have in the lives of others?
- How much are we impacted by death in our lives?
- What types of relationships are most important in your life? Familial? Romantic? Professional?

Things to Watch For in Performance

- Was there any casting that you thought was especially appropriate or inappropriate? Why?
- Was there a good, motivated relationship between the set and the action of the play?
- Were there levels on the stage for variety? If so, did they heighten the story?
- How does the color scheme and costume design heighten the show?
- There are a ton of props used in this play. Do these props help further the plot or character development? How?
- How is the passage of time conveyed through design?
- How does the sound design help heighten the story?
- How does the theatricality of the play contribute to its comedic and dramatic elements?

Things to Think About After the Performance

- What do you think the core value and then the theme is of this play?
- Why is this play still significant in the American Theater?
- Do our experiences or our relationships define who we are?
- What are the implications of the Brewster sister's actions in terms of morality and ethics? How do their perceptions of right and wrong differ from societal norms?
- How do the relationships between the characters change throughout the show?
- How does the comedic tone of the play help to address darker themes such as murder, insanity, and mortality?
- What role does humor play in addressing serious social issues, such as mental illness and the criminal justice system?
- Consider the contrasts between appearances and reality within the play. How do characters present themselves versus who they truly are?
- How does *Arsenic and Old Lace* provide a commentary on the human condition and the need for laughter and levity in society?

Other Analysis Tools

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, what happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is “about”? In a nutshell, how does the playwright drive their point(s) home?
- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for this work?

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes, which includes one 15 minute intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, April 4 at 6:45pm in MAC 140 preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, April 12 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast, and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

Please join us!



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Spring 2024
Production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Lynn M. Borge as Abby Brewster, Alexander Wisniewski as Mortimer Brewster, and Lynnette Myers as Martha Brewster