

10-1983

Arsenic & Old Lace Program

University of Southern Maine Department of Theatre

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ARSENIC & OLD LACE

The History of Russell Hall

Russell Hall, named for Gorham Normal School Principal Walter E. Russell, was the first major construction on the Gorham campus since the erection of East Hall (now Andrews) in 1916. The new building, containing the Auditorium and the Gymnasium, was built in 1931.

The program of exercises for its dedication was held on Friday afternoon, December 11, 1931, and the address was given by Payson Smith, then the Commissioner of Education for Massachusetts, for whom a building would later be named on the Portland campus.

The students lost no time in putting the new facilities to use—at 8:00 p.m. the Dramatic Club presented a comedy in the Auditorium entitled *Kidnapping Betty*, and at 9:00 p.m. the first basketball game in the Auditorium was played by the seniors against the juniors.

The taking of photographs, smoking, drinking, or eating is expressly prohibited within the theatre.

Russell Square Players

present

Arsenic and Old Lace

by

Joseph Kesselring

Directed

by

Thomas Power

Scenic Design

by

Charles Kading

Costume Design

by

Carol Farrell

The Footnote

When *Arsenic and Old Lace* opened on Broadway on January 10, 1941, neither producers Joseph Crouse and Howard Lindsay, nor playwright Joseph Kesselring realized the controversy their play was to create. At that time, America was still wrapped in a blanket of naiveté. Although one war was raging in Europe and another in Asia, the United States was still at peace and its people enjoyed the flourishing economy that had been a by-product of those wars. The Depression was past. America's safety from invasion was insured by the expanse of two oceans. Life was good; the American cause was just; and our thoughts were still regulated by Victorian morality which was echoed in the popular culture of the day. This was exemplified by the stories in the Saturday Evening Post and in the novels of such popular writers as Booth Tarkington and Mary Ellen Chase. Equally important were the efforts of the Hayes Office—Hollywood's self-imposed censor. From this office came the guidelines for what was proper to show on the silver screen and these guidelines molded many a young mind. Crime does not pay, marriage is sacred, true love is everlasting, and good will be rewarded were but a few of the values professed.

Arsenic and Old Lace was an innovative play in that it broke from the tradition of the standard mystery plays of the day. The play was a farce that focused on murder and insanity as its comic elements. Was this Art? Was this play true to the moral standards of Theatre? No sooner had the critics put their last period to the rave reviews, then a ground swell of moral indignation arose from the more conservative members of the populace. This literary war called "Arsenic versus Old Lace" was fought in the letters to

the editor section of every New York paper and in the New York Times, in particular, during the winter and spring of 1941. Most vocal, and the self-appointed leader of the morality camp was Jessie Wilcox of Brooklyn. A Harvard educated woman and a product of Professor Baker's noted 47 Workshop, Ms. Wilcox penned letter after letter attacking the depraved qualities depicted in the play. The following excerpts from her most noted letter to the Times on March 16th indicates her indignation.

"Why all the huzzahs and foot-stamping over *Arsenic and Old Lace*? Is it drama, is it good theatre, is it entertainment, is it worth the money—any money? . . . Should there be laughter over so tragic a situation? . . . Murder is not funny. In spite of humorously written lines, it is still not a funny subject, and I feel it is an imposition on theatre-loving people to ask them to spend two and a half hours in such an atmosphere. The terrific success of the thing and the echoes of thoughtless laughter are to me no excuse for its being. It was built on shifting sand, it is supported by a "you must go" public and it will soon fall of its own weight."

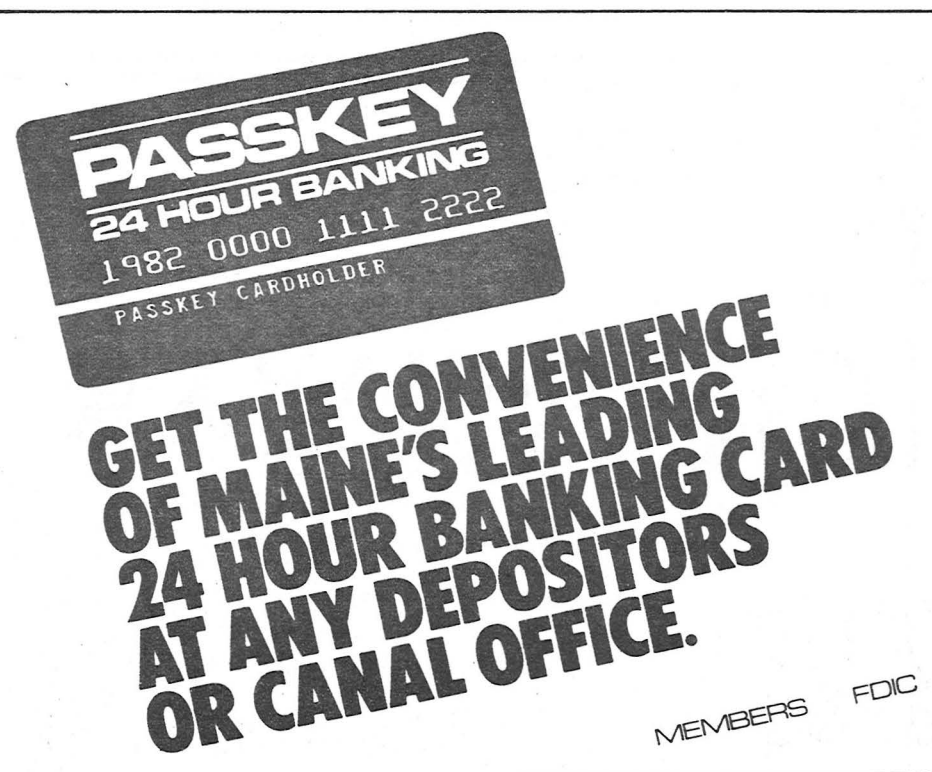
A volley of answers appeared in the following editions of the Times. Some writers questioned Ms. Wilcox's contention that the subject matter was not funny. If this was true they asked, then why were the audiences laughing and applauding with such glee? Another writer attacked Ms. Wilcox's puritanical attitude and said her letter should have been titled "Vinegar and Old Hat". Still another wrote,

" . . . if Ms. Wilcox feels too sad about the whole thing, I might suggest that she visit the two sweet old ladies in the play and I feel sure they could fix her up with a little elderberry wine. Or is that funny?"

The controversy reached its zenith when Brook Atkinson, dean of the New York critics in the 1940s, entered the fray. In a three column article on the front page of the February 23rd Sunday entertainment section of the Times, Mr. Atkinson asked the question, "Is murder a comic topic?", and proceeded to answer his own question. He argued that "in my opinion, the comic point of view as represented in *Arsenic and Old Lace* is a good deal healthier than a realistic point

of view. Like all good farces, it asks you to accept something incredible in the first scene and then proceeds through a harum-scarum story with swift and convincing logic." He finished by asking, "isn't it less callous or morbid to make a game of murder than to wallow in the blood of the victims?"

Though Atkinson's article was not the final comment to the discussion, it did bring the quarrel to a climax and the subject soon died in the shadow of a new debate on the merits of the mystery play, *Mr. and Mrs. North*. Regardless of the adverse publicity, *Arsenic and Old Lace* "soon fell of its own weight" in 1944 after 1444 performances—the fourth longest running show in Broadway's history to that date.



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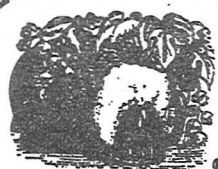
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The Cast

In order of appearance

Abby Brewster	Clare R. Hooper
The Reverend Dr. Harper	Michael Roussin
Teddy Brewster	James Paul Anderson
Officer Brophy	Steven Douglas
Officer Klein	Mark A. Daly
Martha Brewster	Cat Purington
Elaine Harper	Julie A. Powers
Mortimer Brewster	Stephen Price
Mr. Gibbs	Glenn A. Palmer
Jonathan Brewster	Harold S. Withee
Dr. Einstein	Kevin S. Patterson
Officer O'Hara	Nigel Evans
Lieutenant Rooney	Ron Aromando
Mr. Witherspoon	Jeff M. Cyr

Synopsis of Scenes

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

Act I

An afternoon in September

Act II

That same night

Act III

Scene 1: Later that night

Scene 2: Early the next morning

There will be a ten-minute intermission between acts.



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Production Staff

Theatre Manager Eileen T. Sanborn
 Business Manager Susan D. Beaulieu
 Stage Manager Sarah Westaway
 Master Carpenter Thomas C. Vail
 Costumer Cil Cutter
 Head Electrician Ellen Rousseau
 Assistant Stage Manager Renee Lourey
 Props Master W. M. Kelly
 Photographer Debra Lajoie

Costume Crew

Melanie Detmmer
 Sarah Scott

Lighting

Libby Norris
 Ant Haddon

Properties

Madeline Snyder
 Lisa Jacques

Sound

Mark Gerardi

Stage Crew

Maureen O'Meara

Management Personnel

Suzanne Beaulieu
 Sheila Curtis
 Mark A. Daly
 Karen Nazer
 Lori J. Gage
 Nancy A. Munroe
 Pamela Peterson
 Cathy Record

C.E. CARLL AGENCY



The Producing Company

Thomas Power (Director) is an associate professor at USM where he has taught for the past 16 years. During that time he has directed over 30 productions, one of which, *The Fantasticks*, was invited to tour England. Mr. Power was the managing director for the Children's Theatre of Maine from 1974 to 1980. Though his emphasis is towards teaching, acting, and directing, he has an extensive background in theatrical promotion and management. Mr. Power is a prolific playwright having written seven plays which include *The Burning of Falmouth* and numerous pieces for children's theatre. Most recently, he collaborated with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in revising *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*.

Charles S. Kading (Scenic designer) is an associate professor of theatre at USM where he has taught for the past six years. He earned his B.A. in theatre arts from California State University at Fullerton, his M.A. in scenic design from the University of Washington, and his M.F.A. in scenic design from California State University at Fullerton. He has designed professionally for the Union Plaza Hotel in Las Vegas, the Seattle Repertory Company, Intiman Theatre, Casa Mana Musicals and the Fullerton Civic Light Opera. Mr. Kading has designed 23 productions for the Russell Square Players and has been recognized by the American College Theatre Festival for his design of *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*. Local theatre audiences know his work from settings in the productions of *My Fair Lady*, *The Music Man*, and *Così Fan Tutti*.

Carol Farrell (Costume designer) is the newest member of the faculty at the USM Theatre department. She received a B.A.

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degree in theatre at the University of San Francisco and a M.A. degree in costuming from the University of Connecticut. For the past ten years, she has been an active costume designer both on the West Coast and in New England. A member of the faculty of the University of Maine at Orono until 1981, Ms. Farrell now resides in Portland. Last year she formed a professional touring puppet group called "Figures of Speech." Her credits include *Measure for Measure* at the University of Connecticut, *The Cherry Orchard* at UMO, and *Così Fan Tutti* for USM.

Cil Cutter (Costumer) Ms. Cutter has designed costumes for *You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Lion in Winter*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Side by Side by Sondheim* for the Russell Square Players. Ms. Cutter came to USM after five years of professional freelance dressmaking and finds costuming a challenging and stimulating experience. Upon graduation she plans to continue her education in costume design, working towards an M.F.A.

Sarah Westaway (Stage manager) is a British exchange student from King Alfred's College where she has both acted and stage managed. Sarah is an active person in her homeland, involving herself not only in educational drama, but also in the York Theatre Royal. She has played such demanding roles as Medea, and Perdita in *Winter's Tale*. She says she is enjoying her stay in the "colonies."

Thomas C. Vail (Master carpenter) During the academic year Mr. Vail is the master carpenter for the Russell Square Players. He has designed sets for Portland High School, Portland Players, Vocal Arts Foundation, and the Town Players of Buxton, of which he is one of the founding members and currently serving on their board of directors. In addition to technical training, Mr. Vail has studied mime and acting. He has performed in over 40 productions in the last seven years. His most recent roles include Martin Nelson in *A Mighty Fortress* with the Vocal Arts Foundation (Go Out Singing Company) and Harold Hill in *The Music Man* at the Biddeford City Theatre.

The Acting Company

Clare Hooper (Abby Brewster) is a cheerful, buoyant sophomore theatre major from King Alfred's College in England. She and five other British exchange students are presently here at USM to study drama for the semester. At King Alfred's she was involved in many productions including Saunderson's *After Liverpool*, a television play, Gosforth's *Fête*, and *Female Parts*. Miss Hooper is also a member of an amateur Little Theatre in her hometown of Sutton Coldfield. Her professional aspirations are either to become an actress or to work in British children's television.

Cat Purington (Martha Brewster) is a senior theatre major at USM. At age fourteen, Ms. Purington started her artistic career by singing in a local talent show. This inspired her to continue private studies in music and in acting. Her first appearance with the Russell Square Players was as a bellhop in *Oh Dad Poor Dad* in the Fall of 1981. Since then, she has been involved in many USM productions including *Stop the World I Want to Get Off*, *The Inspector General*, *The Music Man*, and *Così Fan Tutti*. Her favorite show was *My Fair Lady*, in which she played three different roles. After graduation, she plans to continue her studies in both music and theatre.

James Paul Anderson (Teddy Brewster) is a senior theatre major who transferred to USM last year from the University of Maine at Fort Kent. He is a versatile theatre person and has been involved in many aspects of theatre: lighting, stage construction, acting, and directing. His acting achievements include Solomon Bozon in *Everybody Loves Opal* and

Howard Benedict in *Applause*. In order to keep himself diversified, he has done some directing in children's theatre. Among his many technical accomplishments are four years of lighting design and a year's tour with a New England rock band. In 1982 he was chosen for the Outstanding Senior award for theatre. After graduation, he will continue his studies on the West Coast.

Stephen Price (Mortimer Brewster) is a senior elementary education major with a minor in theatre. Stephen worked for many years as a professional carpenter and has assisted in the technical side of many USM productions. In addition to this, he has appeared in several shows. He played the typesetter in *Personals* and was in the chorus of *Così Fan Tutti* last year. After graduation, Stephen hopes to teach theatre arts, sciences, and general humanities to children.

Julie A. Powers (Elaine Harper) is a senior at USM, studying both English and theatre. She is a transfer student from the University of Maine at Farmington. While there, her performances included: Midge Harvey in *The Hollow* and Sybil Chase in *Private Lives*. At USM she has played the following: Edith Berringer in *You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running* and a chorus member in *The Lion in Winter*. She is currently the student representative to the faculty of the Russell Square Players Association. After graduation, she hopes to teach both theatre and English.

Harold S. Withee (Jonathan Brewster) is a freshman theatre major at USM. He is a recent graduate of Carrabec High School

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where he performed in many productions including *Spoon River Anthology* and *Godspell*. In 1981 he was part of the company of Lakewood Theatre's *South Pacific*. For his role of Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, he was selected for the All-State Cast at the State One-Act Play Festival. Mr. Withee plans either an acting or teaching career in theatre, depending upon which work will prove to be more lucrative. He remarked, "I may die for my art but not by starving!"

Kevin S. Patterson (Dr. Einstein) is a senior theatre major at USM and was first seen on this stage in *The Inspector General*. He returns to us from a two-year sabbatical in Jerusalem, Israel where he performed in *The Jerusalem Passion Play* and *The Nativity Play of Bethlehem*. Last year he was featured in Doubleday's pictorial book, *The Last Hours with Jesus* as the angel Gabriel. In addition to performing, he taught English on the West Bank. He is currently working on a new fantasy play based on George MacDonald's *The Light Princess*.

Michael Roussin (Reverend Dr. Harper) is a sophomore at USM. Michael's first love (along with theatre) is recording, at which he spends a major portion of his time. He currently works as a recording engineer for Century Records and has assisted in recording commercials for Walt Disney Studios and advertisements for other numerous regional projects. He has established his own music publishing company, Roussin Music, and hopes someday to sing and produce his own music.

Steven Douglas (Officer Brophy) is a junior education major at USM. This is his first appearance on the stage at the Gorham theatre, though he has had an interest in theatre for many years. Theatre is an avocation for Steven, for he plans to finish his education at the University

and then teach mathematics at either the junior high or high school level.

Mark Daly (Officer Klein) is a freshman communications major at USM. Mr. Daly considers himself an average young American boy with an enterprising mind. He plans to pursue a career in advertising design, acting, or video.

Nigel Evans (Officer O'Hara) is a British exchange student from King Alfred's College. While there he has performed in many shows including *After Liverpool* and *Palach*. His most recent performance is *Candlemas and the Killing of the Children*, which was held in Winchester Cathedral. After his semester exchange at USM, he will return to England to complete a three-year drama degree course of study. Upon graduation, he plans a career in television production.

Ron Aromando (Lieutenant Rooney) is a freshman theatre major at USM. In the summer he resides in Wells where he has been active in theatre. He has been in a variety of plays, ranging from 19th century melodrama (*Dirty Work at the Crossroads*) to contemporary presentational drama (*Our Town*). Becoming an actor of professional calibre is Ronald's major goal.

Glenn A. Palmer (Mr. Gibbs) is an education major at USM. A graduate of Morse High School in Bath, Glenn has had an active interest in theatre for many years. This is his first appearance for the Russell Square Players. When asked his pinnacle of success, Glenn smiles and points out that he was voted the second best paperboy in the state of Maine in 1980.

Jeff Cyr (Mr. Witherspoon) is a freshman business major at USM. A recent graduate of Oak Hill High School, Jim has

a wide variety of interests and accomplishments. He is a cross-country runner, journalist, award-winning public speaker, and has been active in theatre since he was fourteen. Mr. Cyr plans to major in business with a minor in theatre at USM.

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Director's Notes

Joseph Kesselring would not be described as a prolific playwright. *Arsenic and Old Lace* was his only successful play. But what a success! The play has been running since 1941, and has been performed by hundreds of acting companies.

The major benefit in staging this play to the university-level performer is in the area of technical acting skills, skills that will be beneficial to the actor pursuing an acting career. The audience gets a fast-paced entertaining comedy, and the technical crew gets a workout in design construction and lighting. Kesselring has done both the audience and the theatre program a significant service.

The old chestnut still produces laughter and suspense and along with *All My Sons* gives us a fitting cross-section of American theatre of the 40s.

Our Special Thanks

Our special thanks are extended to the following people:

Hank and Nancy Beebe

Jack Cinamon

Randall Hunter

Gail Lehoux

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Russell Square Players 1983/84 Fall/Spring Season and Subscription Series Information

Six-Admit Season Ticket

The *six-admit season ticket* is a new concept in ticket sales. The six admissions may be used in any combination. You may use them singularly and attend each of the six productions; you could use three pairs for three shows; or you could use all six admissions for one performance. You decide. On the night you plan to use the ticket(s), call the Russell Square Players' reservation desk at 780-5483 and let us know how many will be attending.

As a subscriber, you will be notified of upcoming productions in ample time to make convenient reservations.

Your subscription is a \$10.00 savings over individually purchased tickets:

Total individual price for all six performances: \$ 30.00

Subscription price for all six performances: \$ 20.00

General Information

Performances

Thursday through Saturday at 8:00 p.m.; Sunday matinee the first weekend the show runs at 2:00 p.m.

Mail Orders

All mail orders should be sent to: The Russell Square Players, Russell Hall, University of Southern Maine, Gorham, Maine 04038, with a check or money order payable to University of Maine. General admission \$5.00, students \$3.00. Please inquire about group discounts.

Rest rooms

One flight down from the main entrance.

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Inquire at the Box Office.

Telephone reservations

The Box Office is open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The Box Office phone number is 780-5483.

Concessions

The concession area is in the main lobby. No food or drink in the auditorium.

Photographs

The taking of photographs in this theatre is strictly prohibited.

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Russell Square Players 1983-84 Season

Arsenic and Old Lace

October 13, 14, 15, 20, 21, and 22
Matinee October 16 at 2:00 p.m.

All My Sons

December 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, and 10
Matinee December 4 at 2:00 p.m.

Russell Square Dance Company

January 27 and 28

Miss Julie

February 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18
Matinee December 12 at 2:00 p.m.

Lark Rise to Candleford

No dates set at this time

History of the American Film

April 12, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21
Matinee April 15 at 2:00 p.m.

All performances at 8:00 p.m. unless otherwise noted.

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