

# PROSCENIUM

## **Arsenic and Old Lace**

By Joseph Kesselring

Arsenic and Old Lace

Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> to Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2015  
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

# Arsenic and Old Lace

Joseph Kesselring

## Cast:

Abby Brewster .....	Anne Gerrard
The Rev Dr Harper .....	Keith Bayross
Teddy Brewster .....	Jevan Morris
Officer Brophy .....	Arnold Glickman
Officer Klein .....	Richard Kessel
Martha Brewster .....	Caroline Bronne-Shanbury
Elaine Harper .....	Lynette Alston
Mortimer Brewster .....	Ben Morris
Mr Gibbs .....	Colin Hickman
Jonathon Brewster .....	Robert Ewen
Dr Einstein .....	David Hampton
Officer O'Hara .....	Alan Bobroff
Lieutenant Rooney .....	Alan Bailey
Mr Witherspoon .....	Colin Hickman

Directed by .....

Michael Gerrard

Stage Manager .....

Crystal Anthony

Assisted by .....

Sheila Harvey

Set Construction .....

Mark Brookes

Properties .....

Linda Hampson, Anne Gerrard

Costumes .....

Shirley Wootten

Lighting Design .....

Paul Robinson

Lighting and Sound operation .....

Roger Turner

With thanks to Alan Glover and Keith French for their help  
in set design and construction.

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

Time: 1940s

Act 1 .....An afternoon in September

Act 2.....That same night

*Interval*

Act 3, Scene 1 .....Later that night

Act 3, Scene 2 .....Early the next morning

## The Author

Joseph Kesselring was born in New York City in 1902, the son of Henry, a surgeon whose parents were immigrants from Germany, and Francis.

Joseph's first interests were musical: he was a choirboy and chorister in the Church of the Epiphany (Episcopalian) in Manhattan and from the age of eighteen taught singing. When in 1922 he applied for a post teaching music at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas his application was enthusiastically supported by the Church organist and choirmaster and the New York Singing Teachers' Association. While at Bethel College he lived, with other single male teachers, in Goetz House, a building that influenced the setting of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The living room with its large window seat reflected that of the Brewster sisters and there was a vast dirt-floored cellar. Goetz House is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and one of the criteria for selection was the Kesselring literary association!

Though popular with students and staff, Joseph clashed with the College authorities because of his reputation as a ladies' man and a certain laxity in following the strict Mennonite rules on, for example, smoking and participating in public dances.

He left the college after two years and his interests became much more centred on the theatre. He earned his living as a director of amateur theatricals, actor, writer of short stories and poems, producer of vaudeville sketches and finally as a playwright. He began working as a freelance playwright in 1933 and by his death in 1967 had written twelve full-length plays, four of which 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).

In 1980 the National Arts Club created the Joseph Kesselring Prize for up-and-coming playwrights, funded by his widow, Charlotte.

## The Play

Joseph Kesselring's reputation depends solely on the huge success of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The inspiration for the plot and characters has been variously attributed. An old colleague from Bethel claimed, 'All of us who knew him thought that he did indeed use backgrounds and people in Newton for his play'. Others have suggested the idea came from a book by M William Phelps *The Devil's Rooming House*, which told the true story of a house in Connecticut where Amy Arthur-Gilligan took in boarders,

promising 'life-time care', and murdered them for their pensions. And several have identified Joseph Moran, a real-life gangland surgeon, as Dr Einstein.

However, whatever the sources, the Broadway production in 1941 was an immediate hit. Theatre critic Brooks Atkinson was frankly surprised by the quality of the script: 'Nothing in Mr Kesselring's record has prepared us for the humour and ingenuity of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. His murder drama is compact with plot and comic situation. The lines are bright. The story is mad and unhackneyed.' The New York Times reported: 'Although the scene is always on the verge of macabre and the atmosphere is horribly ominous, Mr Kesselring does not have to stoop to clutching hands, pistol shots or lethal screams to get his effects. He has written a murder play as legitimate as farce-comedy.' The Herald Tribune called it 'the most riotously hilarious comedy of the season', and the Sun protested 'you wouldn't believe homicidal mania could be so funny'. The play ran in New York for 1,444 performances and in London for 1,337.

The film of the play, directed by Frank Capra, was shot in the following year. Halliwell describes it as:

A model for stage play adaptations. The famous black farce provided a frenzy of hilarious activity, and its flippant attitude to death was better received in wartime than would have been the case earlier or later. The director coaxed some perfect performances from his star cast, and added his own flair for perpetuating a hubbub. The star cast

includes Cary Grant as Mortimer, Josephine Hull and Jean Adair as the sisters, Raymond Massey as Jonathon and Peter Lorre as Dr Einstein.

In an article in *Insights*, 2001 Stephanie Chichester writes about the gestation of the play:

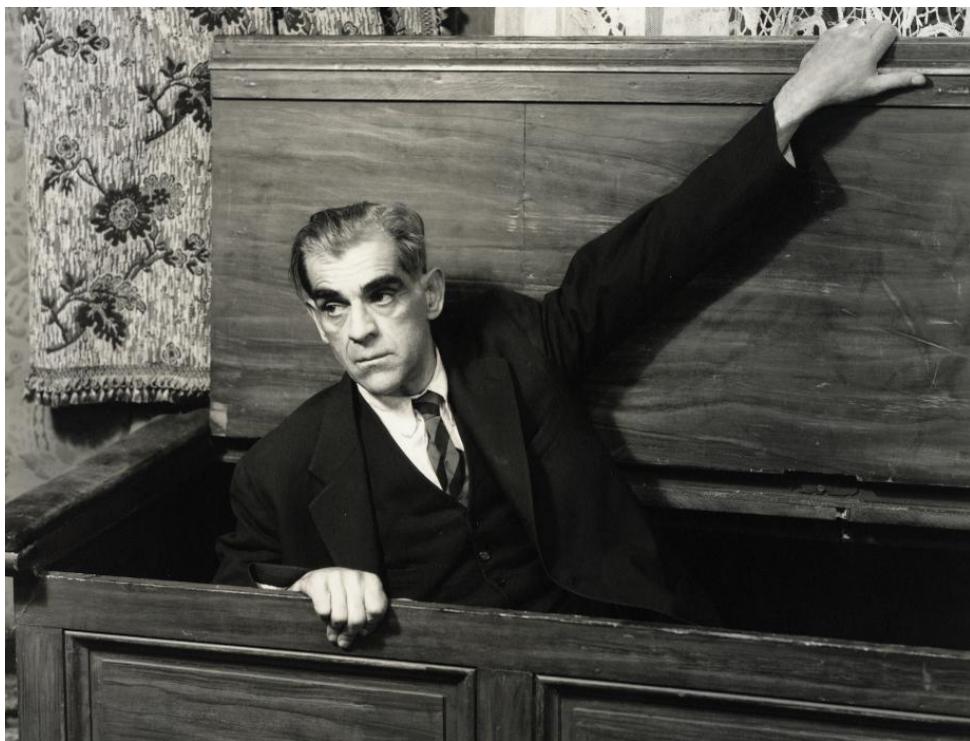
There are two good reasons for this play's brightly shining success amidst the lesser lights of Kesselring's earlier and later plays – Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse.

Though only Kesselring is credited with the authorship of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, it was, in fact, a collaboration among three playwrights.

Kesselring had sent Howard and Dorothy Lindsay a copy of the script, hoping “that Dorothy would be interested in playing one of the dear demented old sisters”. Howard handed his wife the script to read, saying he hadn't the time just then. Dorothy started reading it that evening, and as she did, she kept letting out little gasps and whoops of suppressed laughter, and ended up saying that nobody could possibly get away with a play of blithe madness and cheerful murder but that it was very, very funny. Howard, his curiosity piqued, started to read and he too began emitting similar vocal noises. The script, which was then called *Bodies in the Cellar*, was uneven. However recognising the play's great potential, Lindsay immediately sent a message to Crouse, which read:

“Shake your head, take a cup of coffee and read further. Have just read a play about two charming old ladies who

go round murdering old men. Very funny. How would you like to be a producer?” Russell wired back, “Buy it.” The two went to work as soon as they had made their agreement with Kesselring. They did some quite extensive rewriting but were careful to give full credit at all times to Kesselring.



*Boris Karloff, playing Jonathon Brewster, in the original 1941 Broadway production*

# Master Class, by David Pownall

In this engrossing, witty play, composers Shostakovich and Prokofiev find themselves confronted by the dictator, Stalin, to be told that their music is corrupt and that they must "sacrifice their individuality to the needs of the state".

Master Class shows how the power of music shapes and changes lives, politics and history.

Directed by Vincent Eavis

4th to 7th November 2015

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 673 200

## About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at [www.proscenium.org.uk](http://www.proscenium.org.uk)