



Jason Miller is widely known for only one play, his Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning hit *That Championship Season*, but that alone places him firmly in the great tradition of American letters that deal with the shattered dreams of Americans: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh*, Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as the novels of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Updike, among many others. This rich vein in American literature continues to reflect the psychic turmoil and sought-for transcendence that American men spend their lives grappling with.

In *That Championship Season*, the characters are betrayed by their youth. That initial betrayal then begets others during the course of the evening we spend with them. One shining, perfect moment they shared as high school basketball champions has both shaped and haunted their now middle-aged lives. The crises they face are acute and potentially destructive. They have come to this moment after the deaths

of their fathers, their deceit as husbands, their failed love of their own brothers. They come in search of the father figure who still connects them to their potential and to their ability to corrupt their own promise. Sports fans connect with the play on a particularly visceral level, I think, because sports not only promote necessary team spirit and the exhilaration of shared success as a group—but also because sports can foster deep aggression in its players, who are inspired towards an overarching desire to win, sometimes at any cost. Sports psychologists note the similarities between men at war and men who play sports. Both war and sports consume young men, and both are powered by the young. The scars of battle, as we see all too sharply in the growing number of post-Iraq servicemen who take their own lives, never go away. Similarly, the sense that one can never be as great at something as one was when young can cause the souls of some men to wither in despair and regret.

"Let me tell you what I obliquely tried to do," Miller said when asked about the play. "I tried to catch the religious element in sports...Christian symbology no longer moves people. We've lost our root contact with it. So that today (this was 1972) when I look around, our athletes have become comparable to the Parthenon gods and the Catholic Church. Athletes are emulated, and they're quoted. They've become symbols of transcendence." If religion tries to return us to an Edenic perfection of youth and purity, so can sports as we live through the bodies and the successes of the powerful young players with whom we identify. Miller also said, "The *whole being* experiences athletic success." Just as the devout experience religious ecstasy.

Miller was younger than his characters when he wrote the play, yet he could transcend his own youth to understand men at what he called "halftime."

"There's still half a life to be lived," Miller said of his characters, "but these guys unfortunately haven't the strength or the courage or the honesty, and they're hurting. They have too many injuries. They are simply too damaged at this point. Damaged by life, and by what they are, and by what they have not become. Damaged by what now they know they will never become."

The tragic failure of dreams, the shattered illusions held with desperation by the hopeful, the weak, and even the strong, continue to exert its powerful influence on great drama. Without it, drama from Aeschylus to Ibsen, and from Ibsen to Mamet, would not have existed. Yet in the case of *That Championship Season*, there actually is what feels like a kind of transcendence, and that moving moment reveals men's deepest need: the need for the leader, the father, the priest, if you will, to point the way towards forgiveness, transcend the present, bring enemies together in love, and make all spiritually right again. But, in this play, the cost of that moment is great and will emanate out into the stricken futures these characters must face.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mark Lamos". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Mark Lamos
Artistic Director