Theatre: Version of Agee's 'Death in the Family'
By HOWARD TAUBMAN
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pg. 42

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Tad Mosel's 'All the Way Home' Opens

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

"ALL THE WAY HOME" is a simple and searching play about commonplace things like love and death and the need to go on living.

In his dramatization, which arrived at the Belasco last night, Tad Mosel has caught the spirit of James Agee's posthumous, Pulitzer Prize novel, "A Death in the Family." He has not sought to graft external excitements on Agee's tender recollection of a tragedy in his own boyhood in the Knoxville of 1915. He has had the taste and wisdom to let Agee's poetic vision shine lucidly and purely.

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The novel reverberated with nuances of meaning and feeling. In bare outline it was an ordinary story of a young father killed in an automobile accident and of the shattering impact of this event on his wife and 5-year-old son. Agee managed to catch the specific atmosphere of the time and place and at the same time to make it speak for any family crisis anywhere.

Agee's novel was charged with a hushed intensity that could not, one would think, be reshaped to the needs of the stage. But Mr. Mosel has put together "All the Way Home" with tact and understanding. He has reduced Agee's sustained flights of observation and emotion without altering their essential style. He has achieved what Agee, who did his share of dramatizing in a number of screen plays, would have approved: he has kept the story unvarnished and the people true.

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The conflicts occur within these people more than between them. At the outset you meet Jay Follet, the doomed husband, and his wife, Mary, and their boy, Rufus. You learn that, despite imperceptible tensions, they are striving increasingly toward a good marriage. Then you meet Jay's rustic family; the old parents, the unstable, self-pitying brother and his unhappy wife and child. You accompany them all to a visit to Great-Great-Granmaw out in the hills, and there is a memorable moment of revelation as the very old and the very young reach toward each other.

At the end of the long day Jay and Mary have a brief scene that in its muted poetry tells more about love than scores of passionate hassles in less perceptive romances. Later, as Mary fights her battle to accept the bitter task of survival, you learn a little more of the abrasions that lay below the surface of her marriage, and somehow the earlier scene becomes like a retrospective fulfillment.

Mr. Mosel's problem in the second act was the most difficult. There is little outward action. Mary gets word that Jay has been hurt, and then there is the long vigil as she waits to discover how badly. The playwright has not the novelist's time. With his delicate, understated writing, Agee could bring out the heartbreak of this crisis at his own tempo. Mr. Mosel must concentrate. Here there are moments when the theatre can merely suggest the emotion that sings through the book.

If the second-act curtain is uncommonly muted, that is because Mr. Mosel is faithful to Agee's truth. And as the play moves into the day of the funeral, it sums up the lives of all the characters as they were and as they must now be. Not only has life changed for Mary and her boy but also for her parents, Jay's parents and even poor Ralph, the brother.

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Do not assume that "All the Way Home" deals only with sorrow. Agee knew the value of laughter; he saw his people with clarity and did not hesitate to disclose their shortcomings. Mr. Mosel has communicated the warmth as well as the crudities of their humor. Even in bereavement this family is not sloppy.

Arthur Penn has staged "All the Way Home" with respect for its integrity. He has used David Hays' double-leveled, indoor-outdoor set with variety and resourcefulness. While the action goes forward in one spot he has composed the other characters like affectionate paintings of an older America.

Colleen Dewhurst plays Mary with delicacy and strength. Arthur Hill has firmness and tension as Jay. Aline MacMahon has a grand and touching dignity as Aunt Hannah. Lillian Gish is sweetly ineffectual as Mary's mother, and Thomas Chalmers is understanding as her father. Clifton James is impressive as Ralph, and Tom Wheatley and Lenka Peterson are accomplished performers. Lylah Tiffany is a credible centenarian. Pint-sized John Megna does a wonderful job with the taxing role of Rufus.

"All the Way Home" fills its simple story of good, weak men, women and children with a quiet compassion that one will remember long after some of the theatre's flashier sensations.

The Cast

ALL THE WAY HOME, a play by Tad Mosel, based on James Agee's novel, "A Death in the Family." Staged by Arthur Penn; presented by Fred Coe, in association with Arthur Cantor; scenery and lighting by David Hays; costumes by Raymond Sovey; production stage manager, Porter Van Zandt. At the Belasco Theatre, 111 West Forty-fourth Street.

Rufus	John Megna
Jay Follet	Arthur Hill
Mary Follet	Colleen Dewhurst
Ralph Follet	Clifton James
Sally Follet	Lenka Peterson
John Henry Follet	Edwin Wolfe
Jessie Follet	Georgia Simmons
Jim-Wilson	Christopher Month
Aunt Sadie Follet	Dorrit Kelton
Great-Great-Granmaw	Lylah Tiffany
Catherine Lynch	Lillian Gish
Aunt Hannah Lynch	Aline MacMahon
Joel Lynch	Thomas Chalmers
Andrew Lynch	Tom Wheatley
Father Jackson	Art Smith

John Megna with Colleen Dewhurst in "All the Way Home"

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