



2017-2018 Theatre Season  
*Lights Out:*  
*A Season of Dark Tales*

Blinn College Division of Visual/Performing  
Arts and Kinesiology  
Brenham Campus

Joseph Kesselring's  
*Arsenic and Old Lace*

*Resource Guide*

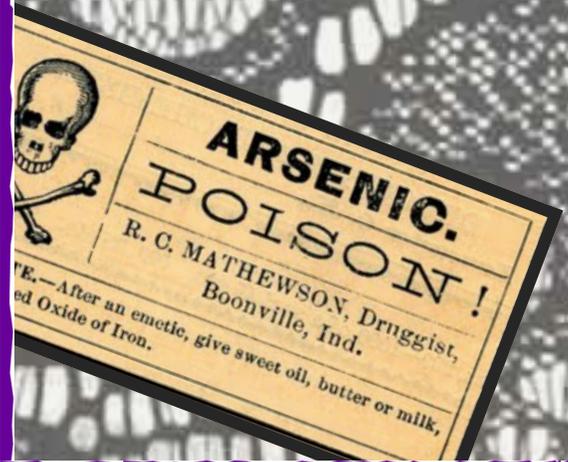
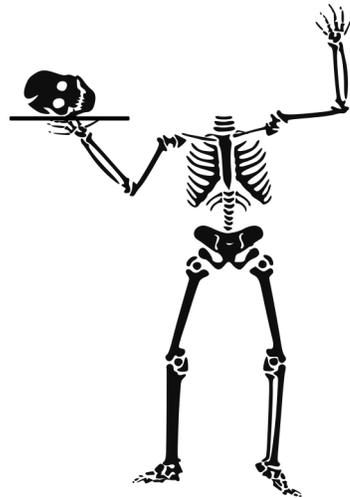
This resource guide serves as an educational starting point to understanding and enjoying Joseph Kesselring's play *Arsenic and Old Lace*. With this in mind, please note that the interpretations of the theatrical work may differ from the original source content.



# 2017 Theatre Arts Faculty Showcase

## *Company*

Jonathan Acosta  
Kayla Adair  
Ilana Ariel  
Daniel Bircher  
Isaiah Edwards  
Kara Freeman  
Steve Haley  
Cristian Mejia  
Andrew Mueller  
Jennifer Patrick  
Kevin Patrick  
Rylie Patrick  
Cristian Santiago  
Dylan Strickland  
Cassin Villa-Lobos  
&  
Caleb Wyrick



***Directed by***  
**Brad Nies**

***Technical Theatre Direction***  
**by**  
**Kevin Patrick**

***Costume, Makeup, Hair,***  
***and Scenic Design by***  
**Jennifer Patrick**

***Produced by Special***  
***Arrangement with***  
**Dramatists Play Service, Inc.**

## Synopsis

Mortimer Brewster, the normal one of the eccentric Brewster family, must decide whether or not to go through with his promise to marry the woman he loves while dealing with two spinster aunts who murder lonely old men, his brother who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt, and a murderous brother who, in an attempt to conceal his identity, has had plastic surgery performed by an alcoholic accomplice.

## Performances

September 7-9  
September 10

7 p.m.  
2 p.m.

Dr. W.W. O'Donnell  
Performing Arts Center Auditorium  
Brenham, Texas



Tickets can be purchased in advance online at  
[www.blinn.edu/BoxOffice](http://www.blinn.edu/BoxOffice),  
by calling 979-830-4024,  
or by emailing [BoxOffice@blinn.edu](mailto:BoxOffice@blinn.edu)

American Playwright

# Joseph Kesselring

(1902-1967)



X Elder Berry Wine  
Pull the berries from the stalks & put  
them in a tub pour boiling water on  
them & gallons water to 8 gallons of berries  
lets them down into the liquor & cover  
the berries clean in 24 hours press the juice  
out of this juice add 5 lbs of sugar 1/2 of clove  
& ginger boil 20 minutes strain through  
while still hot put it into a cash or stone  
jug or bottles fill the jug or cash  
add to every gallon one spoonful of muscadine  
and stir it well together with a stick  
and baked in a dry box is best



Born in New York City on July 21, 1902, Joseph Otto Kesselring spent much of his life in and around the theatre. After teaching vocal music and directing stage productions at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas for two years, he left in 1924 to pursue a career in scriptwriting. After becoming a freelance playwright in 1933, Kesselring completed 12 plays. Of his four works produced on Broadway, *Arsenic and Old Lace* was his most successful. The show ran for 1,444 performances in New York, 1,337 performances in London, and it became a staple in

high school and dinner theaters across the country. The movie version, released in 1944, was also a comic hit. Kesselring died in Kingston, New York on November 5, 1967 at the age of 65.

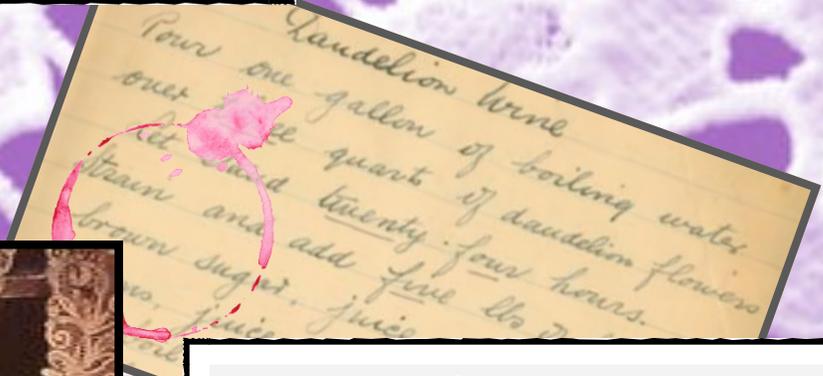
Government Accountancy

## Stage Adaptations of *Arsenic and Old Lace*



*Arsenic and Old Lace* premiered on Broadway in the Fulton Theatre on January 10, 1941. The play starred character actors Josephine Hull, Jean Adair, and horror film star Boris Karloff. It closed on June 17, 1944.

*Arsenic and Old Lace* was revived on Broadway on June 19, 1986 at the 46th Street Theatre. This version starred character actors Jean Stapleton and Polly Holliday, as well as veteran actor Abe Vigoda. It closed on January 3, 1987.



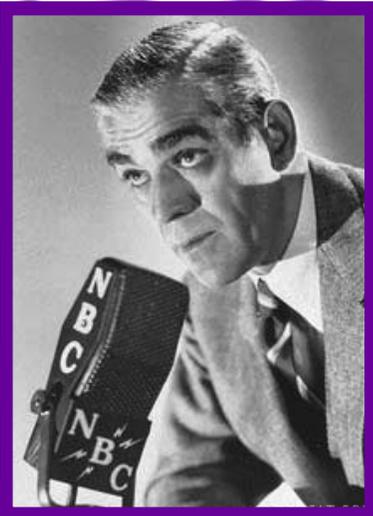
## Film, Radio, and Television Adaptations of

# *Arsenic and Old Lace*



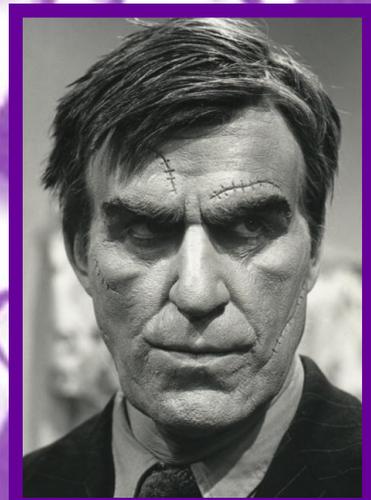
In 1944, director Frank Capra made *Arsenic and Old Lace* into a highly successful film starring Carey Grant and Priscilla Lane. The script was adapted by brothers Julius and Phillip Epstein.

The movie was actually filmed in 1941, however, it was not released until the play ended its run on Broadway three years later.



*Arsenic and Old Lace* was adapted into radio plays for the November 25, 1946 broadcast of The Screen Guild Theater, the January 25, 1948 broadcast of The Ford Theatre Program, and the July 6, 1952 broadcast of NBC's Best Plays Series.

Three versions of *Arsenic and Old Lace* have been produced for television. One version aired as part of *The Best of Broadway* in January of 1955, another version aired in February of 1962, and a third version aired in April of 1969.



# Characters in Arsenic and Old Lace

**Abby Brewster:** A darling lady who poisons elderly gentlemen.

**Martha Brewster:** Abby's kindly sister who is also poisoning old men.

**Teddy Brewster:** Their nephew who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt.

**Mortimer Brewster:** Another nephew who is the only normal member of his family.

**Elaine Harper:** Mortimer's attractive fiancé. A minister's daughter.

**Jonathan Brewster:** Another nephew who is a psychopath and has had plastic surgery.

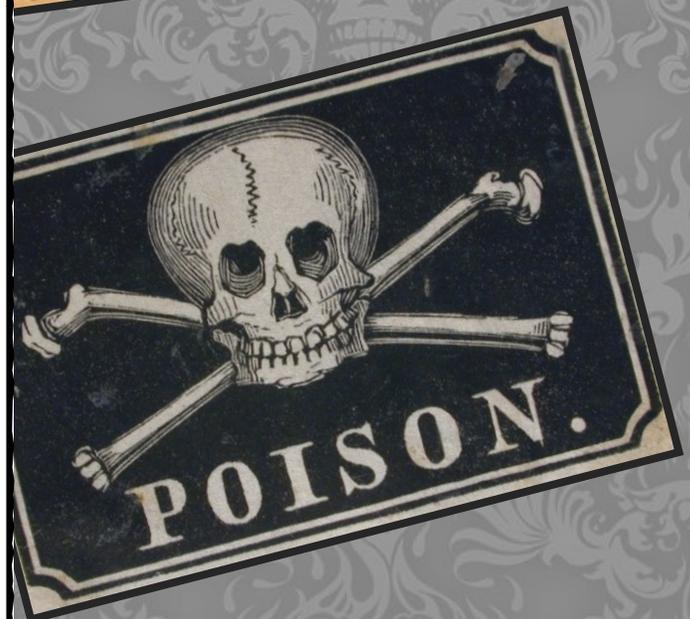
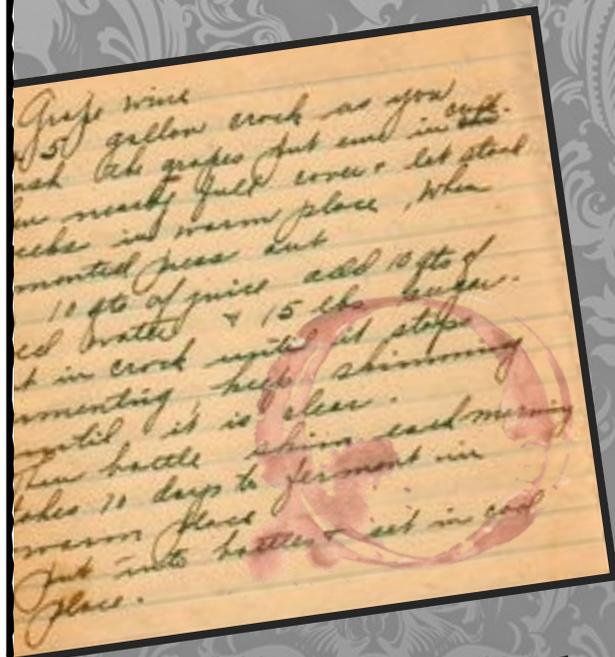
**Dr. Einstein:** Jonathan's sidekick who is also an alcoholic.

**Officer Brophy:** A veteran policeman.

**Officer O'Hara:** Another policeman and a would-be playwright.

**Mr. Gibbs:** A would-be tenant in the Brewster Sisters' boarding house.

**Mr. Witherspoon:** The superintendent of Happy Dale Sanitarium.



# Themes in *Arsenic and Old Lace*



**The Theatre:** In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, Kesselring suggests that the theatre reflects life only in absurd situations. As a critic, Mortimer blames the theatre for not being realistic enough. Ironically, Mortimer fails to realize that the situation he is in is more absurd than the plays he reviews.



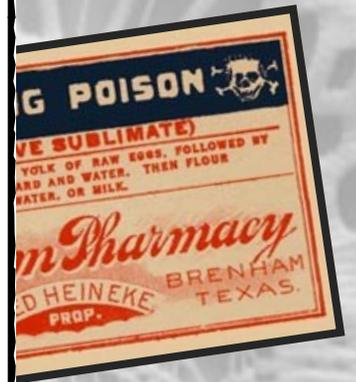
**Insanity:** Many theatregoers during the 1930s and 40s went to the theatre to escape the worries of a possible war. A type of humor popular during this time was Black Comedy; a style that made light of taboo subject matters. The embarrassment of insanity within prominent families was a theme in such comedies as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *The Curious Savage*, and *Harvey*.



**Charity:** Although the Brewster Sisters are known for their charities, altruism is satirized in *Arsenic and Old Lace* when Abby and Martha admit that they are providing a service for the lonely gentlemen they poison by sending them to Heaven.



**Family and Holidays:** Placing the story of *Arsenic and Old Lace* shortly before the holiday season is a significant theme in that Abby and Martha do not want their family-less tenants to spend the holidays alone.



## Little Known Facts Regarding

# Arsenic and Old Lace

“Kesselring created a Brewster clan of two merry murdering matrons, a Theodore Roosevelt-impersonator, a Boris Karloff look-alike, and a theatre reviewer...a motley crew that can't get any wackier!”

-Justin Lucero, Creede Repertory Theatre



The title *Arsenic and Old Lace* comes from the term *Lavender and Old Lace*; a phrase used during the Victorian era to describe the homes of genteel ladies that were decorated with lace curtains, lace dollies, and smelled of lavender.



Many critics believe that Joseph Kesselring was using the mad Brewster family as metaphor for the dark side of American history. Mortimer's struggle of balancing his love for his aunts with their murderous deeds may very well represent America's struggle with its myth and its often violent history.



The original version of Kesselring's play was a melodrama/horror entitled *Bodies in our Cellar*. Broadway producers Howard Lindsey and Russel Crouse read the script and thought it would work better as a comedy. Before putting it on the Broadway stage, the producers reworked the script, and they changed the title to *Arsenic and Old Lace*.



The story line for *Arsenic and Old Lace* may have been inspired by a series of actual murders that occurred in Windsor, Connecticut in the early 1900's. Amy Archer-Gilligan ran a home for octogenarians who stayed in her care until their deaths. Gilligan was believed to have poisoned over 40 people renting rooms in her boarding house.



The story line for *Arsenic and Old Lace* reared its head again when Sacramento, California landlady Dorothea Puente was arrested in 1988 for the murder of nine of her boarding house roomers. Puente, who was known for her cooking, published a cookbook entitled *Cooking With a Serial Killer* while she was incarcerated at Central California Women's Facility.



# Hey, Teachers!



**This theatre is a proud member of the Theatre Collective of the Brazos Valley. This organization has been kind enough to develop the following rules of theatre etiquette. Please review these rules with your students to assure that all audience members enjoy the show!**

- 1. Be on time by being in your seat 10 minutes before the performance is scheduled to begin. Live theatre begins at the published performance time with a darkened theatre and actors frequently in the aisles ready for entrances. Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the theatre and in locations chosen by the theatre.**
- 2. Remain seated until intermission and until curtain calls are completed to allow performers free access to the exits. If an emergency requires leaving your seat, please remain outside the theatre until allowed to return by the theatre's volunteer staff.**
- 3. Finish and/or discard all food and drinks before entering the theatre. Community theatres in the Brazos Valley use volunteers to clean debris from the theatre and restrooms. Please be respectful of these volunteers by disposing of your own trash.**
- 4. Silence or turn off all electronic devices, including cell phones, beepers, and watch alarms. You are encouraged to share your theatre experience via social media, but you must refrain from sharing or texting during the performance. The glow from all media is easily discernable in the dark theatre and is distracting to your neighbors and the actors.**
- 5. Video and flash photography of live performances is not allowed. Community theatres in the Brazos Valley do not purchase the rights to tape live performances. Actors will generally be available for photographs after the show.**
- 6. Tickets and programs will be provided for all students who need to receive credit for attending theatre performances. The Theatre Collective of the Brazos Valley provides a stamp for proof of attendance after every performance.**
- 7. To allow all patrons easy access to theatre seating, saving more than one seat for a latecomer or volunteer is not allowed.**
- 8. Please refrain from talking during the performance.**
- 9. Your courtesy is much appreciated as it allows for the ultimate experience of theatre productions for all our patrons.**

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