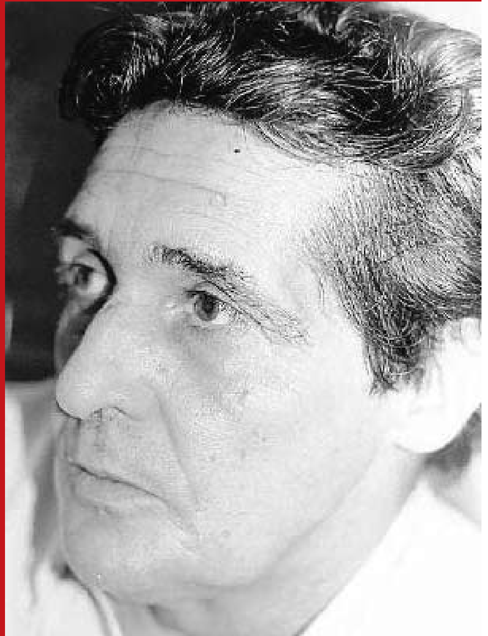
# From the Playwright



Playwright Jason Miller

Jason Miller (1939-2001) was born in Long Island City, Queens and reared in the small industrial city of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Coming of age in the mid nineteen-fifties, he had a typical Irish-American upbringing, receiving his education at parochial school and excelling at sports. That a potent cocktail of Catholicism and athletics should fuel his greatest play, *That Championship Season*, is no accident. For Miller, a writer's greatest resource is his own background. "It seems to me that all good writing—at least writing that I respond to—is autobiographical in some sense," he once said. "Either you've observed it or you've experienced it."

What follows are excerpts from a 1973 interview of Miller which originally appeared in the book *Shoptalk: Conversations about Theater and Film with Twelve Writers, One Producer—and Tennessee Williams' Mother* by Denis Brown:

*Let me tell you what I obliquely tried to do. I tried to catch the religious element in sports. At this stage of our development, it seems to me that religion is no longer a motivating force…We've lost our root contact with it. So that today 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.*

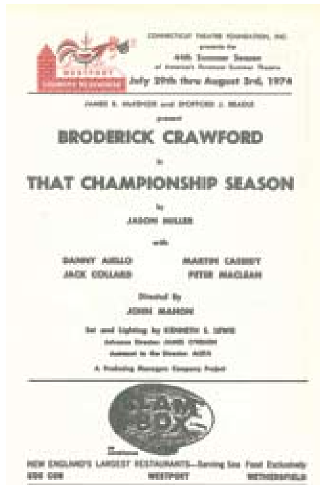
*You walk into bars and you see all the pictures of the softball teams and the old trophies. These guys come in and sit there and look at themselves. They look at what they were like twenty years ago. And then the football game comes on, and you watch middle-aged men totally identifying with youth. Total identification. Down to their souls. They come out of themselves. They're in the game. They're playing the game, they're being hit.*

*It makes you stop and ask yourself, what is sports all about? What does it mean to the players, and what does it mean to those guys sitting there watching and getting involved? I mean, if you took sports away from this country, Christ, the homicide rate would probably quadruple. Really. Football Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, Sunday afternoon. Now Monday night. It's satisfying some need, you know, that maybe we haven't really explored. What is it doing to the consciousness of the country? Why has it become so absolutely necessary? Why is it front-page news when Joe Namath reports to camp? You are tempted to say it's diversion and escape. Well, it's more than mere diversion. It goes deeper into the culture. And I wanted that in the play too.*

*With athletes the whole being is involved. The mind and the body are mutually dependent. But it takes five minds and five bodies working in rhythmic teamwork with overtones of ballet and orchestration, and you say to yourself, it's a beautiful and almost religiously ritualistic thing that you're seeing.*

*What is "team"? What is the feeling of belonging to a winning team? What was the visceral blood feeling to triumph with four other people in the middle of the arena, with forty thousand pairs of eyes staring down at you? What did that do to them? Was this experience something they had too quickly and too early? Was it in some way evil?*

# Program Notes


July 29th thru August 3rd, 1974

BRODERICK CRAWFORD

THAT CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON

DANNY AIELLO
JACK COLLARD
MARTIN CASSIDY
PETER MACLEAN

Directed By

**The title page from the 1974 Westport Country Playhouse production of *That Championship Season***

## A True American Classic

Despite his success as a playwright, Jason Miller was, and always remained, a highly skilled working actor. In fact, he wrote his most famous play, *That Championship Season*, on a strict three-hour-per-day writing schedule while on an out-of-town engagement in *The Odd Couple* during the 1971/72 theatrical season. Although his only other play to that point, *Nobody Hears a Broken Drum*, was both a critical and commercial failure in 1970, Miller found the success with his sophomore effort that most writers can only dream of. Opening off-Broadway at the Public Theatre on May 2, 1972, *That Championship Season* ran for 144 performances before transferring to the Booth Theatre on Broadway where it ran for an additional 844 performances. When it closed at the Booth, the play had achieved the distinction of being the longest-running Broadway drama since the final curtain came down on *A Streetcar Named Desire* twenty-five years earlier. Miller had pulled off a rare feat that was only to be outdone by the raft of awards that followed. *That Championship Season* received almost every major honor for which it was eligible—the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, the Drama Desk Award for Most Promising Playwright, the Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Playwriting Award, the Tony Award for best play, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play quickly entered the repertory of many major American theatres, even appearing in a production on the Westport Country Playhouse stage in the summer of 1974. It has since been adapted into two films: a 1982 effort directed by Miller himself and a 1999 television movie directed by Paul Sorvino, who played the part of Phil Romano in the original Off-Broadway production.

## High School Sports

"You quit on the field you'll quit in life. It's on the playing fields the wars are won."

-Coach in *That Championship Season*

The modern idea that extracurricular school athletics serve to successfully shape the characters of young men, as well as to prepare them for the challenges of the adult world, can be attributed to attitudes first developed in England in the nineteenth century. As noted by scholar George Sage, in the mid-1800s, "With the emergence of student sport teams in British private secondary boarding schools for boys, school sports won recognition as a medium for socialization, enculturation, and social control and they became imbued with a moralistic ideology." This belief in sport as a fundamentally moral pursuit, one necessary for the development of spiritual as well as physical health, soon made its way across the Atlantic, where it greatly influenced educational theorists in the United States.

By the first few decades of the twentieth century, physical education had firmly established itself in the main of the American curriculum, and school sports were prized for the values they were thought to impart: dedication, sacrifice, team work, self-discipline and the ability to thrive in a competitive atmosphere. Success on the playing field was equated with the potential for success in life, no small thing in what was then emerging as the most productive capitalist economy in the world. Given the fundamentally meritocratic nature of sports, with talent rising unimpeded to the top, and great accomplishments possible regardless of one's socioeconomic status, they became bound up in the particularly American ideals of democracy and equal opportunity.

In this context, high school sports have become an almost sacred part of the national life. They are enjoyed by millions for the pleasure inherent as participant or spectator, and are looked to as an inspiration, a pure form of competition, free from the taint of money, where talent succeeds, rules are followed, and the judgments of officials are fair and impartial. That they sometimes fall well short of this goal (even among the youngest high-school athletes of today, there are many who feel so much pressure to succeed that they turn to steroids) has done little to undermine our basic faith that a friendly game of baseball, basketball or football means so much more than the final score. It's not whether you win or lose. It's how you play the game.

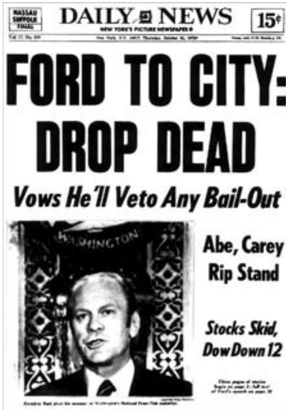
**High School Basketball circa 1950s**

# Program Notes

## The Crisis of Confidence in 1970s America

*I want to speak to you first tonight about a subject even more serious than energy or inflation. I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy. I do not mean our political and civil liberties. They will endure. And I do not refer to the outward strength of America, a nation that is at peace tonight everywhere in the world, with unmatched economic power and military might. The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.*

Jimmy Carter, July 15, 1979


DAILY NEWS 15¢

FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD

Vows He'll Veto Any Bail-Out

Abe, Carey Rip Stand

Stocks Skid, Dow Down 12

**The famous *New York Daily News* headline on President Ford's refusal to bail out a city on the verge of bankruptcy.**

By the time President Carter gave his notorious televised speech declaring that the country was suffering from a crisis of confidence, America had already been in a decade-long decline. After the boisterous period of sustained economic growth that coincided with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the sixties ended with the first of two recessions that would hit the United States over the next five years. The 1969 recession, a relatively routine downturn, came on the heels of the Federal Reserve's decision to raise interest rates to hold down inflation. By 1973, however, the national economy, driven into a ditch by the increasingly costly war in Vietnam, was further eroded by the oil crisis that resulted from OPEC's (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo of the United States over its support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War. For the first time, Americans had to line up at the pump—and they were none too happy about it. The combination of high government spending and skyrocketing energy prices led to a period of "stagflation," an unprecedented combination of increasing unemployment, low growth and rising prices.

But to characterize the crisis as merely economic in nature would be to miss the deeper psychic wounds that had been inflicted on the country since the death of President Kennedy. Among the legacies of his successor, President Lyndon Johnson, was a precipitous escalation of the Vietnam War, perhaps America's greatest military blunder. As the decade wore on, domestic opposition to the war tore at the social fabric of the country, and the violence that attended some anti-war demonstrations—most famously the rioting at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the killing of four college students by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State in May 1970—became defining images of the era. Leading political figures Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. were martyrs to the passions of the time, murdered for their politics or beliefs. American cities, large and small, began their twenty-five-year-long slide into high crime and low functionality, concurrent with "white flight" to the suburbs, a shrinking urban tax base—which led New York City to the verge of bankruptcy—and literally hundreds of inner-city riots. There was a feeling that the United States was in greater trouble than at any time since the Civil War.

These shifting political and social realties may have had the most deleterious effect on those white males who, by dint of widely evolving attitudes about race, the movement of manufacturing jobs overseas and the rise of feminism in the workplace, found their historical preeminence being challenged. Richard Nixon rode the resulting wave of cultural resentment all the way into the White House in 1968, claiming the support of America's "silent majority." Though he promised to bring "an honorable end" to the Vietnam War and restore "law and order" to American cities, he was successful on neither count. In August 1974, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, he left office in disgrace, becoming the only president in U.S. history to resign. American confidence in the very systems of government was called into question. It would be years before the country regained its footing.

**On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard killed unarmed war protesters at Kent State University.**

Program Notes written and compiled by
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Associate Artistic Director