

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-40137-1 - A Profile of Jonathan Miller
 Michael Romain
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

I

JONATHAN MILLER: WORK IN THE EUROPEAN THEATRE

MME RANYEVSKAIA: 'Are you still a student?'
 TROFIMOV: 'I expect I shall be a student to the end of my days.'
 Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*¹

Like Trofimov, Jonathan Miller is the eternal student. For him, as for Montaigne, the world exists as a school of inquiry. Able to find significance in all things, he has – in its original secular sense – *Ozeanisches Gefühl*, which Freud defined as 'a sensation of "eternity", a feeling of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, "oceanic" ... a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole'.² Few – if any – other directors have such a range of interests and breadth of experience. Apart from being a theatre, opera, film and television director, he is also a doctor, neuro-psychologist, research fellow, lecturer, author, presenter and producer. Miller's work as a director reflects his polymath predilections. His productions embrace psychology, psycholinguistics, anthropology, sociology (particularly the work of Erving Goffman and Rom Harré), philosophy (most notably Plato, and the Enlightenment thinkers), history (with special emphasis on the eighteenth century), literature (Kafka's vision is a recurring motif), photography, art and architecture. His versatility extends to both his repertoire – he has moved directly from *The Mikado* to *Long Day's Journey into Night*, from Racine to N. F. Simpson – and to his style – after exhausting the stage crew at the Coliseum with the demands of his spectacularly large-scale *Tosca*, he retired to the tiny studio space of the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs

¹ Translated by Elisaveta Fen (London: Penguin Books), p. 349.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey (London 1953–74), vol. xxi, pp. 64–5.

A profile of Jonathan Miller

to stage his austere, intimate, dream-like production of *The Emperor*. He is fascinated by the possibilities of mixing mediums in his work: casting John Cleese and Alexei Sayle in Shakespeare, Roger Daltrey in John Gay, Jack Lemmon in O'Neill and Eric Idle in Gilbert and Sullivan; or drawing on the films of Chaplin for *Mahagonny*, Rossellini for *Tosca* and the Marx Brothers for *The Mikado*.

Although Miller draws on a huge variety of sources and references, they never dictate the direction of his work. He may refer to Darwin, Klein or structuralism, but his work is never derivative. The one theme that can be discerned throughout his directorial career is the Renaissance concept of 'renovatio', the idea of an apparently ancient object being transformed into something new. This idea reveals itself in the way that Miller's work startles an audience into looking at a play or an opera in a new, unexpected, light, so that the piece itself is refreshed in the process. 'Renovatio', or renewal, informs Miller's work to such an extent that it can often capture the public imagination in productions like his *Merchant of Venice*, with its late nineteenth-century setting, his season of inter-related 'Family Romances', his (Edward) Hopper-esque 'Mafia' *Rigoletto*, his chiaroscuro, Goya-esque *Don Giovanni* and his dazzling white vision of *The Mikado*, set in the foyer of a grand hotel in an English seaside resort c. 1929. Miller achieves this artistic restoration and renewal in his work by reappraising and redefining plays and operas. He is not held back by a reverence for a work's status as a classic: when he began rehearsing *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he told the cast to forget that it was a play reputed to be a masterpiece, so that they could shake off the weight of its Aeschylean aura and play it simply for what it was – an intimate, naturalistic American study in family life. Such an approach has frequently earned Miller accusations of iconoclasm or avant-gardism from traditionalists. Yet Miller has always been guided by a firm adherence to the 'deep structure' (to borrow Noam Chomsky's phrase) of a work.

In addition to his reappraisal of the repertoire, Miller also interprets works and moulds productions through scientific analysis. Science, as Leonardo realised, is an art, and Jonathan Miller is a contemporary example of a European tradition that stretches back through Büchner and Chekhov to Goethe (reflected in his creation, Wilhelm Meister). Miller's own symbiosis of the arts and the sciences derives from his parents. His mother, Betty Bergson (her great-uncle was the philosopher Henri Bergson), was a writer and novelist, as well as a biographer of Browning. His father, Emanuel Miller, trained as a philosopher before becoming a doctor and neurologist, and later moved into psychiatry. He initiated the child guidance movement in England, setting up its first clinic in 1924 and subsequently founding the

Work in the European theatre

Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency. Miller's own interest in medicine and science lies in research rather than treatment. He has always been fascinated by the psychology of human expression, something he can work on equally well in the clinic and rehearsal studio – directing a play or an opera, he is dealing all the time with behaviour and language:

I was interested in the 'ordinary' way people carried themselves, and their nuances of behaviour, which had an influence on what I observed when I was at the bedside of patients who had neurological damage. Noticing what people actually do, instead of accepting the clichés of what we think they do. Theatre tends to clone all sorts of habits that seem to come from nineteenth-century melodramas. There's a reciprocity between working as a clinician, which makes you look very carefully at behaviour, and working in the theatre, which concentrates me on getting the details right. There are tiny things that people do – the apparent rubbish of posture and gesture – which get eliminated from performance but are actually what gives performance its texture. Maybe knowing this was one of the reasons I was a good comic performer. I just saw things, and much of my success was simply getting it right.³

Theatre and opera provided Miller with a natural extension of his research into the mechanics of behaviour, and his productions display acute attention to psychological detail (Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Behaviour in Public Places* are important references for him). His views on medicine have always been humanistic, and this notably informs his approach to works such as *The Tempest* and *The Magic Flute*, leading him to replace their traditionally metaphysical fantasy worlds with the social and cultural frameworks of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively. As a doctor, he knows how emotion can be convincingly – rather than histrionically – portrayed, and the results are often startlingly realistic:

My approach to Ophelia has been influenced by the work of R. D. Laing, and it was not until I worked with Kathryn Pogson in 1982 that I was able to realize the full effect of schizophrenia on stage. I gave her a lot of clinical information but also simply reminded her of behaviour and mannerisms while she was constantly on the lookout for characteristics she could use on stage.⁴

When he directed *The Taming of the Shrew* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Miller pointed out that Kate's violent and unpredictable outbursts are symptomatic of her unhappiness and isolation as an unloved and neglected daughter – what she needed, he said, was a child therapist. Fiona Shaw's Kate was initially a withdrawn, jerky and disordered figure, brandishing a pair of scissors with which she scraped the walls or distractedly cut

³ 'Doctor in Spite of Himself', Jonathan Miller interviewed by Penelope Gilliatt in *The New Yorker*, 17 April 1989.

⁴ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 116.

A profile of Jonathan Miller

off locks of her rapidly diminishing hair. Like a disturbed child, she greeted Petruchio (Brian Cox, burly and imperturbable) with a slap in the face. Her gradual awakening to him proved literally therapeutic.

Miller's *Othello* for his BBC TV Shakespeare cycle pitted Bob Hoskins' Iago – a combination of 'the rough army sergeant, the puritan trooper at Naseby, and the mischief-making fairy-tale dwarf – a primal trickster like Rumpelstiltskin' – against the exotic, near-operatic Moor of Anthony Hopkins. Ever since Coleridge puzzled over Iago's 'motiveless malignity', the dynamics of his personality have proved to be a problem for actors and directors. One of the ways in which Miller approached Iago's characterisation with Hoskins was to focus on his motivating envy:

I began by asking about the nature of envy itself and found that there are several ways of approaching the question. At an almost psychoanalytic level you can ask what it is that makes people destructively envious. To find an answer I turned to the most revealing line that Iago speaks almost inadvertently, towards the end of the play when he is waiting in the shadows for the murder of Cassio, and remarks 'He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly.' This seems to summarize for me the nature of envy.⁵

Miller's approach resulted in a frighteningly convincing – and, at rare moments, oddly touching – characterisation from Hoskins, far removed from the usual pantomime villain, and one which emphasised Iago's pivotal role in the play rather than allowing it to become a one-man firework display of jealousy.

A further example of Miller's work in psychology which illuminates his work in theatre is his use of speech act theory, which he will often employ in rehearsals to discover the real meaning of a speech or sentence, instead of using the traditional interpretation based on the written word. When it comes to orchestrating the rhythms of conversation on stage, he will draw on his research into psycholinguistics and behavioural psychology, as he did to remarkable effect in *Three Sisters*:

Chekhov is quite clearly more realistic than Shakespeare. The characters speak lines that are very like those that ordinary people speak when conversing with one another. There are ways of enhancing that sense of being in the presence of reality, and it is most important to attend to what are called 'the rules of conversation'. These have been identified only in the last twenty years or so by psycholinguistics who are very interested in what is called 'turn-taking' in conversation. Conversation has a certain internal structure which is determined by rules that we all somehow know without understanding how we acquire this knowledge . . . It is also useful to allow for things that Chekhov has not written; by this I mean interruption, reduplication and overlap

⁵ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 149.

Work in the European theatre

with people starting to talk when the previous speaker has not finished and then having to apologize. All these little characteristics of speech take a long time to re-create on stage but when actors manage it the audience feels as if it is in the presence of a real conversation . . . It was an intuitive awareness that prompted me to rehearse Chekhov in this way.⁶

The 'rhythm of ordinary speech' has distinguished much of Miller's work, from the irritable exchanges of the shipwrecked courtiers in *The Tempest* to the philosophical debate between the dying Hume and the drunken, tortured Boswell in *Dialogue in the Dark*. When he used the technique of overlapping dialogue for *Long Day's Journey into Night* (particularly appropriate for the Tyrone household, where the same old lines are repeated again and again until – as in so many families – the characters simply stop listening to each other), the play's running time was reduced from four and a half hours to just over three, with hardly any textual cuts, and to the surprise of Broadway audiences accustomed to marathon performances. Played at the speed of normal speech, the production achieved a Chekhovian sense of ensemble, adding the piece to Miller's series of 'Family Romances'. (As with Violetta in *La Traviata*, the tubercular Edmund Tyrone benefited from the doctor-director: while audiences and critics usually expect Edmund to look as if he is at death's door, Miller knew that this was not medically accurate for someone just beginning to develop tuberculosis and boldly went against the stereotype by casting the physically strapping, but *emotionally* fevered, young American actor Peter Gallagher in the role.)

Anthropology informed Miller's interpretation of *The Tempest*, in which he cast black actors as Ariel and Caliban, bringing the racial issue to the forefront of the play:

My approach to *The Tempest* was very largely guided by *Prospero and Caliban*, a book by O. Mannoni. He gave an anthropological interpretation of the Malagasy revolt and emphasized the effect of the paternal white imperial conqueror on an indigenous native population. So, instead of making Caliban and Ariel personify natural principles, I simply made them into native people, the rightful inhabitants of the island. I was guided not only by this book, but also by reference to the imperial themes of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century and the notion of the New World. There are accounts of the journey that describe the behaviour of British sailors on the shore of Massachusetts making the Indians drunk. This made me want to see what would happen if I liberated Caliban from his fishy scales, and mythical monstrous identity, and made him monstrous simply in the eyes of those who arrive on the island. Caliban's servitude was a social one.⁷

⁶ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 170.

⁷ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 160.

A profile of Jonathan Miller

Noting that Shakespeare wrote the play only a few years before Galileo developed his telescope, Miller presented Prospero (first Graham Crowden, mysterious and tortured, at the Mermaid; then the melancholy Max von Sydow at the Old Vic, all his power overshadowed by the impending loss of his daughter) as an embryonic scientist, rather than the traditional magus with a repertoire of party tricks, even placing an early telescope at the front of his cubic cell.

As well as the interpretations gleaned from scientific analyses, Miller also draws inspiration from the visual arts. Caravaggio gave him the dramatic balance of light and shadow for *King Lear*; Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* evoked the eerie sense of late-night loneliness for the third act of *Rigoletto*; and Poussin provided the classical pastoral backgrounds and poised, controlled style of movement for *Orfeo*. Miller's staging of the final scene of *Mahagonny* resembled a *pietà* by Rogier van der Weyden. The Kafka-esque atmosphere of 1920s Vienna for his *Measure for Measure* was derived from the photographs of August Sander, while those of the Count de Primoli characterised the background of his late nineteenth-century *Merchant of Venice*. In this way, Miller is able to make connections between social history and art history – between the society of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, for example, and that of Hogarth's *Marriage à la Mode*. He will often bring prints and art books to rehearsals to illustrate the mood or style he is aiming for (a large part of Miller's direction works through metaphor). The writer and critic Penelope Gilliatt, a long-standing colleague of Miller, recorded his description of his use of art in the theatre for her *New Yorker* profile:

He talked about Wölfflin's work on the organization of space in pictures, and Panofsky's on iconography. 'I take jobs in Italy and France and Germany so as to be able to go to galleries and churches. I did *Measure for Measure* in Rome last year, and rehearsed in a beautiful old triumphal arch on top of the Gianicolo. We didn't rehearse until four-thirty, when the heat began to subside, which meant that I could get up at nine o'clock and go to churches and do sketches, and visit most of the galleries . . . The pleasure of looking at paintings and exploring Roman churches feeds back into the theatre all the time, of course.'⁸

Although Miller's productions always observe the 'deep structure' of plays and operas, his work has nothing to do with the 'authentic' school of direction produced in period costume. Miller's approach to works informed by the culture of their own time (such as *Orfeo*, or the Mozart operas) aims not at the literal re-creation of a bygone age but at an examination and recognition of the past informed by the sensibility and staging techniques of the present. Yet his treatment of works from the past is characteristically flexible. The

⁸ 'Doctor in Spite of Himself', *The New Yorker*, 17 April 1989.

Work in the European theatre

approach varies from play to play, from opera to opera: if the work reflects the period of its composition, Miller will root it in that context; but if it has no connection with its own period or that specified in the text or libretto, then he will feel free to relocate it as he sees fit. He will also strike a balance between these two courses of action by using what he describes as ‘historical parallax’ to present one area of the past through the eyes of another.

Miller’s reputation in some quarters as an ‘updater’ is inaccurate, as only a tiny percentage of his overall output is actually transposed in time – *Prometheus Bound*, its unwieldy literal setting replaced by a seventeenth-century limbo; the nineteenth-century *Merchant of Venice* with Laurence Olivier as Shylock, a Rothschild-like Victorian businessman; the 1920s *Measure for Measure*, set to pastiche Schoenberg in Freud’s Vienna; the two *Rigolettos*, the first set in the Dickensian world of the 1850s, the period of composition, the second set famously in the Mafia underworld of 1950s New York; a *Tosca* set in 1944 as the Allies advance on Mussolini’s crumbling Rome; and the thoroughly English ‘Roaring Twenties’ *Mikado*. All dramatically valid transpositions, bringing Miller’s ‘renovatio’ to bear on mostly familiar works.

‘I think contemporary connections are legitimate for most nineteenth-century operas’, Miller told Penelope Gilliatt. ‘Between about 1830 and 1880, composers and librettists dealt carelessly with the past. The anchorage of the work to the period in which it’s said to happen is loose and very provisional anyway. Sometimes it can be removed with much more effect . . . When you make these theatrical distortions, the mapping has got to be almost one for one.’ By ‘mapping’ he means making sure that the characters and motives and social drives of a work transposed in time will fit onto ‘the deep structure’ of the original.

Miller’s approach to works which, like *The Taming of the Shrew*, are rooted firmly in the past is influenced by the Annales school of French historians, who use sociological and anthropological techniques in an effort to reconstruct the *mentalité* of the past. Miller uses a similar approach to illuminate the society and culture reflected in the play or opera. Only by exploring the *mentalité* of the past can a Mozart opera or most of Shakespeare be fully understood (while works like *Rigoletto* or *Tosca* have nothing to do with Renaissance Mantua or Rome in 1800, hence Miller’s temporal transpositions).

Aware that the Mozart operas are anchored in the world of the Enlightenment, and embody the values and concerns of the late eighteenth century, Miller accordingly staged them in their own context (rather than imposing contemporary themes over those of the Age of Reason, as have Peter Sellars and David Freeman). His *Figaro* was set in the household of a minor rural

A profile of Jonathan Miller

aristocrat, the relationships defined by the social conditions of the eighteenth century; Goya's dark, late eighteenth-century Spanish world provided the background for *Don Giovanni*; and *Così fan tutte* took place in a Neapolitan villa of 1790, the year of composition, with Don Alfonso as a philosopher in the Enlightenment tradition of Diderot, Voltaire and Johnson, his study cluttered with books and scientific instruments, all lit in the chiaroscuro manner of the eighteenth-century English painter Joseph Wright of Derby. When he directed *The Magic Flute* Miller brought out its Enlightenment themes by replacing its traditional ancient Egyptian setting with a multi-layered and intricately detailed panorama of the Age of Reason, embracing freemasonry and the French Revolution as well as the American Declaration of Independence, Rousseau's Man of Nature, and the Habsburg Empress Maria-Theresa with her Catholic retinue.

Miller set his production of *The Tempest* in the seventeenth-century context of Europe reaching out to the New World, *Othello* amidst the splendour of Renaissance Venice, and *Hamlet* against an austere evoked Tudor background. This reconstitution of the *mentalité* of the past not only releases the full significance of the plays and operas, but also strips away the traditional stereotypes and clichés that surround them. Miller's King Lear ruled a Stuart kingdom, where the play's seventeenth-century themes of statecraft and Christian imagery could be realised, rather than a primitive, pagan society governed by Druids. His *School for Scandal* avoided the usual West End representation of Georgian London, all fluttering fans and silk handkerchiefs, and presented an accurate picture of the minor gentry in the 1770s, living in dank houses, with unwashed, pregnant servants, lice-infested wigs, and a suitably Hogarthian atmosphere.

When confronted with a work set by a playwright or composer in the distant past or mythical antiquity, Miller will use a central image to align and express several different periods. For Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, Poussin's paintings bridged the gap between the seventeenth century, when the opera was composed, and the period to which it refers, classical/mythical antiquity, as well as matching the formal, poised style of the opera itself.

With Shakespeare's Greek and Roman plays, Miller points out that the playwright

is not writing about a literal, historical past, and the more we learn about the Elizabethan period the more striking the discrepancy between what he writes and the supposed date of the play's action becomes . . . it is much better either to set them in some kind of sixteenth-century Renaissance limbo or any setting that makes allowance for the past.⁹

⁹ 'Doctor in Spite of Himself', *The New Yorker*, 17 April 1989.

Work in the European theatre

Thus for his television production of *Antony and Cleopatra* Miller re-created 'a syncretic appearance showing fragments of antique dress, and figures in sixteenth-century armour alongside ordinary stage costumes reflecting the time at which the play was written'.¹⁰ When he directed *Julius Caesar*, Miller attempted

to reconcile in one format all the conflicting themes – Roman antiquity, the Renaissance and the faint implications of modern Italian Fascism which I did not want to make explicit but to hint at. The format that brought all this together – and highlighted that strange sense of surrealist premonition which runs throughout the language with its peculiar dream images and its stabbed bleeding statues – was given to me by the paintings of de Chirico. The setting was based on his work, which is full of Roman piazzas, classical statues and long shadows, and enabled us to bring the surrealist ingredients of the play to life.¹⁰

The long-term significance of Miller's work begins with only his second production: when *The Old Glory* opened New York's American Place Theatre in 1964, Miller's innovative direction was acclaimed by Robert Brustein as heralding the start of a Renaissance for the American theatre. Not only did its success ensure the survival of the American Place Theatre, but it also launched Frank Langella into the forefront of American actors and introduced a mixture of stillness and stylisation onstage that was later to be developed in the United States by Robert Wilson and Andrei Serban. A few years later, Miller's startlingly Hogarthian *School for Scandal* came as a revelation in the treatment of eighteenth-century drama after decades of polished and plush revivals.

The updating of plays and operas forms only a tiny percentage of Miller's work, but a prominent part, from *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* early on in his career right up to his recent *Tosca* and *The Mikado*, setting a precedent for dozens of younger directors. Of his work in this vein, it is undoubtedly his *Rigoletto* which has made the most resounding impact. Struck by the inconsistency between Verdi's nineteenth-century score and the opera's literal setting in Renaissance Mantua, Miller realised

how consistent the plot was with something that could have taken place in another Italian community where people have absolute power of life and death over others, namely the world of the Godfather and the Italian Mafia. Since the music of the nineteenth century continues to be played, and is influential in the Italian communities of the twentieth century, it seemed much less anachronistic, and a perfectly obvious and effortless transposition.¹²

¹⁰ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 123.

¹¹ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 128.

¹² Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 183.

A profile of Jonathan Miller

Replacing the dusty trappings of the sixteenth-century court of the Gonzagas with Lugers, Ray-Bans and juke-boxes, Miller set his 1982 production of *Rigoletto* for the English National Opera in the Mafia underworld of 1950s New York. The Duke became a Mafia Boss with Rigoletto as his hunchback barman, an ever-present joker; the settings ranged from a neon-lit hotel bar to a shadowy street of looming tenement blocks, and finally to the lonely diner reminiscent of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*.

English National Opera conductor Peter Robinson recalls:

Jonathan had already done a *Rigoletto* set in the mid-nineteenth century for Kent Opera, and I remember sitting with him in a Melbourne restaurant shortly after that and hearing him say, 'One day I want to set it in 1950s New York – the characters could be members of the Mafia.' There were several of us there with him, and he kept exploring this idea, thinking how it would work for Gilda and where Rigoletto himself would fit in – 'Maybe he would be the bartender?' So it had been ticking over in his mind for some time before he actually staged it for Lord Harewood, who was running the ENO at the time. He first dreamed up the idea after seeing *Some Like It Hot* and picking up on the line – 'I couldn't have been at the St Valentine's Day Massacre. Me? I was at *Rigoletto*.'

The plot of *Rigoletto* actually fits the Mafia setting perfectly, with Monterone as the head of a rival family, and so on. Jonathan's updating makes so much sense, as there is a very strong contrast between the nineteenth-century music and the sixteenth-century setting if you do it in Renaissance Mantua, whereas a Mafia community in the 1950s would be full of nineteenth-century Italian opera. For the whole of this century, that kind of music has been the Italians' folk music. Having 'La donna è mobile' come out of a juke-box was an inspired touch.

We watched videos of *The Godfather* during rehearsals, as Jonathan wanted the cast to get the right physical gestures rather than 'operatic' acting. He wanted them to imitate the relaxed style of American social life – the way that they slap each other on the back and shake hands without really looking at anyone in particular as they move around a room, the way that they smoke or hold their cigarettes, and so on. It was a very strongly cast production – John Rawnsley fulfilled Jonathan's conception of Rigoletto perfectly, and Arthur Davies was ideally suited to the Duke. (*personal communication*)

The originality – and validity – of Miller's concept, the sheer panache with which it was staged, and the way that it instantly seized the public imagination made *Rigoletto* a landmark in modern opera production comparable to Patrice Chéreau's *Ring* cycle or Peter Brook's pared-down *Carmen*.

Like *Rigoletto*, *The Barber of Seville* is also a standard work in the repertoire and Miller points out the problem for directors faced with the challenge of staging it afresh:

The Barber has been done many times before, and everyone thinks they know how it should be done. There are lots of traditional views about how it ought to be presented, what it ought to look like, how it ought to sound, and how jolly it ought to be. If you are