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Edited by Christopher Bigsby

Excerpt

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I

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

Introduction

Introduction to the first edition

The plays are my autobiography. I can't write plays that don't sum up where I am. I'm in all of them. I don't know how else to go about writing.¹

Arthur Miller was born in Harlem, on 17 October 1915, a long way from the Connecticut hills where he has lived for nearly half a century, though not quite as far as it may seem. Harlem, then, was an elegant and mixed neighborhood, partly German, partly Italian, Jewish, and black. There was open space. His mother could watch him walk to a school which she herself had attended, down unthreatening streets.

The family was wealthy. His father, an all but illiterate immigrant from Poland, had built up a clothing business which employed a thousand workers. That all ended with the 1929 Wall Street Crash. The houses grew smaller, family life more tense. They moved to Brooklyn. At thirteen he wanted to be a soldier and go to West Point. Three years later, with the Depression biting hard, he "wanted to be anything that was going." The "anything" extended to being a crooner. For a brief while he had a radio programme of his own: "I sang the latest hits and had a blind pianist with lots of dandruff."

The impact of the Depression was traumatizing: "there were three suicides on the little block where we lived. They couldn't cope. The impact was incalculable. These people were profound believers in the American dream. The day the money stopped their identity was gone ... America is hope, even when it doesn't work ... America is promises ... I don't think America ever got over the Depression." Certainly the Depression haunts his plays. The lesson which he drew from it, though, had little to do with economics. He learned that "there is a feeling at the back of the brain that the whole thing can sink at a moment's notice ... everything else is ephemeral. It is going to blow away, except what a person is and what a relationship is." The Depression nearly ended plans for his education. The family business was gone, along with the stocks and shares. There was no money left to support him. He earned his way to university through a succession of small jobs, including delivering bread at four in the morning for four dollars a week.

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The University of Michigan had a reputation as a radical campus. With a group of others he ran the student newspaper. Five of his friends went to the Spanish Civil War: one died, another was severely wounded. He was tempted to go himself but there were causes closer to home. Down the road in Detroit Henry Ford hired “Nazi storm troopers” to run the factory. “Spain,” he insisted, “was in Detroit.” His radicalism now poured into a series of student plays, two of which won, and another was runner-up for, the annual Hopwood Award.

Miller knew little of theatre. He had seen few plays and was unsure even how long an act should be. “I chose theatre,” though, he has explained, because “it was the cockpit of literary activity and you could talk directly to an audience and radicalize the people.” There was something real about theatre which appealed to a man who, beyond anything, liked to make things. From the age of six he had worked with wood. He has continued to do so, building the shed in which he wrote *Death of a Salesman* and subsequently a bed, a dinner table, and an array of chairs and cabinets. A play, he has suggested, is like that: “it has an architectural structure. You could walk around in it. I like to make things, mostly furniture, and create as I go along. I improvise designs. I never make a drawing. I just get a couple of pieces of wood and start to fiddle around until something happens. A play is a real object.”

On leaving university Miller briefly joined the Federal Theatre, a nationwide organization designed to give work to unemployed writers, actors, directors, and designers. Among other works he submitted was a play about Montezuma and Cortés called *The Golden Years*, which was finally produced, for the first time, in a radio and television version, nearly fifty years later. Thereafter he wrote radio plays, mostly for Du Pont’s drama series *Cavalcade of America*, while also working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a school injury ruling him out of the military.

His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), closed after four days; though, nearly fifty years later, the Bristol Old Vic in Britain successfully produced the same play. His response was to turn to the novel. *Focus*, a work about anti-Semitism in America, proved remarkably successful. He nonetheless returned to the theatre with *All My Sons*, a play written during wartime but produced in 1947. It was an immediate success.

Despite this success, or perhaps because of it, he took a job in a factory, for wages, because, as he has explained, “I wanted to be with the salt of the earth.” His radical days in Michigan had left him feeling guilt for his sudden wealth. The job lasted a week: “I couldn’t think of myself any longer as being allied to the working class because the working class were busy being middle class.” Miller followed *All My Sons* with *Death of a*

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Salesman, which, while responding to the new American affluence, still seemed to him to bear the mark of the Depression. It was, he has explained, about “what happens when everybody has a refrigerator and a car. I wrote *Salesman* at the beginning of the greatest boom in world history but I felt that the reality was Depression, the whole thing coming down in a heap of ashes. There was still the feel of the Depression, the fear that everything would disappear.” One thing that did begin to disappear was his audience.

His own response to the growing anti-Communist hysteria of the early fifties was to write an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* and then *The Crucible*, set during the 1692 Salem witch trials but with obvious relevance to Senator Joseph McCarthy and to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a committee of the House of Representatives which set itself to identify present and former Communists and so-called fellow travelers in all branches of American life. His audience began to edge away. *Death of a Salesman* ran for 742 performances; *An Enemy of the People* managed 36, and *The Crucible* 197. The play was sustained on Broadway only with the help of a cast willing to accept pay cuts, while those who attended were likely to be partisan. On the night Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed as Communist spies, audience and cast stood for a moment’s silence. It was not a good time to be a liberal: “the isolation was terrible. No part of society would support you.”

In the early fifties a cabin appeared half a mile from Miller’s home, where men sat for twenty-four hours a day watching out for Russian bombers passing over Connecticut: “If you told them you didn’t think there would be any they looked at you suspiciously.” Decades later he read the FBI reports and discovered that he and his friends had been under observation throughout this period. He joined a group of writers, publishers, and journalists whose objective was to write articles attacking McCarthy. No newspaper would publish them and the group broke up when it was infiltrated by the FBI. Called before HUAC in 1956 and asked to identify those who had attended meetings which might be construed as being subversive he refused, was fined, and sentenced to prison for contempt of Congress, a sentence later quashed on appeal.

His last play of the 1950s, *A View from the Bridge*, which focused on the figure of the informer, ran for 149 performances. Eddie Carbone, its protagonist, precipitates his own death as a means of denying a truth he cannot face, his feelings of sexual attraction to his own niece, Catherine. Forty years later, in *Broken Glass*, Phillip Gellburg cannot claim his life as his own because he, too, cannot accept his own nature. Denial, indeed, lies at the heart of Miller’s work. Time after time he explores the lives of those who fail to acknowledge their freedom to act. They are observers of their

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own fate, unwilling, often through guilt, sometimes through fear, to intervene on their own behalf or to acknowledge their responsibility toward others. Some, like Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, or Phillip Gellburg in *Broken Glass*, win their way through to understanding, albeit on the edge of death; others, like Willy Loman and Eddie Carbone, die rather than accept a truth which they fear will render their lives retrospectively meaningless. Willy Loman believes himself no more than his function, which is why the play bears the title it does. He has another life but fails to value it because his society seems to afford it no value. Miller's characters seek some confirmation of their identity, some recognition that they have left their mark on the world, in a context in which that significance seems denied them. The persistence of that need, however, is evidence for the survival of an instinct otherwise threatened by the power of coercive myths.

There followed a nine-year period in which no new Miller play appeared on the American stage. A gap had opened up between him and his audience. He turned instead to the cinema, though largely because of his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. When she lost a child in pregnancy Miller wrote the screenplay of *The Misfits* for her as a gift. "It was also," he explained, "an expression of some kind of belief in her as an actress. But by the time we got to make the film three years had gone by and we were no longer man and wife. The film was there but the marriage wasn't."

He returned to the theatre in 1964. He and Monroe had divorced not long before her death and critics saw *After the Fall* as in part his attempt to deal with this period of his life. It was, however, a work of much greater scope than this suggests, braiding together, as it does, the Holocaust and the anti-Communist hysteria of the fifties in an attempt to locate the connective tissue linking private and public betrayals. *After the Fall* was perhaps the first of his plays to establish a greater reputation outside the United States than within. Playing in repertory at the new Lincoln Center, it ran for fifty-nine performances. Its companion piece, *Incident at Vichy*, which also addressed the question of the Holocaust and the nature of human betrayal, ran for ninety-nine performances. It was not, however, a work without contemporary relevance. The play, he explained, "was written at a time when all values were up in the air. You're a Nazi. That's OK. You could be a vegetarian. I am there to say that vegetarians don't kill people ... In other words the message of the time was that there was no such thing as society ... just people doing what they wanted." This was a theme to which he would return in subsequent decades.

The fact is that two events, above all, proved definitional for Miller – the Depression and the Holocaust. One changed a particular model of social

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organization, a national myth, an interpretation of history; the other seemed to destroy the very meaning of the individual and the concept of society as a network of sustaining obligations. To write after such events was to face a challenge, for how could art itself be said to have survived. Viewed in one way the ironies of the theatre of the absurd (as presented by Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco) were a logical response. But for Miller this was to make art complicit with the forces it existed to resist. In the presence of such defining events, art, Miller implies, has a special responsibility. It either accommodates itself to, acquiesces in, social and metaphysical irony or it resists it. And in that context theatre becomes central as a direct expression of a fundamental community of mutually dependent individuals.

Despite the ambiguous American response to *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*, Miller concluded the sixties with his most successful play since *Death of a Salesman*. *The Price*, in which two brothers meet one another after years of hostility and separation, appeared in 1968, a year characterised by trauma in Vietnam and assassinations at home.

Indeed, the real theatre in late sixties America seemed to be taking place on the street, as America staged its social and political conflicts in rallies and marches. Miller played his role in these. In particular he stood up against the Vietnam war, which he characterized as a “criminal engagement which showed a side of American civilization I would rather not think about.” He was a delegate to the chaotic and violent Democratic Party National Convention in Chicago in 1968 and worked for the anti-war movement. Abroad, he became President of PEN, the international writers’ organization, and spoke in defense of imprisoned writers, an activity which gave him the subject for a new play.

In the late 1970s Arthur Miller sat at a dinner table in Czechoslovakia with a group of writers. Outside the window, in the street below, was a car filled with secret police. But the real threat did not lie outside the window. It lay in the microphones which, they could be reasonably sure, were concealed in the apartment. The writers’ awareness of other, unseen, listeners put a pressure on language, turning those present into actors who performed for two audiences. Words had to carry a double meaning, one for those in the room, whose eyes they could meet, and another for those who would listen later to a tape recording which recorded everything but the truth. It was a game which writers were especially well equipped to play but it was a dangerous game nonetheless in that language became suspect and deeply problematic.

In 1977 Miller wrote a play based on this experience. It was called *The Archbishop’s Ceiling* and was set in an old archbishop’s palace in an

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unnamed city in eastern Europe (clearly Prague). In the ceiling there may or may not be concealed microphones. Beyond the obvious reference to a totalitarian world in which reality is defined by those who control political power and, indeed, language, it would have been hard for audiences not to see the relevance of the play to an American society in which the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, had not only bugged his own office but, from time to time, had plainly forgotten that he had done so. In such circumstances the real becomes increasingly difficult to define, a fact which intrigued Miller. In answer to a question from a member of the audience at the National Theatre in London in 1984, he remarked that “what I’ve become more and more fascinated by is the question of reality and what it is, and whether there is any, and how one invites it into oneself. That’s a moral issue, finally.”²

In 1980, however, he appeared to turn the clock back in a work which borrowed from the very first play he ever wrote, *No Villain*. *The American Clock* is set during the Depression years. It was, he explained, “a conscious attempt to invoke the past and its necessities at a time when self-interest seemed the order of the day ... I wanted to remind people of a totally different period. We always wanted to wipe out the past. We don’t give a damn about it any more. It has no utilitarian value.” His 1992 play, *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, a play about a man who believes “you can have it all,” made a similar point.

In 1994 he once again returned to the past in a play set in 1938. *Broken Glass* is set at the time of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, but relates to a sense of moral and political paralysis which he saw being recreated in contemporary Europe. “We are living,” he suggested in 1995, “at a time when nothing has a relationship to anything else. Just for my own sanity I wanted to write about something that showed a relationship, that A led to B. It is in relation to a culture that has severed connectiveness. We are now one individual and another individual and another in the face of the fact that it is perfectly obvious that there is a society, that we are all in the grip of various forces that are raging around us. The reigning philosophy is that you are on your own.”

In his autobiography, *Timebends*, Arthur Miller remarks on his talent for “being contemporary,” his conviction of the need always to stay “involved in transition.” It is, he suggests, a natural inheritance of the child and grandchild of immigrants. Change was a birthright, while survival depended on an ability to read the shifting text of society. And yet along with the need to decode the moment went a desire to reach back beyond some temporal divide and acknowledge continuity. Growing up alongside his father and grandfather, both from Poland, the past existed for him as

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present fact. That simple truth lies behind virtually all of his work as he resists the American desire to deny history in the name of a future which contains the essence of its promise of new beginnings. Indeed, he has remarked on the tendency of American authors themselves to write “as though the tongue had been cut out of the past, leaving him alone to begin from the beginning, from the Creation and the first naming of things seen for the first time ... American writers spring as though from the ground itself or drop out of the air all new and self-conceived and self-made, quite like the businessmen they despise.”³

Miller has spoken of his concern to penetrate his own feelings about himself and the times in which he lived. It is in that sense that he sees Willy Loman as a representative figure because he, as Miller once remarked, carried in his pocket the “coinage of our day” (*Timebends*, p. 176). But Willy Loman has a past and for Miller the present moment always has a history. Nor is it simply that he hears echoes of the past, so that the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, for example, can be seen to be a re-enactment of the witch-hunts of colonial New England. It is that, believing in a moral world in which actions have consequences for which individual and state must be held accountable, it becomes necessary to dramatize causality in the lives of his characters. It is in that sense that he says that “the job of the artist ... is to remind people of what they have chosen to forget” (*Arthur Miller and Company*, p. 200),⁴ and asserts, as he does in *After the Fall*, that the past is holy. As he has explained, “I’ve come out of the playwriting tradition which is Greek and Ibsen where the past is the burden of man and it’s got to be placed on the stage so that he can grapple with it. That’s the way these plays are built. It’s *now* grappling with *then*, it’s the story of how the birds come home to roost. Every play” (*Arthur Miller and Company*, p. 201). The very structure of *Death of a Salesman*, of *After the Fall*, and, indeed, *Timebends* itself, brings past and present together precisely because the past which we carry in our heads is the substance of our present.

The reference to Ibsen is both accurate and misleading, accurate in that it draws attention to the logic of plays which do, indeed, insist on the moral relevance of the past, and misleading in that his acknowledgment of the significance of Ibsen is often taken to imply a commitment to realism on Miller’s part. In fact, as he has frequently lamented, only *All My Sons* genuinely fitted that model. It is true that he is not a formalist, insisting that stylistic invention, without an explicit commitment of some kind to a more humane vision of life, is “a boat without a rudder.” On the other hand his commitment to stylistic innovation is apparent in *Death of a Salesman* and *A View from the Bridge*, as it is in *After the Fall* and *Two-Way Mirror*. The

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structure of a play, he has insisted, is its essential poem. It is as much a metaphor as are the characters, as is the action, while his concern with the suspect nature of the real, the active component of memory, and the plasticity of language, is evident in *The Crucible*, *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, and *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*. For Miller there are if not realities then urgencies, and beneath the contingencies of the body politic a skeletal structure of individual human relationships. Public behavior does not corrupt private relations: it is a projection of them. In other words, his central subject is human fallibility. The problem was never capitalism or a coercive conformity, anti-Semitism or totalitarianism, but the very human nature which in other respects is the only possible defense against those reductive forces. Private and public history alike begin and end with the individual, with the self. Miller's characters are deeply flawed. That is what led him to speak of modern tragedy, but that flaw is the essence of their humanity.

At the center of his work, then, is a concern to see in private lives the origins of public issues. As he has said, "the way I see life there are no public issues; they are all private issues." The dilemma of Willy Loman, of John Proctor, and of Phillip Gellburg, has to do with the substance and integrity of their identities, yet the battles which they wage with themselves are related to larger issues. Denial and betrayal are marks not only of the individual but of a society whose leaders deny that very mutuality which is their justification for existence.

Arthur Miller is Jewish. This means nothing to him in terms of formal observances. Beyond that, however, it is a significant fact. It is not for nothing that the Holocaust lurks behind *The Crucible* and is a subject of *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, and *Broken Glass*. Not merely does he believe that his liberal instincts may be rooted in the Jewish experience but the knowledge that the sky can fall has given a greater urgency and a sharper edge to his commitment to reinventing the moral world whose historical irrelevance was declared so peremptorily nearly sixty years ago. The lessons which he learned from the Depression, as the familiar world dissolved leaving only the necessities of survival, were projected to some ultimate point in Nazi Germany. His public statements in defense of writers are thus of a piece with his work for he believes the writer to be a truth teller whose function is in part to warn against the coercive power of myth and the constant temptation to deny responsibility for the world we make. As at the beginning of his career, he remains committed to theatre because he believes it can change people – no longer in that direct sense that he once thought possible, but change them nonetheless: "I've given up the idea objectively that anything I write was going to get anyone elected. But I do think that in a very small way, probably historically of no importance, what one writes

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can change people in the sense that it gives them a new idea of themselves ... You will shift the consciousness of a certain number of people.”

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The first edition of this book appeared in 1997, at a time when Miller had been writing for over sixty years. It seemed not unreasonable to think that the flow might have stopped. The last play it considered was *Broken Glass*, first staged in 1994. The story, though, did not end there. Ahead lay three further plays, along with three films and a clutch of short stories. He continued to engage with the world, firing off articles to the *New York Times* and, in 1998, writing a striking and ambiguous poem to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel, whose founding he had welcomed in 1948 with one speech at the Polo Grounds in New York and another at the Commodore Hotel.

When he died, on 10 February 2005, fifty-six years to the day after the opening night of *Death of a Salesman*, newspapers marked his passing with respect, Broadway dimming its lights. A few of those on the political right, however, chose to renew old battles. Five days after his death the *Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled, “The Great Pretender: Arthur Miller Wasn’t Well-liked – and for good reason.” If the bells were tolling for his death, it suggested, most of those bells were made of tin since the playwright’s work had been pretentious, lacking in ideas and the ability to express them. The article then listed those American critics who had, indeed, attacked him over the years, mostly those once on the left who had taken issue with his politics and who saw his work as embodying left-wing convictions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its politics, the *New Criterion* headed its obituary, “Arthur Miller: Communist Stooge,” and was denounced for doing so by Edward Albee at the memorial celebration of Miller’s life at New York’s Majestic Theater. Even the *New York Times* found space to insist that he sometimes succumbed to over-statement and that he was probably the least subtle of America’s Big Three – the other two being Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams. Themes, motifs, moral convictions, *Times* critic Charles Isherwood concluded, often shone through his work like neon signs in a diner window.

These responses are worth quoting not because Europeans have always taken pleasure in the more bizarre outposts of American cultural gaucheness, but because it is worth being reminded that Miller did not always bathe in the bright sunlight of critical regard in his native country. From the beginning of his career, and intensifying in the final decades of his life, he wrote if not against the American grain then in the knowledge that there were those who despised his politics and what seemed to them his dramaturgy.

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In the end, of course, it is the plays that survive while those who dismissed them in the 1940s and 50s lived to see them find a secure place in the international repertoire. Those who dismissed his later plays – often the same people – had to account for the enthusiasm of European critics and audiences, and signally failed to do so.

Miller never disengaged from public issues. He was capable, he confessed, of getting things seriously wrong. He was bitter at the betrayals of the Soviet Union, having allowed himself to swallow its propaganda, failing to question the Moscow trials and the Hitler–Stalin pact. He remained loyal until 1950, in part because he resented the rewriting of history which sought to airbrush out Russian sacrifices which had made victory in Europe possible. For all that, he never regretted feeling passionate about the plight of the poor, for responding to the idea of human brotherhood. He denounced American racism and anti-Semitism, rallying quickly to the side of the young as they protested against the war in Vietnam. He was a delegate to the 1968 Democratic convention and as such witnessed police assaults. He was part of the antinuclear movement and as president of International PEN worked for the release of imprisoned writers around the world. When a young man in his locality was falsely charged with murder and imprisoned, he worked for his release.

His work would bear the imprint of his commitments, without ever turning into propaganda. His early play *The Golden Years* was a response to what he saw as the paralysis of European countries in the face of the threat of fascism, something to which he would return in *Broken Glass* in 1994. His novel *Focus* was a direct assault on American anti-Semitism, as his work to release a young man imprisoned for manslaughter would find its way indirectly into a play – *Some Kind of Love Story* – and a film – *Everybody Wins*. *The Crucible* was as born out of the shock he felt at America's betrayal of its principles, as *Death of a Salesman* had been his response to a society that seemed to him in danger of distorting America's promises. In a new century would come *Resurrection Blues*, a satire on a society in which the gap between rich and poor grew ever wider. Yet to put it in these terms is misleading. Such concerns may in some sense have been an immediate cause, a stimulus to write. The plays went far beyond this in an attempt to track the social and political to the personal.

If his central themes were betrayal and denial it was because he saw man as essentially flawed. The movement of his plays, however, is towards the moment at which the individual begins to see, if only imperfectly, the need to acknowledge responsibility for his or her actions. He recognized the impulse to defer to authority, whether that be a social imperative or a deity, but saw in that no more than a sacrifice of will, a failure to become the protagonist