

Arthur Miller's Century

Arthur Miller's Century:

*Essays Celebrating the 100th
Birthday of America's Great
Playwright*

Edited by

Stephen Marino

Cambridge
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To Katie

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FOREWORD

ENOCH BRATER

Of the three great master dramatists who set out to transform the scope and shape of American drama in the twentieth century, only one of them was determined to write plays that, as he said, were going to change the world. That playwright, the subject of this book, was Arthur Miller. Eugene O'Neill, the sole Nobel laureate among the heady triumvirate, early on stated his goal of composing a dynamic repertory larger even than the haunting cycle of classical Greek plays. A recovering alcoholic, and a survivor, too, of his actor-father's embrace of the romantic lead in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, O'Neill succeeded in late works like *The Iceman Cometh* and, most particularly so, in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in setting the stage for a drama that was at once intimate, wide-ranging, and psychologically real, imposing and true. For every one of his characters, as for Mary Tyrone, the past was always in the present: "We all try to lie out of it, but life won't let us." The full range of Tennessee Williams's dramatic personae, by contrast, always struggle in vain against the strictures of such an all-consuming determinism. Onstage they long for a more fluid, a more liberating identity, sexual and otherwise. They fail, and fail again, even when, undone by their own frailty and fragility, they sometimes find momentary respite in the fleeting kindness of strangers.

Miller's characters are plagued by other demons. These are configured in the wide social sphere, where a character's fate is as much the product of individual choice as, to use the playwright's favorite phrase, "chickens coming home to roost." In his drama there is always a choice, and the price we pay for it. "It's not your guilt I want," the rounded-up Jewish psychiatrist tells the could-be aristocratic bystander in *Incident at Vichy*, "it's your responsibility." The denouement is predicated on actions, not words when Nazis in full uniform loom offstage, doing their investigative duty, smoking out Jews.

Though Miller was an accomplished hand at writing short stories, several of which appeared in *The New Yorker*, and a fiery muckraker as activist-commentator on national and international injustices and human rights violations in pieces published in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*

and elsewhere, it was naturally in the theater where his spirit soared. Even after more than half a century his voice rings true with alarming clarity and precision. The right wing, alt and always waiting in the wings—and as we know at the present moment not only in the wings—comes to us in the shape of faux witchcraft and blatant political opportunism in Miller's most performed play, *The Crucible*. A world in migrant crisis, moreover, need look no further than *A View from the Bridge*. When Eddie Carbone turns in his wife's "alien" cousins to the authorities, our passivity, like the lawyer Alfieri's, is also on the line. War profiteering, both big and small in the military industrial complex (without which there's no fuel to the fire, cracked warheads notwithstanding), is writ large as complicity in his first Broadway success, *All My Sons*. And then there's the landmark play, *Death of a Salesman*, Miller's signature work. Writers in the second half of the twentieth century—Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth among them—were obsessed with producing the great American novel. What they failed to notice was that Miller had already done that, only his had come in the shape of a family play.

The major revivals of Miller's work that were produced in and around his centenary year, 2016, some of which provide inspiration for the essays that follow, are of course the most compelling evidence of their immediacy and contemporary relevance, what students are likely to cite these days as "relatable." All you have to do to make his lines sing is recite them (every actor knows this), though imaginative and innovative directors like Simon McBurney and Ivo van Hove have pushed their actors and designers to do much more than that. In many ways their productions of *All My Sons*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge* have given the Miller for all times a new Miller for our own times. What a younger generation of theater practitioners knows is that plays like Miller's continue to breathe new life into the theater. They breathe new life, too, into other forms as well, as can be seen in films like Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) and the great Iranian director Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (2016).

Miller's theater, despite the lofty ambition he once had for it, did not really change the world. Plays rarely do that. What they can do is change our way of thinking about it. He firmly believed that theater, now and always, played an important part in the national conversation any healthy democracy has to have about itself. That dialogue continues in the work of contemporary playwrights like Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, Jon Robin Baitz and Lynn Nottage, and even more so in the passionate legacy that follows in the transformative work of Annie Baker, Samuel J. Hunter,

Dominique Morisseau, Amy Herzog, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Ayad Akhtar,
Anna Ziegler and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

Let the conversation continue.

It must.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues at St. Francis College for promoting the Arthur Miller Centennial Conference, especially Provost Timothy Houlihan and my co-chair, Ian Maloney. I must also recognize Robert Oliva, Director of Special Events, and Richard Relkin, Director of Media Relations, for their vital help and support in organizing the conference. I would also like to acknowledge the advice and encouragement of the Arthur Miller Society, especially Sue Abbotson, David Palmer, Chris Bigsby, and Enoch Brater. Special thanks to Rebecca Miller for her permission to use Inge Morath's photos and Julia Bolus of the Arthur Miller Trust and Sana Manzoor of the Inge Morath Estate in facilitating the acquisition of the photos.

INTRODUCTION

STEPHEN MARINO

At his 85th birthday celebration at Queens College of the City University of New York, Arthur Miller confessed: “I don’t like birthdays because I hate counting...It reminds me of time passing. I resist that” (Marino 3). Fifteen years later, the world ignored Miller’s disinclination, for 2015 was an *Annus Mirabilis* for him.

The centennial of Arthur Miller’s birth in Manhattan on October 15, 1915 was celebrated around the globe with a panoply of acclaimed revivals of his plays, media documentaries, academic conferences, and new criticism. The centennial year—coinciding with the ten-year anniversary of Arthur Miller’s death in February 2005—provided opportunity to consider Miller’s influence as a literary, political, and cultural figure that ensured his place not only as one of the greatest American writers, but also in the pantheon of great world playwrights.

In a special section of *The Arthur Miller Journal* titled, “Why Miller is Important,” Miller’s biographer, Christopher Bigsby, commented on the explosion of centennial activity:

I have a Google Alert for Arthur Miller and am thinking of cancelling it. Every day my inbox fills up with news of productions around the world. It is especially bad this year. Theatre directors and media alike have a fondness for anniversaries. They invite a backward look, a re-visiting of works that at the time seemed to speak to the moment but which astonish by their continuing relevance. (1-2)

Most Arthur Miller scholars and aficionados are familiar with two indisputable facts: there is never a time when *Death of Salesman* is not playing somewhere in the world and rarely a time when a Miller play is not in production in London. During this Miller centennial year, audiences throughout the world reveled in the staggering number of revivals of Miller’s major plays. Productions in Austria, Australia, Brazil, Catalonia, China, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Canada, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Russia, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey proved his enduring relevance to international

audiences. In England, the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford upon Avon staged *Death of a Salesman*, and Londoners experienced the avant-garde director Ivo van Hove's remaking of *A View From the Bridge*. BBC Radio offered a season of Arthur Miller plays, documentaries, and features, including "Attention Must Be Paid: Arthur Miller's Centenary," "Arthur Miller's The Hook: Unmade Movies" and broadcasts of *Death of a Salesman* and *A View from the Bridge*. The significance of Miller's 100th birthday also stirred interest in plays that had never appeared on any world stage. English audiences also had unique experiences seeing world premieres of a staged version of *The Hook* (the screenplay that Miller wrote about the Sicilian-American dockworkers in Brooklyn that he and Elia Kazan peddled in Hollywood in 1951), and the very first play that Miller wrote, *No Villain*, for which he won his first Avery Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan.

New York City celebrated its native son's centennial year with a cascade of productions. Ivo van Hove's remarkable *A View From the Bridge* transferred from London and he also directed an acclaimed revival of *The Crucible*. A Yiddish production of *Death of a Salesman* and a powerful version of *Incident at Vichy* played off-Broadway. Symphony Space in Manhattan marked the centennial with an evening of conversation and film clips celebrating Arthur Miller's masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*. Miller's first play, *No Villain*, received a staged reading at The Public Theatre. The Arthur Miller Foundation celebrated with a star-filled benefit directed by Gregory Mosher and featuring Miller's daughter Rebecca Miller and his sister Joan Copeland. The staged readings of excerpts from Miller's dramas were the highlight of the benefit performances with: Laurence Fishburne as Willy and Peter Sarsgaard as Howard in *Death of a Salesman*; Ron Leibman as Solomon bandying with John Turturro's Victor in a scene from *The Price*; Bradley Cooper as Quentin and Greta Gerwig as Maggie clashing in the climactic scene from *After the Fall*; Alec Baldwin as Joe Keller depicting conflicts from *All My Sons* with Ellen Barkin as Kate and Jake Gyllenhaal as Chris. The evening's final scene returned to *Death of a Salesman*. McKinley Belcher as Hap, Ray Fisher as Biff, and La Tanya Richardson Jackson as Linda reinforced the universality of Miller's masterpiece. Each scene excerpt was punctuated by passages from Miller's diaries, journals, and letters read by the playwrights Ayad Akhtar, Tony Kushner, Katori Hall, and A. R. Gurney. In February 2017, the centennial celebration continued with the Broadway revival of *The Price* starring Mark Ruffalo, Tony Shaloub, and Danny DeVito.

The centennial year also saw re-issues of Miller's writing. Bloomsbury marked the occasion with two timely publications: *Death of a Salesman in Beijing*, a re-issue of Miller's diary when directing his most famous play in China, and *The Collected Essays of Arthur Miller*, a new compilation of Miller's theatre and non-theatre essays. Penguin released three collections of Miller's plays, essays, and stories in its Penguin Classics Deluxe Editions to commemorate the centennial: *The Penguin Arthur Miller: Collected Plays*, *Collected Essays*, and *Presence: Collected Stories*.

The centennial year featured international academic conferences coinciding with the month of Miller's birth. On October 17, Lucknow University in India celebrated by curating an exhibition with Miller memorabilia: handmade paintings, rare photographs and articles, and archival posters from Broadway productions. A documentary with a compilation of Miller's interviews, including one with Nelson Mandela, was the highlight of the exposition. In Ireland, the Dublin Theatre Festival and the Gate Theatre held a tribute to Miller and his work with a series of interviews, readings, and discussions on Miller's life and his writing. Guest speakers included Christopher Bigsby, Enoch Brater, Joe Dowling, James Houghton, Garry Hynes, and Fintan O'Toole. The festivities also featured a production of *A View from the Bridge*. The University of Bolton in England celebrated with the distinguished director David Thacker hosting two days of intimate and exclusive discussions. The conference included screenings of Miller's work and live performances of his plays. David Thacker's inaugural lecture as Professor of Theatre at the University of Bolton focussed on *Broken Glass*. Two major American academic conferences were held at colleges closely associated with Miller. Miller's alma mater, the University of Michigan, sponsored a three-day event: "Arthur Miller @ Michigan and Beyond." The conference dovetailed with the 100th anniversary of the university's famous writing program that fostered Miller's early talent. The Arthur Miller Theatre on the university's campus produced *All My Sons*; the Department of Theatre & Drama also hosted an Arthur Miller Symposium that explored Miller's time at Michigan and his connection to the university throughout his career. On October 16-18, the Arthur Miller Society sponsored the Arthur Miller Centennial Conference at St. Francis College in Brooklyn Heights, the neighborhood where Miller lived in the 1940s and 50s. Scholars from around the world gathered to deliver papers on the dramatic and non-dramatic work that Miller produced in his stellar seventy-year career. The conference featured an interview with, and performance by, Miller's sister Joan Copeland, a staged reading of *All My Sons* by "The Verge" of Ithaca College, and the world premiere of a Syrian version of *A View From the*

Bridge, approved by the Miller estate. The conference also included discussion of the artistic relationship between Arthur Miller and his wife, Inge Morath, the world-renowned photojournalist, featuring a photo exhibit of Morath's work provided by her foundation.

This centennial year invites publication of new perspectives on Miller's life, career, and influence. The eclectic essays in this collection are gathered from the Miller Centennial Conference in Brooklyn and from contributions from renowned Miller and theatre scholars. This compilation is not only a "Festschrift," but also provides detailed discussions of text and performance, of Miller as a political and cultural figure, and of his connection to other playwrights. The essays explore the trajectory of Miller's career, his most famous and frequently produced works such as *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and *A View From the Bridge*, the dramas of his later career, and his fiction. The plays in Miller's large dramatic canon continue to draw scholars and theatre critics from all disciplines with diverse approaches so that the collection includes a cross-section of critical perspectives and theories: biographical, historical, political, comparative, language, psychological, feminist, cognitive, and dramatic theory and stagecraft.

The volume opens with "Performance and Arthur Miller," the keynote address delivered in Brooklyn by Christopher Bigsby who traces how Miller maintained "a dialogue with America" in his art and life. Brenda Murphy has produced a groundbreaking essay about the genesis of Miller's career that resulted in his first Broadway hit, *All My Sons*. She argues that Miller's writing of *Situation Normal* was crucial in the transformation that he underwent during WW II: from a playwright of the thirties, earnestly trying to write plays that reflected the ideals of collective responsibility, to a playwright who created plays that dramatized the interrelation among the individual, the family, and the larger society, a form that came to be recognized as the great American drama of the late forties and fifties.

In the two essays on *Death of a Salesman*, George Monteiro speculates that Gustave "Dutch" Ferbert, the young football coach at the University of Michigan who left his coaching job to try his luck in Alaska, may have been the inspiration for the character of Willy Loman's brother, Ben. Brian Mazeski undertakes a language study of *Death of a Salesman*, joining the critical effort to re-position Miller as a language stylist. His essay sheds light on yet another layer of Miller's unique dramatic idiom—the aquatic imagery that pervades *Death of a Salesman*.

In consideration of Miller's great plays of the 1950s, Matthew Lorenz examines how John Proctor in *The Crucible* has been considered a flawed tragic hero and posits that he resembles not the tragic but the Byronic hero. Richard Brucher's essay reads *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge* in association with Sidney Hook's address on "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life." Brucher shows how Hook's pragmatic criteria offer a vocabulary for getting at the paradoxes of Eddie Carbone's agonizing choices. Garin Cycholl's examination of *A View from the Bridge* delineates the boundaries between the old and new worlds of the immigrant Sicilian community in Brooklyn, showing how these boundaries are obscured by the American mythologies of family, work, identity, and the movies.

In an essay that focuses on the interchange of art and biography, Stefani Koorey challenges the legendary stature that Arthur Miller attained by his refusal to name names at his appearance before HUAC. She argues that Miller's image is less than heroic in his exploitation of females in his life and literature.

Of essays that show the relevance of Miller's international perspective, Ramón Espejo Romero challenges how "universality" is applied to Miller's work. His discussion maintains that the study of Miller's reception abroad—his global dimension—is a grossly neglected area of scholarship. He explores three milestones of Miller's production history in Spain: *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and *After the Fall*. Ann C. Hall examines the political relationship between Harold Pinter and Miller in both their art and life with an emphasis on *Ashes to Ashes* and *Broken Glass* as examples.

Sylvia Kasey Marks analyzes how Miller's stories, "I Don't Need You Any More," "Fitter's Night," and *Jane's Blanket*, contain thematic connections. The characters in these stories have "private misunderstandings" of reality that reveal a kind of myopic, skewed, or limited vision of past events or of current events in their lives.

Two essays tackle Miller's work of the 60s and 70s. Paul J. Contino shows how in *The Price* the dynamic between Victor and Walter Franz bears affinities to the destructive relational pattern known as "Nadryv," in which characters, keenly sensitive to the way others may be objectifying them by their gaze, take pleasure in self-hurt, or hurting others. Frank Bergmann proves how *The Creation of the World and Other Business*—considered a relatively minor play—occupies a significant position in Arthur Miller's theatrical oeuvre. He offers a timely re-examination of its chronology, of its critical reception, of its style, and of its crucial connection to myth and archetype.

David Palmer uses Miller's late play *The Last Yankee* as a portal toward understanding Miller's broader vision of tragedy, in particular his ideas about a peculiarly American kind of tragedy and the way in which it arises from a faulty sense of pride that is grounded in the dark side of the American Dream.

Three essays examine relatively unexplored aspects of Miller criticism. Jane K. Dominik's exceptional essay provides an extensive analysis of the crucial roles that the many absent characters play in Miller's canon. My own essay shows the remarkable similarities in the lives of Shakespeare and Miller that fostered their unique development as playwrights in their own eras. Susan C.W. Abbotson offers a landmark essay about how Arthur Miller and Inge Morath collaborated on their books of photojournalism and how they informed each other's art, aesthetics, and politics. Her text is accompanied with Morath's photos from *China Encounters* and *In Russia*.

The book concludes with Joshua Polster's sweeping examination of Miller's entire career, emphasizing how he committed himself to the arts and humanity in order to advance social awareness, political engagement, and the progress of culture—and how his efforts have made lasting and important contributions to humanity.

Christopher Bigsby's concluding remarks in the centennial issue of *The Arthur Miller Journal* offer a fitting commentary as to why Miller will continue to be important: "This is his centenary. It will soon pass, but his plays will not, being re-imagined, re-invented and embraced by every generation, in every country, not as so many relics from a bygone age but as urgent messages about who we are and the world in which we live" (2).

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CHAPTER ONE

PERFORMANCE AND ARTHUR MILLER *KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE ARTHUR MILLER CENTENNIAL CONFERENCE*

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

Imagine a boy of six travelling alone across a continent and then an ocean, a boy from a small town in Europe who suddenly finds himself in a city of which he had heard but which had been spoken of in a language that would become alien. This is a boy whose parents thought him intellectually damaged and who never sent him to school. As a result, he never learned to read and late in life could still not understand that the world was round. Then imagine that he becomes enormously successful before losing almost everything in an economic cataclysm while remaining a true believer in a dream of wealth, in a promise broken but ever renewed.

This man, however, engendered a son who would challenge his beliefs. In a country which lays claim to the future, brushing the past aside as Indians once trailed tree branches behind their ponies to conceal their tracks, he would insist on the moral logic of the past. He would create works in which fathers and sons were in contention. And this son of an illiterate father would write words which stirred the mind and pierced the heart. He would stage the drama of those who were the victims of their own misdirected passions as they would be of a society too ready to betray its ideals. He would write of those concerned above all to invest their names with meaning, even as their actions would threaten to erode the integrity in which they needed to believe even as they sensed that they had failed in some way that they hesitated to confront.

This man, Arthur Miller, would write of denial and betrayal, of the need to transmute guilt into responsibility. He would create characters who moved and occasionally stunned audiences who recognised the private truths presented to them as later they would acknowledge the public

dimension of those truths because for him private and public have a permeable membrane, the individual never abstracted from the world which shapes him or her and which, in turn, they have the power to shape if only they realised as much, an existential truth that would run through his work.

And when he stepped outside his own fictions, he would demand responsibility of others, challenge those at home and abroad who thought to place limits on freedom, to constrain the imagination. And when he was not writing or defending those oppressed by ideologues, he was shaping wood from the trees he had himself planted, creating objects both functional and pleasing, signing them as he would the plays which shared precisely those characteristics. And when he died, he left behind a poem which invited others to look for him in what he had made, and so we do which is why we are gathered here in a part of that city to which his father had once come in fear and hope and where he himself began to write believing that in doing so he would be entering into a dialogue with America, for what else is theatre but a conversation in which we, the audience, bring our own experiences, our own sense of what is true, to suffer a shock of recognition but also a sense of transcendence which comes from being led into a world in which the everyday shines with a new significance as Gerald Manly Hopkins observed in another context, like shining from shook foil.

In March of 2001, Arthur Miller delivered the Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities. It was held in the Kennedy Centre before an audience of 2,500 people which consisted in part of congressmen, senators, a chief justice and the Washington elite. This, you will recall, was just after George W. Bush was elected, or if not exactly elected then offered the presidency by the Supreme Court. That March, both the House of Representatives and the Senate were in the control of the Republican Party. Plus ça change. Before delivering his speech, he had received a call asking him to tone it down. He refused. As he said to me, "I'm eighty-five, and I don't care." The man who hired him was subsequently fired. Why? Because in his speech, Miller ridiculed politicians, more especially Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, and he did so by seeing them as actors desperate to present themselves as other than they were. This was politics as performance from a man who was not unknown for offering performance as politics.

Of course, he accepted that, "acting is inevitable as soon as we walk out our front doors into society," (*On Politics and the Art of Acting* 1) something his own plays had acknowledged from the very first, from *All My Sons*, in which a man re-casts himself, playing the role of someone

unjustly accused, and on to Willy Loman whose profession as a salesman requires the invention of a persona. Willy is a man with a script to deliver and a costume to wear along with a smile and a shoeshine. He even performs for his wife, returning from his fruitless and debilitating dramas in New England, where he “killed them dead,” to stage himself to her as the success he wishes to see himself as being even as that character begins to collapse. He has lost his audience as a salesman, husband and father and who is he when he has lost that, not least because his identity has become synonymous with his performance. As a salesman, Willy Loman is an actor who settles for being “well-liked” rather than loved which is the essence of his tragedy as well as itself a part of the fiction he presents. Jonathan Franzen has remarked, “liking, in general, is commercial culture’s substitute for loving...if you...imagine a person defined by a desperation to be liked...you see a person without integrity, without a center...If you dedicate your existence to being likable...it suggests that you’ve despaired of being loved for who you really are” (7). Willy is offered love by his family but is wedded instead to the public view of himself which is why he is astonished when for a second he realises that “the boy loves me.”

What does he sell, something that unaccountably bothered a number of critics who thought Miller’s failure to tell us a sign of the play’s inconsequence. Apart from anything else, he sells a version of himself to his wife, to the woman in the Boston hotel room, to his son, to his clients but most of all to himself. He dies to sustain a fiction which is in some degree a national fiction, a dream of becoming through performance. He stages his death, a suicide which is to seem an accident or the insurance policy will not pay off. Willy Loman’s problem was that he thought performance and reality were the same thing, that he was his social role which is why the play is called *Death of a Salesman*, not *The Death of Willy Loman*. He dies as a salesman, still selling a bill of goods, the dream that has destroyed him and yet which he wants to sell onto his sons, one of whom, Happy, is already an actor, laying claim to a role that is not in fact his own, building a narrative that gifts him a meaning his life apparently does not. The other, Biff, has travelled back because he has in part bought into a part of his father’s dream feeling that he has not got anywhere, sharing the discontent that is his father’s heritage and that of his society. Happiness in his culture is not a state; it is to be endlessly pursued, a green light across the bay. Failure to succeed in a private and public drama is in some way not to have lived at all. For Miller, the salesman “is close to being the universal occupation of contemporary society...Everybody is selling and everything is for sale” (Kullman, “Interview”).

In *The Crucible*, young women perform a drama for the benefit of members of the court who become an audience invited to suspend their disbelief, except that they are already inclined to believe in a theological drama which pitches good against evil, a religious melodrama presented as social, political and legal truth. This performance is stage-managed, directed, and performed by Abigail in a society in which reality is defined by a belief in the existence of witches and those who would deny it dismissed as subversives challenging the law. In Puritan New England anyone who fails to follow the text is no longer performing the prescribed role, and there is a price to be paid for dissent. There is always a price to be paid for dissent, and Miller paid it, as did those he would one day seek to aid.

In *A View from the Bridge* two illegal immigrants must masquerade as what they are not even as Eddie Carbone has to deny the truth of his feelings, playing the role of a concerned surrogate father even as something else drives his actions. Acting, in other words, is a part of who we are, but as a Tennessee Williams character remarks, “there are no lies but those thrust down the throat by the hard-knuckled hand of need,” which accounts for the compassion with which, even in the midst of the personal and public betrayals of HUAC, Miller presents the informer as a tragic figure in *A View from the Bridge*.

The offence, as far as the critics of his Jefferson lecture were concerned, lay in his disrespect, his partisanship. His was an act of lese majesté. While he accused Al Gore of going through several changes of costume “before finding the right mix to express the personality he wished to project,” Bush was simply a bad actor who had to learn “to cease furtively glancing left and right when leading up to a punch line, followed by a sharp nod to flash that he has successfully delivered it.” “Nixon, he said, “was acting during all his waking hours, his entire working life a recorded performance.” Johnny Carson once remarked of him that, “I hear that whenever someone in the White House tells a lie, Nixon gets a royalty.” He was not alone in his hostility. President Harry Truman remarked that he was a “no-good, lying bastard,” adding that “he can lie out of both sides of his mouth at the same time, and even if he caught himself telling the truth, he’d lie just to keep his hand in.” “I am not a crook,” said the crook Richard Nixon, staring into the television camera with all the conviction of a practiced actor, a role in which it is, perhaps, feasible, he had taken for the truth. As he was to say later of his involvement in the Watergate scandal, “I was not lying. I said things that later on seemed to be untrue.” As Hamlet says, “seems. I know not seems.”

As to Reagan, he had long since failed to distinguish reality from fantasy, confusing his actual life with roles he had played in the movies, or, as Miller observed, simply movies he had seen. Meanwhile, “the closest thing to a deliberately rehearsed passion” Miller had witnessed, he informed his startled audience at the Jefferson lecture, which by now resembled that in *The Producers* as the cast swing into a rendition of “Springtime for Hitler,” was the organized mob of Republicans banging threateningly on the door of a Florida vote counting office and howling for the officials inside to stop counting. Watching this outburst, he said, “I could practically hear the rehearsal.” “It seems to me,” he said, “that when one is surrounded by such a rolling mass of consciously contrived performances it gets harder and harder for a lot of people to locate reality anymore,” a statement which might, of course, be seen as bearing on theatre itself and which was not only a concern of his late plays, though several of those did, indeed, focus on this question. But, then, I suspect most of us have experienced the anxiety that someone will one day tap us on the shoulder and suggest that we have only been playing the role of grown-ups, that the title “professor” suggests a significance to which we can in truth hardly aspire, that we are all too conscious of the knowledge we don’t possess, the books we haven’t read, that we play a role. Or is it just me?

Hilary Mantel, in contemplating her own characters in *A Place of Greater Safety*, her novel set at the time of the French Revolution, asked how far those in the spotlight of history are “owned by themselves or the public” and “what happens to people when they are manufacturing their own legend, day by day—when they become self-conscious.” For her, too, there was a parallel with the actor. How far, she wondered, does the persona extend? At what point does the mask grow onto the face? (“The Lives of Others” 9).

It is not hard to see why the lecture was denounced, though those who did so had their own political positions. It was attacked by the *Jewish World Review*, whose founder was on record as saying “it is hard to understand a religious person who votes Democrat,” and by William Buckley’s conservative *National Review*, which described it as “appalling, a disgrace.” Of course, Miller accepted that performance was the essence of theatre and, indeed, of social life. He was merely regretting the degree to which it had become central to the selling of politicians, a confusion of realms. The theatre, he accepted, fabricated everything “from the storm’s roar to the fake lark’s song, from the actor’s calculated laughter to his nightly flood of tears.” But though “the actor lies; with all the spontaneity that careful calculation can lend him he may nonetheless fabricate a vision

of some important truth about the human condition that opens us to a new understanding of ourselves,” what Edward Albee called “lying in the direction of truth.” I am interested, though, in the degree to which he was throughout his career, but especially perhaps in his later plays, fascinated with the implications of the performing self, this man who was once married to Marilyn Monroe, an actress who performed the role of Marilyn on screen and sometimes off. But then, as I suggested, we do, indeed, all perform, switching effortlessly from accent to accent, depending on the social circumstance, from role to role as we address different audiences, at one moment a wife at another a lover and woe betide any who confuse the two performances.

Actors exist to perform, becoming through performance. They literally em-body the words written on a page or improvise as a means of understanding who they are to become. It is interesting to watch at rehearsals as some actors perform at the read-through, committing themselves, linguistically if in no other way, while others simply read the text, sometimes uninflected and certainly without whatever it is that lifts words from the page, as yet the only audience being those involved in the production. There can be a curiously competitive element to the read-through and subsequent rehearsals, a performance only tangentially related to that for which they are gathered. Who has the greater power—the one who is first off-book and can therefore shape the performance of those who are not, or the one who delays and necessitates changes by those who have exposed themselves before meanings have fully emerged? I watched such a competition in the rehearsals of the American production of *Broken Glass*, the chief culprit being Ron Silver, who would later withdraw from the cast.

“What then is the American, this new man?” asked Crèvecoeur, a question that has never been answered because it is a country where people go to re-invent themselves, re-stage themselves, as Gatsby did, as every immigrant hopes to do. They went to become something else, to take on a new role in a national drama of becoming. Sometimes, along with the new role, appropriately enough, went a new name. “You can change your name,” says Hester Prynne to Dimmesdale, urging her lover to draw a line across his past. How many Jewish actors masqueraded, performed, as goyim: Edward G. Robinson, Hedy Lamarr, Al Jolson, Tony Curtis, Lauren Bacall, Danny Kaye, Jack Benny, George Burns, Walter Matthau, Mel Brooks, Gene Wilder, Elliott Gould, Natalie Portman, Kirk Douglas, Winona Ryder, not to mention Bob Dylan and Barry Manilow, who has masqueraded twice being not only Jewish but gay. That they should feel constrained so to perform says something, of course, about a society that

was presumed to prefer performance to reality. But you didn't have to be Jewish to change your name. It was an American birthright. "It is always morning in America," as a Reagan television advertisement declared. You can always start again, assume a new role, in a supposedly secular country that is deeply Christian you can be born again. America's belief in the self-made man is not merely an ideological commitment, it is an existential declaration. The actor becomes a national paradigm and transformation through performance a bright possibility and a dark temptation. Jay Gatz emerges as Jay Gatsby whose own past roles may simply have been just that and who performs the role he believes Daisy Buchanan wishes him to play. Richard Whitman becomes Don Draper in *Mad Men*, though losing himself somewhere along the way in so far as performance may threaten the authenticity for which there is a natural yearning.

There is a sense in which all theatre is metatheatre. We are inevitably reminded that it is a performance. How could it be otherwise when the whole apparatus of theatre is on show as we enter an auditorium with plush seats or hard benches, see a curtain behind which the Wizard of Oz, in the form of a director, stage and costume designer, is preparing his or her artifice? We clutch our programmes which tell us the real names of the actors who are about to insist they are someone else. The curtain rises, the After Eights are noisily passed, a cell phone bleat is silenced once the owner has sorted through a handbag seemingly containing half the contents of the known universe, and figures who an hour before painted their faces and rehearsed their lines in their heads, step forward in a simulacrum of life. We know it for a performance and yet we know it for a truth.

An actor is Protean. One of the central characters in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a deceiver, is actually called Proteus. So adept are actors at dissembling that in Rome they were not allowed to run for the magistracy since they would put politicians, mere amateurs at lying, at a disadvantage. Need I say, Richard Nixon was an enthusiastic actor at Whittier College and thereafter for the rest of his life, though not lying in the direction of truth.

In the 1960s, there was a rebellion against this central truth of theatre. Actors stepped forward and gave their real names. At times they stripped themselves naked as if that could be a guarantee of truth, believing that the body speaks truth, a conviction that I suspect men and women through the ages have discovered to be erroneous. The reason for this was in part that there was enough deceit in the political and commercial world without the actor becoming complicit, but language was central to Miller and performance theatre tended to evidence a suspicion of that, not least

because of a consciousness of the uses to which it was put. One group chose to treat *The Crucible* as a found object until Arthur Miller, through his lawyers, pointed out that he hadn't lost it. Later, he regretted his action, the more so as he became ever more interested in life as performance.

Miller was not a fan of performance theatre or the avant-garde in general. He met Dylan Thomas, a fellow inhabitant of the gloriously anarchic Chelsea Hotel. When my daughter stayed there, she opened the door to her room only to discover a drama group rehearsing there. Thomas described a visit that he and Miller made to a play performed, as he recalled, "in a cellar, or a sewer ... in the middle, [Miller] said, 'Good God, this is avant-garde ... In a moment, the hero is going to take his clothes off.' He did" (Bigsby 15). Later, Miller wrote, but never published, a parody in which actors begin naked and slowly dress while the audience members make sexual advances to one another, a comment on the Living Theatre, some of whose actors did indeed seek to break down the barrier between audience and performer in a manner which today would probably have led to a court appearance. What was wrong with performance theatre, to him, was that it side-stepped rationality, distrusted language and, indeed, the writer. He went to see the musical *Hair*, which opened Off Broadway in 1967 and then moved to Broadway in 1968. It appeared to him to celebrate liberation of the body and the mind, to pose a generalised sense of revolt, without addressing the political realities of Vietnam. After all, the pivotal moment in that war, the Tet offensive, occurred in January 1968. He also thought that performance theatre lacked an interest in the past except as myth. For Miller, the past was "the seedbed of current reality, and the way to possibly reaffirm cause and effect in an insane world." He was aware, though, that his own culture "had deemed amnesia as the ultimate mark of reality" (Bigsby 156). Gore Vidal agreed, referring to the United States of Amnesia. For Miller, to deny the link between past and present, between cause and effect, is not only to deny social responsibility, it is to deny the basis of morality. His own plays, he noted, "are refracting the past all the time, because I don't really know how to understand anybody only from his present actions. We need the past to comprehend anything" (Briggs 10). As he once told me, you can no more escape the past than you can the beating of your own heart. His interest in performance took a different form.

In *Playing for Time* Miller adapted Fania Fenelon's memoir of playing in the Auschwitz women's orchestra. Fenelon was a half-Jewish cabaret singer who ended up in Auschwitz. She, like her fellow musicians, was Scheherazade, performing to live rather than living to perform. The music was true, if simultaneously a mockery of those who were marched to work

and ultimately to their deaths as they played, but they were obliged to please the killers who were their audience. The contract between performer and audience was thus compromised, tainted at source. They were playing their instruments but equally playing the normality of an orchestra appealing to those with the sophistication to judge the harmony they sounded in an environment in which the only harmony was that of a common suffering and potentially common death. They were performing in two ways. They performed their music but also the role of an orchestra.

The prisoners find some solace as they retreat into the music they play, but its discipline, their pride in professionalism, can be a means of denying the reality of their position. They are, perforce, collaborators, their music being enrolled in the cause of the annihilation of others. Indeed the Nazis went out of their way in the camps to dress the set of their dark drama, from the sign over the entry gates promising that work will set those who pass through them free, to railway terminals, terminal in every respect, sometimes complete with hanging baskets of flowers. Victims were directed to showers. All this was performance. This was a theatre not as a pathway to truth but annihilation. The stage was set, the performance rehearsed and practiced, performed ultimately for those in Berlin who had both written the script and were an appreciative audience.

In the play version Miller chose to emphasise its theatrical nature. There was to be no set. Changes in locale were to be made in full view of the audience as were changes in costume. Why this approach? Perhaps in part because of a felt need for discretion, an acknowledgement of the sensitivities of the subject and hence the necessity to forgo the benign deceptions which are the essence of the theatrical contract. Perhaps also, though, because the benign deceptions of performance may be contaminated.

The Miller play in which performance becomes central to the plot, as to the characters, however, is *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, set in an unnamed east European city—in fact Prague. Indeed Vaclav Havel claimed to be one of the characters. The context for the play is one with which we have recently become all too familiar with revelations of the widespread surveillance by the NSA and GCHQ but which had a particular edge at a time when Richard Nixon in the White House was recording himself and the CIA was bugging Washington hotels in the United States. At the same time, in eastern and central Europe there was no guarantee that conversations could be private, as Miller had learned on his visits to Russia and Czechoslovakia. Some of the time Nixon obviously played a role for the invisible microphones and those who would one day listen to the recordings. His was a performance, his lines carefully calculated. At other times he plainly forgot they were there as he inadvertently built a

case against himself, playing a leading role in his own demise, an exquisite irony which maintains its appeal and which, I suppose, would qualify him as a tragic hero were it not for the fact that we are talking about Richard Nixon.

The Archbishop's Ceiling is a play in which a number of writers are gathered together in an old archbishop's palace, now home to a writer who had been imprisoned by the state but whose true loyalties are not necessarily clear. One of the country's leading writers has had his manuscript stolen and may be about to be arrested. The question is will it be possible for their host to intercede? Meanwhile, there may or may not be microphones concealed in the ceiling and, as with Nixon, for some of the time they all perform for what they assume to be a hidden audience while for some of the time forget their possible existence. Vaclav Havel himself discovered a microphone in his chandelier and returned it to the police on the grounds that it was their property. No wonder he thought he was a character in Miller's play.

There is plainly a politics to this play but Miller's interests go beyond this. As he asked, "When are we talking to whoever we are talking to, and when are we talking to authority, whether it is the authority of the university, or the city administration...or the actual government?" He added, "there were two listeners in every conversation: one was the person you are talking to, the other was some authority or another. So how do you wriggle through that maze and what is left of you, finally, when you have wriggled through it? Can you identify yourself any more? So the nature of human reality began to come into play." Could you even, he asked, "speak of sincerity any more, since everybody had to engineer his speech in one way or another, even with the best of motives" (Bigsby 259-60).

So this is not just a play about central Europe. Beyond the question of surveillance, it is about the way the language we use shapes the people we are. What do we think when we defend theatre subsidies on the grounds of the money tourists bring into the country? What do we think when we stress the extent to which a university education is about career potential, adjusting not only our language but ultimately ourselves to what is perceived to be a reality.

This is a world in which performance has replaced being, a world in which people lie, the state to maintain its power, the individual to protect him or herself against that power. What is real? It becomes ever more difficult to know. As Miller remarked, "We're all impersonators in a way. We are all impersonating something, including ourselves...We have all become actors" (Bigsby 269). "Our country," a character remarks in *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, "is now a theatre." Miller saw the same thing in