

Two readers respond to “Arthur Miller, an American playwright”

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We post below two responses to “Arthur Miller, an American playwright” by David Walsh, posted on the WSWS February 21. The first has been abridged, with the author’s permission, for the purposes of posting.

David takes on Goliath: David Walsh on Arthur Miller

David Walsh’s masterful retrospective essay on Arthur Miller, public figure and playwright, was, to say the least, provocative. Well-informed, carefully reasoned re-assessments of iconic figures and modern “classics” should be. After reading it (and re-reading it) I felt I should respond, if for no other reason than to clarify my own appraisal of Miller and his work. Somehow I’ll bet I’m not the only one compelled to do this.

In this essay, DW paints a portrait of a writer who is very much a product of his age and world, hinting that it is perhaps this very thing which limits Miller’s reach. Actually, come to think of it, DW doesn’t just hint at it, he hammers it. And what makes this insight so unsettling is that it rings of truth.

Once you see Miller’s work through the lens of a child-survivor of the Great Depression’s disruptions, so much of what drives the dramas becomes eerily obvious. That Miller’s sense of how the world works was shaped by the sudden collapse of his father’s comfortable universe and the rubble into which that collapse plunged Miller’s family seems, after reading DW’s essay, unquestionable. Yet this insight is hardly of the naked emperor variety.

All writers are products of their times. Some manage to reach beyond the temporary ephemera to something permanent and enduring; others merely reflect their surroundings. Shakespeare’s famous mirror that reflected nature was parabolic; Miller’s seems more, well, flat.

The heart of David’s critique of Miller’s legacy is his re-appraisal of Miller’s masterwork, *Death of a Salesman*. Digression. A couple months ago, “Written By,” the monthly journal of the Writers Guild of America, West, carried a story about “notes,” those pearls of wisdom, insight, and advice that producers, directors, and test audiences deliver to writers. The example cited was Miller’s experience with the backers, producers, and director of *Death of a Salesman*. When the producers received their first copy of the script, they uniformly recoiled in horror. To a man and woman, they insisted that the play was “unproducible.” Audiences, they insisted, would never be able to follow the flashbacks and fluid time-frames of the piece. Miller, duly chastened, rewrote the play. Making it worse; truly unproducible. Miller went back to his original script. The producer, after the catastrophe of the re-write, was now willing to go to the boards with the original version of the script. He did, however, have one more teensy-weensy problem: the title. It had to go. No one would ever pay good money to see a play about “death,” especially the death of a “salesman.” Besides, the title gave away the ending!! Miller resisted. He polled friends, colleagues, and, one suspects, near total strangers. The verdict: 98 percent agreed with the producer. The producer suggested renaming the play “Free and Clear.” Miller refused. Elia Kazan, the director, backed him. The show went on. Critics went wild. Audiences agreed. An American Classic was born. The hoopla has endured. The play

has been granted the status of icon, a piece of our cultural landscape too sacred to trample on, too important to question.

David disagrees. He is particularly tart in his reaction to the chorus of recent eulogists who have elevated Miller to the ranks of Shakespeare and the Greeks. *Death of a Salesman*, is not, as the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s critic, Steven Winn, recently called it, an “American *King Lear*.” Miller was a good playwright, but, David contends, hardly one of the greats, certainly not the “greatest.”

Arthur Miller. The man who refused to name names; but also the man who seemed to have little problem leaving behind his “youthful” affiliations. A man who, from his comfortable perch in Westport, could afford to be kinda-sorta angry about the way things were going in his country and in his world. A man who kept writing plays—that almost no one ever saw—that tried, like *American Clock*, to recapture a lost world that, frankly, probably wasn’t much worth saving.

David has managed to point a finger at the very thing that has always left me slightly dissatisfied whenever I’ve read Miller’s plays. (Read—not seen; a distinction I’ll return to in a moment.) There is a kind of pedestrian weariness to the speech and moments, a pervasive fatigue, like the thick damp wool of a smoggy November dusk. There is that sorry dearth of humor. Want to hear a punch line fall flat? Check out any and all of the Miller oeuvre. These characters are too beaten down to laugh; life, it seems, isn’t funny, at least not in the world of these plays.

Miller, for all his talents, lacked twinkle. Chekhov had it; lord knows, Big Bill, Tennessee, Monsieur Molière, Shaw, and other certifiable greats had it. Ibsen, didn’t; O’Neill had his moments (notably in his whimsical *Touch of the Poet*, and even in some of the off-the-rails moments in *Moon* and even *Long Day’s Journey*); Strindberg, well, what can you say. It is that sense of humor, a sure sign that the poet/playwright finds our species dear or at least worth saving, that seems so lacking in Miller. Miller may have sympathy verging on pity for his characters, but one would never accuse him of loving them. There’s not a single moment in any of Miller’s plays—at least that I can readily call to mind—in which a character could believably burst into song, start tap-dancing, or even break out in laughter. I’m not saying that every play of worth should have such moments, but there should at least be that potential for the ruckus of a joyful noise. I’d even settle for eight bars of blues, a sad waltz, or a genuinely felt chuckle. But *nada*. There is this unrelenting subterranean sadness bordering on the oppressive. Granted, *Oedipus Rex* is hardly a laugh-fest, but that play, in production, was part of its city’s sacred rites. In each and every Shakespearean tragedy, tucked between the homicides and suicides and self-mutilations, there are uproarious set-pieces that, in addition to keeping the plebes in the pit entertained, open us emotionally to the darker more complicated emotions that follow. Miller’s attempts at humor too often feel like Dick Cheney trying to crack a joke: We always feel the sneer tainted with contempt just behind the set-up and punch. One does not turn to *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *The Price*, or, Apollo forbid, *After the Fall*, for laughs. Why then do we continue to mount these plays, so often and with such virtuous resolve?

Because these plays play. Everything I've said till now applies to the reading of Miller's scripts. But having seen productions—multiple productions, in fact—of these plays with a range of traditional and non-traditional casts, conceptions, and venues, I confess that in every single case I was drawn in. The sympathy so absent in the readings, became palpable in production. Why? I'm not sure, but I suspect that it has something to do with the innate vulnerability of the actor—the living breathing human being, struggling through life (and these long wordy plays) a few short yards away. I remember, in particular, a production of *Salesman* at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre in which veteran character actor (and friend), John Carpenter, did the 'Lo-Man.' Like the character, John was a working working-class actor, struggling against the odds, oppressed and neglected by unseen, unnamed forces, the shape of his life determined by insecurity and ever-encroaching anonymity, and the tick of mortality's clock.

In feeling for John (in the role), I found myself feeling for Willy. Their lives were, in so many ways, similar. The actor's need to be liked, to snatch affection from the stingiest of hearts, approval from the most jaded and indifferent, is so very much like the burden that Willy bears that the transference imperceptibly occurs. Ah, you say, but what of the actor who is a stranger? Putting aside the case of the "bad" actor—one who fails to bring real life and real emotion to the stage—any good actor (and the best do this with a naturalness and apparent ease that make the art and craft invisible) will put us in the presence of a living human caught in special circumstances.

And therein lies the power and humanity of live theatre—the living actor, alive in the moment, a moment that we, in the audience, are part of as participant witnesses; an actor whose art is to infuse the character with so much truth of his own life experience that the character becomes him/her, not, as the cliché would have it, the other way around. Miller's plays play whenever this alchemy occurs, and, in my case at least, it's happened with every single one of these productions.

Plays, in short, are not literature, they are platforms for live performance. Sometimes David seems to have forgotten this. Even so, many of David's more detailed comments are breathtakingly *en pointe*.

David's brutally incisive take on the Biff-Willy scenes, is borne out in production. I can honestly say that I have never seen these scenes work; I've never once found them believable or even credible. They always feel like a caricature of Freudian dogma. Biff's trauma is ridiculous if he is, at the time he discovers Dad with the hooker/bargirl in his hotel room, really an adolescent. Adolescence is, after all, the time for trying on the robes of adulthood. As David says, Biff could have and should have "grown up" after having his illusions about his father shattered. That Biff doesn't, is just pathetic; that Willy doesn't teach his son by claiming his mistakes, is equally pathetic. Biff is definitely the play's Achilles Heel; the sweeping sentimentality of the play's finale is its potential travesty.

So then why do we invariably tear up during those final eulogies? We do because we care; and we care because the actors have been right there with us for a marathon two-plus hours. These characters are just so common and ordinary and unspectacular that they invite our pity (the close cousin of sympathy). They are not giants or kings or power-brokers who inhabit realms beyond our ken, these are the people who are so easily overlooked. They move among us, half-noticed and nameless, dressed in the discount off-the-rack couture of the South Asian sweatshops. The limits of sympathy is ours. They are the men and women with whom we share the subway pole, made anonymous by the press of everyday urban life, made specific by the actor. To dismiss these sentiments is to close our hearts to the plight of these unknowns, to look past them is to dismiss their longings and yearnings as so much delusional scrap. If we are capable of caring, we invariably find ourselves caring about Willy at the end—assuming, that is, that the actor has somehow touched us with his shared humanity. No matter how ill-defined Miller's characters may seem

on the page, it is the actor, whose life in all its particularities and idiosyncrasies and secrets and human values and refined or philistine political philosophies and how he or she moves and speaks and breathes, flesh out and fill in the limnings of these characters as written.

So, in summary, while David is absolutely right about so much of Miller's work, I still feel that he is more than a little unfair in his assessments of that work as living theatre. But the aspect of David's essay that staggers me even after multiple readings of it is the way he connects Miller's life, historical events, and economic circumstances with the kinds of plays Miller wrote and the kinds of issues those plays addressed (and, even more revealing, those they avoided). Especially discerning is his analysis of *The Crucible*, Miller's intentionally anti-McCarthyite parable.

That Miller stood his ground is admirable. That he, (small-j) Judas-like, sidestepped his past, in effect denying the affiliations of his more impressionable, less critical "youth," is troubling. For the life of me, I cannot imagine any non-comatose thinking person in the 1930s not seriously contemplating a socialist solution to capitalism's self-induced catastrophe. Why didn't people like Miller remind their public interrogators and the conformist public that the Thirties were a time of international crisis and widespread suffering? That to do nothing, or worse, not even consider doing something, would have been heartless and, yes, unpatriotic (in the core meaning of that word: love of country)? Perhaps these condemnations are possible only with the luxury of hindsight, but David's point, if I read him correctly, is that even those, like Miller, who resisted the pressures of conformity and simplistic patriotism, were left somehow and deeply damaged as members of the body politic. Instinctively, they shied away from the very ideas and ideals that shaped their emergence into adult citizenship. By abandoning their critical habits, they lost their spine—and it shows in the work.

Given that he, like so many others, abandoned their socialist principles as they made their way in a post-War Cold War world, it's perhaps not so surprising that the best Miller could achieve was a liberal-bourgeois critique of the world he found himself in. Once his status as "great dramatic artist" had been secured, could it be that he simply lost his edge, his hunger, a true identification with the oppressed. He worried at capitalism's edges, not at its core, taking nibbles, never bites. He wrote in a day when the self-appointed mullahs of patriotism, intoxicated on their own power, especially on the power to harm, felt free to persecute and await their kudos.

With *The Crucible* he railed against the regimen of forced conformity; in revival, the theocrats have merely changed their clothes and titles, the satanic terror merely adopting more contemporary form. The play—even on film—still plays, and, one suspects will always play as long as there is a majority of orthodoxes shilling their group-think as infallible truth. Yet once again, the drama in the play is that of the little man crushed beneath the monster-truck wheels of the juggernaut. Miller always seems to be saying that wickedness is banal, betrayal always petty—greed, laziness, mundane envy, anxiety at isolation from the herd. Circumscribed by this "smallness," Miller could not elucidate the greater forces of history and economics that placed these little folks in the path of the wheels. Miller's runaway tumbrels appear as if from nowhere, from the flanking hillsides, as lacking in intention or purpose as an earthquake.

Like the Miller of recent years, I am troubled by the seeming aridity of ideas and social criticism in the American theatre. Ideas, it seems, have taken a holiday. So much of our theatre seems dedicated to celebrations of victimhood. It's tempting to think that Miller, by his status and the stature of his plays within the repertoire, helped put us on this path. Willy, at least, was someone other than self as victim; not so Quentin.

The chicken and egg debate could go on and on over which came first, the diminution of ideas in plays or the indifference of audiences to the medium as vehicle for serious engagement with issues that affect daily life in very real ways. Theatre is no longer an integral or especially important

part of the public discourse; it has been relegated to the realm of dance recitals and orchestral music, a cultivated pastime for sophisticates. With so many smaller stages available, it's disappointing that so few are willing to mount material that confronts acquiescence to the status quo. What makes this doubly sad is that these days the price of a ticket to a small theatre is roughly the same as that for a first run movie at the multiplex.

As a working playwright with a penchant for "issue plays," I took to heart David's comment on the *Nation's* glib compliment, inserted into its eulogy of Miller, praising Miller because he "made no distinction between art and politics." David reminds us that art is different; its agenda, at most, merely complements the political. The first obligation of the writer of plays is to pick a story worth telling then tell it well. Good art will invariably bring with it a system of values, an implied agenda for a better world. Great art reminds us that humanity is worth saving, even from itself, especially from the illusions that threaten to crush it.

David's complaint about Miller is that Miller's work lacks the sparks of spontaneity that might have made them lively and living. Miller's tales feel engineered—obvious and uninspired. Miller, in David's assessment, plumbs the surface.

Miller's aversion to concrete historical circumstances and struggles beyond the inter-personal and intra-familial explain the sense of vagueness that pervades so much of his work. Everywhere, it seems, the best-known plays of Arthur Miller are lauded as the 20th century's most astute criticism of the American Dream. At root, David's charge against Miller is that Miller never quite got behind the trappings of that Dream or poked a fork into the sources of its illusions.

But ultimately, even if all these shortcomings are true, the fact that Miller's plays provoke bigger questions, challenging us to explain and reexamine the greater forces at work in the lives of individuals, they do a great service. They challenge us to understand what makes his characters victims; they set us in motion, in directions far more substantive than the bulk of plays that merely—even if satisfyingly—simply send us into emotional tizzies.

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Arthur Miller obituary: a great introduction that leaves me hungry

I am writing to you regarding your recent essay on the life and works of Arthur Miller. It's great, and I have two ideas or one thought and a bunch of questions I would like to contribute.

One is that it is an essay that is provocative, that it makes one curious and makes one think not only of the subject at hand, but of one's own time and life contribution. More than that it makes one think about process and self-critique. It serves as a great door into one's own thinking. I think that it is a great accomplishment! Seriously, very remarkable! I cannot think of an *Artnews*, *ArtReview* or *New York Times* review that helped me think in new ways. I really enjoy reading it!

My second idea, or observation, or bunch of questions is more specific to the content, and so less significant regarding my first point, and more significant regarding your subject matter. The essay is really a super captivating read, but there are a few points where you begin to open the door on some interesting points, but never completely take us through ... and so I want MORE!!! This is not really a failure, and I don't want to come across as being critical.

I will be coming back to this essay several times in the future to think about how it critiques works of art! But I would like to point out those places where I think you could have gone farther; and really I am pointing them out so that I can find out some answers to the questions they raise!! Because I am very curious and it is a very good, thought-provoking essay, and I am an artist also ... so it is all the more interesting/exciting to me. And basically the essay really makes we want to know more about what you are specifically thinking of.

Here are the places where I think you begin to open some great doors, but where I still need to know more to get the full significance of your thesis:

"*The Crucible* does not offer much insight into the source of McCarthyism or the state of American society as a whole."

You also follow this quote with a comment about Miller being influenced by the political pressures of the time. Now, probably as a good progressive I should know the sources of McCarthyism ... but amazingly I do not, and it speaks to the power of the essay that it creates this realization. So I think it would have been valuable for you to mention here what those sources were, and how those forces might have come into play in Miller's conscience or subconscious as he authored.

Similarly here: "By 1949 the general shape of the postwar world had begun to emerge."

And here: "Only a relative handful of artists and intellectuals, probing beneath the surface of postwar life, recognized that the unresolved contradictions of capitalism would reemerge with explosive force."

So what is the general shape of the world emerging in 1949? Is it the postwar boom you have already referred to? Is it about the politics? Is it about urban flight? Reconstruction in Europe? American domination? And what are the significant unresolved contradictions of capitalism at this time, or better, how are the unresolved contradictions expressing themselves at this time in the world? And what is the specific relation to *Death of A Salesman* or Miller's work that you are trying to draw?

You allude to historical perspectives in these moments, but you do not expand on them in specifics. But I know you must have some, as I read this site regularly (because the essays are just so consistently interesting!!) and most essays on WSWS have very specific perspectives.

Similarly here: "*The Crucible* was intended at least in part as a response to the anticommunist witch-hunting of the 1950s, and, in the mechanisms and mentality it exposes, it has a certain value. One would find it nearly impossible to argue, however, that the piece illuminates in any way the set of conditions in America that made the 'red scare' possible."

And here: "It is extraordinary, in fact, that neither *The Crucible*, *A View From the Bridge* nor *On the Waterfront*—the first two, of course, morally far superior to the last—shed the slightest light on the concrete-historical situation in the US, the driving forces of the anticommunist witch-hunt or the roles played by the various social actors."

This would be an even more devastating critique if you presented just a few bits of what you see as the source of the "red scare," and juxtaposed it in a little more detail, against how Miller treated it in *The Crucible*.

As a contrast, or, as examples of how hyper-stimulating your essay can be I cite the following passages. The first was early on where you speak of the shortcomings of *Death of A Salesman*. The whole section is a riveting read, but these are some particularly illuminating points:

"America was about to 'take off' in 1949, the American salesman was entering a golden age. The play hardly speaks to the 'success story,' with all its devastating moral and social consequences, that was about to unfold in the economic boom.

"After all, if Willy Loman had simply hung on a few more years perhaps he could have made a bundle selling Chevrolets or kitchen appliances."

This is great, it makes one completely rethink the play and its historical context, booming America, cars Jetsoning around everywhere. ... WOW! It just slays that play, albeit tragically, because we would like it to be a great play, for the other reasons you cite. This is just some very nice contextualizing! And I really would love to have seen it developed more.

And then the other part I reference is the story of Miller's *After The Fall*. The details of Miller's relationship with Monroe and her tragic day-in and day-out methods of coping with her own celebrity and juxtaposing that against Miller's almost bitterness are so poignant. It is another great example where you connect what Miller is doing in his plays to what is

happening specifically in the world around him, as well as what he is doing.

I know I can find more answers to all of the questions I have. The essay is great as it provides a excellent foundation for thinking about these things. And more, as I have said. I also realize that writing a lengthy essay such as this is not easy work, and deciding what details to include and what not to include is difficult. Perhaps you could use web links to other essays around that might explain more of these historical perspectives, that might be one way to have handled this. But again, a great read. Thank you so much. And maybe I will get lucky and you will send me some answers!

Looking forward to reading more!

WJ

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