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Death of the Salesman

By Richard Corliss

"Nobody dast blame this man," a friend says at the funeral of Willy Loman. As I watched this last scene of *Death of a Salesman* on the Late Show in Philadelphia just about 50 years ago, I wondered, "What's 'dast'?" That answer came easily enough: it's some colloquial form of "darest" — "dares" — as in "Nobody dares blame this man." The real question is: "Why 'dast'?" Why, at the moment the audience should be melting into tears over the death of this salesman, does the playwright introduce a word that sets viewers to thumbing their internal thesauri? But that was Arthur Miller for you. The propagandist in him wanted to sell big messages, while the artist tried to find poetry in the plainspoken American vernacular.

There was another struggle in Miller, who died today at 89: between the polemicist's need to blame society for its ills and the artist's gift for discovering shadings, ambiguities, in the best or worst of men — for fleshing caricature into character. Blame runs through Miller's two early Broadway hits, *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) like toxic waste in a sylvan stream. Joe Keller, the munitions manufacturer in the first play, fudges the specs on airplane cylinders; to do otherwise would doom his company and, he thinks, his family. Because of his shortsightedness, other men's sons die, and Joe pins the crime on his partner. Blame blame, shame shame. Willy Loman is not so black-and-white a figure — at least, not so black — but his compulsion to be accepted, along with his adulteries on the road and his inability to understand his sons, certainly set him up for the audience's disapproval.

These are a young man's plays, eager to identify the sins of the father, of all the fathers who grabbed for too much, who didn't care enough. But I dasn't blame Miller. He wasn't just painting slogans on placards. Even as a ten-year-old in my Philadelphia living room, with my own salesman father asleep upstairs, I knew that Miller was after, and had achieved, something more than finger-pointing.

He was grieving for mankind, for man's inability to connect with his fellow man, maybe for the need to dream. Miller saw the American Dream as a kind of curse, for it led us to mistake ambition for destiny, and to suffer the inevitable slump and crumble when reality makes mock of the dream. In the starkest and most sympathetic terms, he was describing the American Tragedy, and I think I recognized it as such so long ago. So I have to thank Arthur Miller for alerting me to the real world. He was an obstetrician, spanking my

social conscience to life. I'm sure I'm not the only one to have been enlightened by his harsh, expert hand.

PREACHER, TEACHER

In an obit published on the New York Times website today, Miller is quoted as seeing playwrighting as an agent of change — political instruction — and "that meant grabbing people and shaking them by the back of the neck." The Times also cites his early sense of vocation: that, "with the possible exception of a doctor saving a life, writing a worthy play was the most important thing a human being could do."

In American life there have been such solemn, stolid gents, driven to enlightening the masses. John Adams was one such — and, of current public figures, Ralph Nader. He and Miller even looked a bit alike. Tall, slim, slightly stooped by the burden of their calling, the two carved fairly exemplary lives of crusading. And both had a humanity unblemished by humor. Miller was of Polish-Jewish ancestry, and Nader is an Arab-American, but both remind me of New England preachers, so righteous, so sure of being right, that they risk exhausting or alienating their parishioners. We can't be as good as they insist.

Fine, then, change the world. Fix things — but through playwriting? As it happens, before *All My Sons*, Miller had tried most of the other forms of entertainment haranguing. He had written a best-selling novel, *Focus*, about a man named Newman who is mistaken for a Jew and pummeled with prejudice. (The plot, similar to that of Laura Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*, reminds me of the comment a stagehand is supposed to have made to director Elia Kazan while making the film version: "I understand now. We should be nice to Jewish people because they might turn out to be gentiles.") A TIME profile in 1949 reported that Miller "had tried Hollywood briefly ('like swimming in a sea of gumdrops') and for three years wrote for radio ('like playing a scene in a dark closet')." That left the stage as his preferred medium for protest.

It worked out fine, for a time. *Death of a Salesman* was the first work to win the playwright's Triple Crown: the Tony Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. For a while he was a one-man industry, adapting *An Enemy of the People* (by Henrik Ibsen, the playwright thought to have most influenced him) while churning out new plays, notably his proletarian tragedy *A View from the Bridge* and *The Crucible,* which used the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 to comment on the so-called witch hunt of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

The premiere of *A View from the Bridge*, in 1953, had real-life reverberations. That was the year HUAC found Miller guilty of contempt of Congress for refusing to name friends who had been members of the Communist Party. Since Kazan, Miller's friend and the director of *All My Sons* and *Salesman* on Broadway, had cooperated with HUAC, leftists and certain people of conscience had a readymade hero and villain, who would be an iconic tandem for the rest of their lives — the salesman who refused to sell out his friends, and the Greek immigrant who believed in telling the awful truth, even about those whose beliefs he once shared.

WRIGHTING PLAYS

Miller became a playwright more through sheer will and hard-won skill than from a natural gift. In this way, he was closest to Eugene O'Neill, the preeminent American playwright of the first half of the 20th century. O'Neill blended grand themes with formal innovations to mask his lack of eloquence. "Stammering," his stand-in Eugene says in the memory play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, "is the native eloquence of us fog people." Mary McCarthy wrote that O'Neill was a playwright the way another man might be a wheelwright — a craftsman, dutifully hammering his ideas into plays. A wright, that is, more than a writer.

That applies to Miller. He had a point of view, of the liberal-humanist tinge, and crafted characters and plots around them. Which often made for potent drama that triumphed over his often earthbound attempts at poetic dialogue. His opposite number would be Tennessee Williams, whose works were informed less by a great statement than by lushly poetic dialogue and insights into the world's fallen eccentrics.

It follows that Miller wrote man's plays, burly, sometimes muscle-bound. He provided terrific roles to forceful actors — stardom to his first Willy Loman, Lee J. Cobb (who, at 37 on opening night, was just two years and two months older than Arthur Kennedy, who played his son). Fredric March and Dustin Hoffman were enriched by playing Willy in later versions now available on film. George C. Scott had a parallel career in Miller plays; he was Willy in a 1975 Broadway revival, and co-starred with his wife Colleen Dewhurst in TV versions of *The Crucible* and a later work, *The Price*. Steve McQueen went bearded and serious in a 1978 film of *An Enemy of the People*.

Contrast this to Williams, who naturally, almost preternaturally, wrote great roles for women: *The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Night of the Iguana* and *Suddenly, Last Summer*, to stop involuntarily at six. William Inge, the other of the 50s' Big Three playwrights, did all right by women too: *Bus Stop, Picnic* and *Come Back, Little Sheba*, among others. But in the plays of Miller's prime, the only female character with any vibrancy (and this is debatable) is Maggie in *After the Fall* — a character based on Miller's one-time movie-star wife.

MR. MARILYN MONROE

In 1956, Miller won a notoriety the broader public could cherish: he wed Marilyn Monroe. (And I can't tell you how proud I am that I spent 1,400 words on Miller before getting to Marilyn.) It was a marriage out of Central Miscasting: one of the top postwar American playwrights and the definitive movie star. Granted, the other members of the Big Three were homosexual; still it was quite a coup. And a benison for the tabloid press: the egghead and the bombshell. If Adlai Stevenson had married Jayne Mansfield, the contrast couldn't have been more delicious,

It all went wrong very quickly. Miller, who in seven years had written three full plays, two one-acters and an adaptation, put no new work on Broadway for another eight years. Monroe became the prototype "difficult" star and lost some of her sexily innocent allure under the education in acting she received from Lee and Paula Strasberg. The one film Miller wrote for Monroe, *The Misfits,* was a calamity during shooting and a frayed failure on release. The couple divorced in January 1961, before the movie came out, and 19 months later Monroe was dead.

That was the popular image of Miller — the intellectual who couldn't make the movie star happy — and it has held for more than 40 years. The obituary headlines will mention *Death of a Salesman*, but the people will think of Marilyn. Popular culture couldn't stop thinking of the unlikely pairing. At least two musicals from the mid-80s, one on Broadway (*Marilyn, a Musical Fable*) and one in London (plain old *Marilyn*) had featured roles for Miller. A 1980 telefilm version of Norman Mailer's biographical essay *Marilyn*, renamed *Marilyn: The Untold Story*, starred Jason Miller as the playwright and Catherine Hicks as MM. A 1996 TV movie, *Norma Jean & Marilyn,* with Mira Sorvino as Marilyn and David Dukes as Miller. And in 2000 Joyce Carol Oates tried a roman-a-clef novel, *Blonde,* where Miller was ID'd as "the Playwright."

The first writer to exploit the Marilyn-Miller marriage was Miller himself, in two plays that added little luster to his reputation. *After the Fall* came in 1964, a mere two years after Monroe's death; directed by Kazan, it starred Jason Robards, Jr., as Quentin (Miller) and Barbara Loden as Maggie (Marilyn); ten years later there was a TV movie, with Faye Dunaway and Christopher Plummer. Critics found the play unsporting at best, mean-spirited and necrophagic at worst. In fighting and fidgeting with the personal demons of his celebrity, Miller hadn't renounced blaming.

And, just last year, *Finishing the Picture*, about the making and unmaking of *The Misfits*, which was staged at Chicago's Goodman Theater with Matthew Modine as the playwright and Heather Prete as the star, here named Kitty. As Richard Zoglin noted in his TIME review, the characters surrounding Kitty "romanticize her fragility ('She's been stepping on broken glass since she could walk') ... and lament the burden of fame ('Everyone wants something from her; we're no exceptions')." But it's another exercise in rancor, 40 years after the first one.

And it doesn't finish the picture of Monroe and Miller. Maybe it's the Pollyanna in me, but I'd have liked to see a third play on the subject, this one about their courtship. How did they meet? What needs did each one rouse in the other? Why did they think marriage would work? How did Miller propose to Marilyn? Were they great in bed? Granted, a man lacking in humor wasn't the one to write this play. (Paging the ghost of Preston Sturges.) But it would open a window on the strangest, least predictable part of their time together: when both dared, against all logic, to hope.

OUTLIVING FAME

All My Sons had run nine months on Broadway, *Death* a year and nine months. After that, no Miller play ran more than six months, except for *The Price* in 1968, and *After the Fall* (which was in repertory, so that's cheating). In comparison, Inge had three run more than a year (*Picnic, Bus Stop* and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*) as did Williams (*The Glass Menagerie, Streetcar* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof).* Inge died in 1973, Williams in 1983, but their day as Broadway hitmakers was over by the end of the 50s. So was Miller's. The difference: he outlived his fashion by nearly a half-century.

He plugged away, writing shorter, leaner pieces. I found some of these later works attractive. In *The Last Yankee*, an hour-long, two-character chamber play that came out in 1993, a woman (Frances Conroy) who has been hospitalized for depression confronts the possibility of going home with her husband (John Heard). She seeks release from the ghosts of her golden youth. But wry or wistful, she speaks with the reckless lucidity of someone liberated from drugs and intoxicated by the impending peril of real life. "Sooner or later you just have to stand up and say, 'I'm normal, I made it,' " she says. "But it's like standing on top of a stairs, and there's no stairs."

In 1994, 50 years after his Broadway debut, Miller brought *Broken Glass* to town. This scalding drama had a healthy run in London and received an Olivier Award for best play. Yet, on Broadway, with Amy Irving as another crippled woman — crippled, literally, with obsession over Hitler's mistreatment of Jews — and Ron Rifkin as her raging, gelded bull of a husband, it lasted only two months. By this time, Miller's new plays didn't stay around nearly as long as the revivals of his old ones (*A View from Bridge*, with Anthony LaPaglia, had an eight-month run in 1997). Like Stephen Sondheim, whose early work is endlessly tributed but who can't get a new show to Broadway, Miller had become one of those national theatrical treasures more honored as nostalgia items than as practicing showmakers.

Yet he had learned a few things along the way. He knew that theater is, at heart, just people in a big room trying to talk — the characters with one another, the playwright with the audience. After a half-century of listening and talking, Miller had become comfortable with the stage's limits. In these two plays, he refined his best artistic tendencies. Mature artists often simplify, discard the old frills, decide what's worth saying as the clock ticks toward death. Miller in his late 70s had nothing to prove but much to tell, in a few words. Certainly *The Last Yankee* qualifies as prime old-man's art. It is just a sketch, really — some lines that reveal the contours of a soul. In his final days, Matisse did work like this.

He was looking for that elusive dramatic form, middle-class tragedy. He figured it needn't portray the fall of a king; it could be the look of moral failure, or social defeat, on the face of an office drudge staring out a 10th story window and musing on the terminal thrill of a 100-ft. swan dive onto asphalt. Miller acutely diagnosed Willy Loman's, America's, need to be not just "liked" but "well-liked." That need defined a half-century of social and political U.S. policy — until the Bush Administration substituted "feared" for "liked." The playwright would not have been surprised by one poll, around the time of his first fame, showing that 90% of Americans thought they were members of the middle class ... or by poll a few years ago, which had 20% of respondents declaring that they were in the top 1% income bracket!

In a country with an every-man-a-king theology the delusion of royalty is a powerful drug, a dangerous dream. And Miller argued that the fall, on waking up, can be fatal, can meet the demands of tragedy. So he sang the dirge for the Dream.

The dreamer didn't need to be of elevated status; it was poignant enough that he dreamed. As Linda Loman says just before Willy's death: "Don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person."

And applause, applause must finally be granted to the playwright who preached and hectored until we finally got his sad, profound message.

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