Arthur Miller

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So last time I spoke about the Group Theater and I said that Arthur Miller in a way was in succession to that kind of committed theatre. And now I'd like to concentrate a little more on Arthur Miller himself and his career.

And I have sent out as documents a literary chronology of Arthur Miller's career, but I would just like to stress here a few of the landmarks in this chronology. I would like to stress the fact that Arthur Miller was brought up in Harlem and Brooklyn, which means, well, Harlem was still a Jewish neighborhood in some parts, while it has become a totally black neighborhood now. But it means that he considers himself at least as having a working-class background.

Then he enrolls in 1934 as a student of journalism at the University of Michigan. So that still means that he becomes a student, a regular student. And journalism or playwriting, maybe it's not clear to him yet.

What I find very interesting in the next step in his career is that in 1937 he enrolls in a playwriting class. And I think this is very specifically American. I don't think you can imagine anybody in Europe, any country in Europe, who would decide to become a playwright and who would then enroll in a class. And it works. He does become a playwright and one of the most famous in America.

Another landmark I would like to stress is in 1938, right before the war, but it will go on during the war, too. He joins the Federal Theatre Project, which I mentioned as part of the Roosevelt policy and the New Deal policy. And he writes, I quote here from my document, he writes radio plays and scripts for numerous programs, including all kinds of programs. So, this means that he has employment, actually, even if he doesn't have an actual production of one of his plays, he can write scripts and radio plays, which are now part of his collected works.

And this is a great incentive. When you have a market for your writing, you are encouraged to go on writing, which is his case. I said that he was considered as a committed playwright or “dramaturge engage”, “auteur dramatique engage”.

And I think that before we turn to *Death of a Salesman*, I would like to insist on this, on the fact that he's always been interested in the questions of right and wrong. And in the essays by Miller, which have been collected now, this is something we find over and over again, this question of not only order, but a moral order, a sense of values. Facts are not just facts, but you have to reevaluate them from a human point of view, which does not mean a religious point of view, except that myth enters into it.

There is a sense of, I don't know if I should like to call them transcendental values, but values anyway, at least the terms he uses himself are the terms of right or wrong, sometimes the term of justice. And here I think I would like to quote something that he has to say about this.

In all my plays and books, he says, *I try to take settings and dramatic situations from life which involve real questions of right and wrong. Then I set out, rather implacably and in the most realistic situations I can find, the moral dilemma and try to point a real though hard path out. I don't see how you can write anything decent without using the question of right and wrong as the basis.*

So, you see, he's very insistent about this. And I would like to stress also the fact that he mentions that he tries to point a real though hard path out. That seems to indicate that he's an optimist. He thinks there is a path out.

And maybe, well, when we come to the question of whether his plays are tragedies or not, maybe he has the tragic sense of the human predicament, of the social predicament of some of his characters. But still, even though the path out is hard, he thinks that his mission as a playwright, as a dramatist, is to show the way out. And this is something that other dramatists don't have.

So, I was saying, does he have this sense of tragedy? And this is what I'd like to come to now. In what sense, and if we come to *Death of a Salesman*, can it be called, it has sometimes been called, a modern tragedy or an American tragedy? And we can wonder if it is a tragedy at all. And you know that the hero's name, Willie Loman, Loman seems to indicate that you don't have a hero there because Loman has a symbolical meaning. It means a man who has a low

status. And it is true that this salesman has a low status in society. And in the very title of the play, *Death of a Salesman*, you have a sense that you are more on the side of the “fait divers” than on the side of tragedy.

Yet, Willie Loman has dreams of success, but these dreams of success will destroy him. They are wrong dreams. And here is what Miller has to say about the fact that he considers himself that his hero is a tragic hero in some sense.

This is part of an essay he wrote entitled *The Salesman*, and that means his salesman, *Death of a Salesman*, has a birthday. And it is the first anniversary, so he stops to consider what the value of this play to him is. And he says, this is what he says,

To me, the tragedy of Willie Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those keen-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices. From those forests of canned goods high up near the sky, he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind except to stare into the mirror at a failure.

End of quote.

So here we have this, the final word is the word of failure. And of course, the pole, the two opposite poles of a possible vision of one's career and one's life are either success or failure. And the dreams of success of Loman are met with the final failure, which even he has to recognize, and this is why it ends up in suicide.

You will notice also that the city, city life, and the jobs that the city has to offer are here compared by Miller to a sort of jungle. And it is compared to the free nature of the old days in the days of the frontier. You have the clean-shaven frontiersmen. They are clean-shaven, but they are still ruthless. And he mentions the forests of canned goods high up near the sky with all these skyscrapers and the newspaper-lined canyons of his city. And it is true that if you look at a street in New York, the skyscrapers make a landscape which is reminiscent in a way of a city canyon.

And he has the wind of a voice, which means that it is totally impersonal, that it is not one man talking to one man. And this is in a way a sense of alienation. In nature, if you have the wind around you, you are not alienated. But when you get nothing to answer you, as you know with the answering machines now, you don't speak to a human voice anymore, any longer, but just to a recording of a voice. Well, that sense, I'm sure, Willy Loman has. And Miller goes on to say what tragedy is to him in more general terms. And as I indicated before, in order to have a tragedy, you have to have meaning. Maybe not an ultimate meaning, but at least a meaning of some kind. And as I said before, a value.

We ought to be struggling, he says, *for a world in which it will be possible to lay blame. Only then will the great tragedies be written. For where no order is believed in, no order can be breached. And thus, all disasters of man will strive vainly for moral meaning*.

What is a little paradoxical in this quote is that he seems to be dying for a world in which there can be tragedy. And again, I would like to stress the fact that this is not necessarily pessimistic. Because a world in which we can lay blame is again a world in which we know what is right and we know what is wrong. There is not the total confusion which we find in certain war situations, for instance. And when he says no order can be breached, all right. It means that you have to break order and breach order. There must be a sense of order.

I come back to Willy Loman now. And this is what can be said about him. And this is from my little book about 50 American Plays. There is a brief summary of the play, but a very apt summary. In which it is said that, I quote, *Willy measures success in terms of wealth and status. And as Charlie*, that's his neighbor, *warns him, he goes further and reverses the sequence.* And the next element is that the essential ingredient of success to him is popularity. You know that at some point, Willy Loman says that, well, he has to be, not only has he to be liked, but he has to be well liked. And this is a sort of American imperative. You have to be well liked.

It is not so much your actual abilities or skills or your competence that counts. But you have to be liked by people. And in a way, this is maybe what could be called his tragic mistake. Because he had some real talent, you know. He had a real skill. This is indicated in the play, farming and carpentry. But he has denied these talents because they would not bring him the prestige that he thought salesmanship, belonging to the prestigious world of commercial America, would bring him.

And he has not realized that what he was selling, first and foremost, was himself. If you have to be liked, it is because people like you that they will buy what you have to sell. This is a way of selling yourself. In a way, you are selling your soul. And he is the victim of a vicious circle.

Here I quote again: *he tries to convince himself that he is the success that he is trying to attain*. And we have Willy Loman as the hero, in a way, of this destruction. But the effects are visible on his sons, too. You know that one of the sons never recovered from the fact that he found his father in a situation which belied everything that Willy was pretending. He was pretending he was so respectable, the perfect salesman, the perfect father, the perfect husband. And ever since, the son has been a failure.

And one of the sons absorbs his father's ideal, in a way, and the other one, Biff, rejects it. But he still has to justify himself in the eyes of his father. And this is the reason which is given for his stealing things. He steals to show that, I quote, *the rewards of the world belong to him*. But at the same time, he hates himself for being a failure in his father's eyes.

If the play has been widely successful, it is because it is representative of American aspirations and American disappointments. It is, I quote, *a widescreen example of the American dream gone sour*. The American dream is the old American legend of free opportunity for all, the land of opportunity. And this goes back to the Frontier's days when, indeed, life was hard, but it was possible. Whereas in modern America, the American dream, especially after the Depression days, the American dream has gone sour.

One other reason why it has been successful, I think, was due to the production by Elia Kazan. And here Miller has something to say also about the achievement of Miller, I'm sorry, the achievement of Kazan in this production. And he has tremendous admiration for him, and I think that he owes part of his success to this director. And this is what he has to say about this. *And Elia Kazan, with his marvellous wiles, tripping the latches of the secret little doors that lead into the always different personalities of each actor*.

I would like to stress here the term secret little doors, because what makes an actor? Somebody who is able to externalize, to convey what lies inside the soul of his character and what lies inside our souls, the emotions which are within and which must go without losing themselves, this always remains a secret. You can ask directors, you can ask playwrights, actors, they are unable to explain what happens there. I go on.

That is his secret. See, the word secret again. *That is his secret. Not merely to know what must be done, to know the way to implement the doing for actors trained in diametrically opposite schools or not trained at all. He does not direct. He creates a centre point and then goes to each actor and creates the desire to move toward it*. *And they all meet, but for different reasons, and seem to have arrived there by themselves*.

So, what is important here is a sense of the theatre in which the actor is not the star, but the actor is serving something. And this serving something is creating a centre point. And the centre point is the focus of the play, which means sometimes the images in the play or actually the meaning of the play, what Peter Brook, an Englishman, used to call the "kernel of a play", which is what you remember a play by. And I was mentioning the fact that sometimes it's a mental picture, an image, which is the starting point of the play. Sometimes it is also an image, which is the centre of the play.

And if we had to select an image here, maybe it would be different images for different people. Maybe I would select the scene in which Willy Loman is confronting his boss, who is listening to a tape recorder. And the tape recorder is the image of modern impersonal replacement of man by the machine, in a way. And Willy Loman is trying to catch the attention of this young man. He's a respectable older man, and the other one is just like a kid. But he's also the responsible adult who will cast out this man who is no longer useful.

I would like to insist for a minute at one moral issue, which I have not mentioned yet, and which I think is part of Miller's preoccupation in this play. And it is the sense, I called it alienation before, but I think it's a sense of separation between people, a sense of loneliness, where the term lack of communication has been used over and over again, and maybe a little too much. But we have a family structure in the play, and we have this tremendous separation.

There is a certain kind of love, but also separation between the sons and their father, and between the husband and his wife. And I think this is one of Miller's preoccupations. At least it is a preoccupation he mentions in this essay called *The Salesman Has a Birthday*.

I would like to quote him here. He is referring to the time when he was writing the play, and when he was rehearsing it, and the first few people were seeing it. *Then it seemed to me,* he says*, that we must be a terribly lonely people, cut off from each other by such massive pretense*

of self-sufficiency, machined down so fine we hardly touch anymore. We are trying to save ourselves separately, and that is immoral. That is the corrosive among us.

You remember that when I mentioned O'Neill, I said about one of his plays that the hero kept saying, *I don't belong, and I want to belong*. I think that it is in the same trend that Miller speaks about people who cut themselves off, as he says. In *A View from the Bridge* by denouncing one of his fellow workers, somebody who lives at his place, the hero also cuts himself off, not only from his family, but from his little community, and you could say almost from mankind. And this is, in a sense, perhaps a modern tragedy.

Now I'd like to mention one technical point, and I want you to think of this when we come to Tennessee Williams, because in a way it has been said, Tennessee Williams would be on the side of dreams and fantasies, while Miller would be on the side of hard reality and social reality, real life. Well, I think that technically it is not so different, and in Miller's technique there is a sense that the past is important in order to shape the present, and that fantasies, what people have inside their minds, is also important to shape their behavior or their speech.

And it is true that *Death of a Salesman* is by no means a naturalistic play. There are flashbacks, and the past is very important, and there are monologues in which a character speaks to himself, and the setting has a meaning, so that everything counts, and it is not copied from reality. It is not what is called naturalistic.

Here is what Miller says about this. He says, *There is no limit to the expansion of the audience's imagination, so long,* and this is the only qualification he makes*, so long as the player's internal logic is kept inviolate. It is not true that conventionalism is demanded*.

Conventionalism, he means what I was saying before when I said naturalistic, because naturalistic is not reality, it becomes a convention, it is academic. So he wants to be more innovative in the theatre. *There*, he says, by there he means the audience, *they will move with you anywhere. They will believe right into the moon, so long as you believe who tell them this tale*.

And this is a plea for sincerity. You must keep away from stereotypes. You must keep away from cheap, slick truths, which are no longer truths but lies. This is me speaking. And this is Miller again.

We are at the beginning of many explosions of form. They are, this is the audience again, *they are waiting for wonders*.

When he said that, I don't think he was anticipating what we shall have to talk about later on, which was the great explosion, it is true, of form, which took place in the 60s, but what he represents and what Williams represents with him is still away from the commercial conventions of Broadway, and he has been very successful doing this.

We shall have occasions to speak about Miller again, and about his importance in the theatre, which was to come after him, and in particular the importance of his almost obsessional concern with the relationships between fathers and sons. Don't forget that his first play was called, or second play, was called *All My Sons*, and it has been said at some point that *Death of a Salesman* could have been called *All My Fathers*. And it has also been said that it could have been called, and he was planning, his first image was Willy Loman's head. He wanted a big, looming image of the main hero occupying the whole stage, because what takes place inside his head is as important as what takes place on stage. And the stage itself is only a representation of another space, which is the outer world. So, we'll have to keep this in mind to be able to compare it with the new techniques and the new themes developed by Tennessee Williams.

But I'd already like to give a few landmarks about Tennessee Williams now, whose life and career developed as a parallel with the fact, which makes him closer to Tennessee Williams, the fact that Elia Kazan also directed his plays. But the important difference is that while Arthur Miller is a Brooklyn Jew, you could say, Tennessee Williams is a Southerner. His dates, you know, are from 1911 until 1982 or 83, maybe it was, when he died.

He was born in Columbus, Mississippi. Mississippi, which was also the native state of another great American writer, William Faulkner. His real name was Thomas Lanier Williams. Ten, for the people, Ten was his short name for the people who knew him. And he took up the name Tennessee. Tennessee is the name of another American state. And he took up that name to commemorate the pioneer past of his ancestors, as if it was an indication that he considered himself as a pioneer himself. Except that he did not lead the life of a pioneer as in the Frontiers days, but he led the life of a well-known dramatist who had personal problems of all kinds.

And as he says himself about his problems, he says that he spent a lot of his time going from the psychoanalyst's couch to the Caribbean beaches. And if there is one trait which you could use to give a label to his personality, it would be restlessness. He does not beam in success and enjoy every minute of it. He remains restless. And maybe this is one of his qualities as a dramatist. He says, he's very harsh on himself, and he says, *I have exposed a good many human weaknesses and brutalities, and consequently I have them*.

It does not mean that he has been actually brutal, but in his soul, inside himself, in his emotions, in his wishes, in his fantasies, he considers that he is weak and brutal. *Guilt is universal*, he says. This is the old Puritan heritage, this sense of guilt. But it is guilt and fear are two important motivations in the theatre, because, and I turn back to Miller again, it is what gives you a sense of right and wrong. The sense of guilt comes with the sense of right and wrong, as we know from Adam and Eve on.

One of his great admirations was for the young poet Hart Crane, who committed suicide. And more than one play is preceded by a quote from Hart Crane. Here is the quote, for instance, which precedes *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love Its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.