

Miller's Dialogue With the World

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NEW YORK -- How was last night's premiere? the interviewer asks, a throwaway question to launch the conversation.

Arthur Miller, a bit bleary from having celebrated till 1:30 in the morning, is entitled to an indifferent shrug. What's one more New York opening night when you've been one of America's Leading Dramatists since 1947? How exciting is a film version of "The Crucible" when the play has been produced on six continents, performed thousands of times, read in every suburban high school? The movie stars who turned out last night, the swarm of photographers -- old news, all of it, to Miller at 81.

In fact, someone at the premiere pointed out that the play is older than anyone involved in the production -- Paul Scofield, the rumble-voiced veteran British actor, excepted. It's outlived, by decades, the anti-communist witch hunts that inspired Miller to delve into the originals in 17th-century Salem. It's outlasted the most prominent of the witch hunters, too. "I'm wondering how come I'm still around," he notes mildly.

But he doesn't shrug off the ritual of the premiere. In fact, he leans back against his wooden chair and beams. "It was fantastic," he reports with pride. "Had a standing ovation when we started, which I didn't expect. And then another one when we finished. And it went on for 10 minutes!"

A veteran of the mercurial ascents and inevitable tumbles of the theater world, alternately canonized and anthologized and criticized and ostracized, Miller still can't quite be indifferent to the way critics and audiences respond to his work. "Long-term, it doesn't have any effect. But at any one moment, of course I want the public to take it to heart," he confesses.

At this moment, with a spate of New York productions of Miller works planned, and with "The Crucible" about to open on screens across the country (including Washington on Friday), Miller is having another of his periodic renaissances. And he's determined to enjoy it, despite a heightened sense of irony engendered by so many years in show biz.

"By this time, I tell you, I'm just happy the thing has had such a long life," he says of "The Crucible," all sincerity. A pause. He can't help himself. "I have to really make an effort," he adds dryly, "to remember how it seemed to have failed the first time."

'Miller Time'

He lives on a Connecticut farm, where the thousands of evergreen seedlings he planted more than 30 years ago now stand 60 feet tall. He writes in a small cabin there, and crafts furniture in a shop.

But lately, Miller and his wife, photographer Inge Morath, have spent more time than usual here in their small East Side apartment as he helps to launch the film. Pied-a-terre is too grand a description for the place: It's got a couple of couches, posters of Miller's plays in various languages in the foyer, a flaking living room ceiling ("You know a good painter?"). Miller built the coffee table -- it's cherry beneath the layers of books -- and he also made the straight-backed chair he's sitting in, using beams from an 18th-century barn.

The work he does with his hands, planting and planing, stands Miller in good stead when he needs to transcend his stature as a cultural icon.

When he met the awed cast and crew of "The Crucible" on Massachusetts's Hog Island, where Colonial Salem was being re-created, "they often started out saying, 'I played John Proctor in high school' or 'I was Abigail in a community theater production,'" says Miller's son, Robert, who produced the film. "There's a daunting, intimidating quality about him. He's not off-putting; it's his reputation." Perhaps it's also his appearance, so tall and straight, with fierce-looking features barely blurred by age.

But before long, the senior Miller was asking the set builders about construction techniques and the landscape designers about flaxseed. "He's more at ease talking about tractors and 2-by-4s than theatrical conquests," Robert says.

Those theatrical conquests came early: He was 31 when "All My Sons" opened successfully and 33 when "Death of a Salesman" electrified Broadway, going on to win him a Pulitzer Prize and every other major theatrical award. " 'Death of a Salesman' was a watershed," says Steven Centola, editor of Miller's collected theater essays. "American theater after that has never looked the same." Miller was enshrined, in a trinity with Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.

Yet his next two plays, "The Crucible" and "A View From the Bridge," disappointed critics and quickly closed (though both had successful productions years later). And "After the Fall" was particularly savaged for its supposed autobiographical parallels: It featured an alluring, tortured blonde -- and Miller's ex-wife Marilyn Monroe had recently died. "When you're a success as he was, early in his career, people are constantly waiting for another 'Death of a Salesman,' another 'Crucible,'" Centola says. "He's not trying to write those plays again. He's got other things to say."

Over time, as the theatrical trends of the '60s and '70s proved unfriendly, Broadway was less interested in what Miller had to say. "There's a brutality" to the way the American theater treats its writers, says James Houghton, artistic director of New York's Signature Theatre Company, which devotes each season to the works of a single playwright and will present Miller's plays in 1997-98. "It's hit or miss -- you hit and you're produced again, you miss and you're not."

Miller had become one of those honored writers whose works were read and studied in their own country, but far more likely to be performed -- to great acclaim -- abroad. That

was one of the reasons Robert Miller wanted to put "The Crucible" on the screen. "Most of his work is revered, up on a shelf, a masterpiece, a museum piece," Robert says. "It's taught as a history lesson."

Has Arthur Miller felt exiled? "Not as a person," Miller says. "I wouldn't know how to live any other place. I feel estranged only as most playwrights do here. There's a great deal more despair than anyone wants to talk about, because of this chaos, this production system that wastes so much talent."

When Miller talks about theater "here," he's talking about this, his native city. He can sound a bit snobbish on the subject of regional theater. Younger playwrights may exult over productions in Louisville or Seattle; for Miller's generation, American theater meant New York. "One wants the best violinist to play one's music," he says.

So he goes, frequently, to London, where one after another of his plays -- including those dismissed or disparaged or unproduced in New York -- have had successful runs. Britain's subsidized theaters provide both a noncommercial incubator and a sophisticated audience. "Death of a Salesman" is playing there now, at the National Theatre. "All his plays are big events here," says London director Nicholas Hytner, who's also the film director of "The Crucible." "People will listen."

Miller has railed repeatedly about the need for an American equivalent to Europe's national theaters. But after the political attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts -- Miller went to Washington to lobby, unsuccessfully, against the NEA's evisceration -- government support for theater is less a reality here than ever.

"We subsidize opera," he sighs. "And classical orchestras. A lot of the ballet. Because it's quite obvious those arts can't exist via private enterprise. But a sufficient number of plays have made profits, running months or years and making everybody a lot of money, that people don't think they need subsidies." That the moneymakers are few, and likely to be musicals, has not changed that thinking.

"No one wants to confront that, it's so awkward to deal with. It's boring!" Miller says, sounding increasingly morose. "I've been saying the same thing for 50 years! It's unlistenable, because it's so true." He would have written more plays, he believes, if there had been a national theater waiting to stage them.

Yet as evidence that "down deep in His heart God is a comedian," as he wrote in his 1987 autobiography, "Timebends," there has arisen this unplanned convergence of various plays. The Roundabout Theater will revive "All My Sons" in March, and next season the Public may stage "The Ride Down Mount Morgan" -- which Miller unveiled in London five years ago but has not been seen in New York. "Broken Glass," which won Britain's Olivier Award for best play in 1995, was recently a "Masterpiece Theatre" presentation. And Signature's retrospective will resurrect four to seven works. "It's Arthur Miller time," says Edward Albee, who's experienced the theatrical roller coaster himself. "And high time."

Perhaps pure cussed perseverance is at work here. Miller has endured plenty of critical slings and arrows from those who find his plays moralistic, old-fashioned, melodramatic. But he has declined to go away -- or even to stop writing plays. His 80th birthday was celebrated last year on both sides of the Atlantic: On this side, Albee was among the admirers paying tribute at Manhattan's Town Hall; on the other, the Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies was dedicated at the University of East Anglia. Maybe he's being acknowledged, at least partly, for simply staying at it.

Possibly, Miller says, considering. "You could also interpret it as being silly, to keep banging your head against the same wall for so long."

'Apprehension That Has No Definition'

Not only does he persist in writing, he keeps sounding off about the world beyond the footlights. "He's actively engaged in public life," says Centola. "He's someone who chaired international PEN," the writers' organization, "who's gone to Chile, to Korea, to the then-Soviet Union to campaign to free dissident writers from jail. You don't see anyone else in American theater doing this, and he did it well into his seventies."

At Miller's birthday bash last year, Albee (who also has a history of political involvement) recalled their various vigils together in front of the Soviet mission on 67th Street, carrying placards denouncing one outrage or another. "I think of Arthur as a conscience," he says.

It goes back to Miller's youth when, like so many other writers and artists of the '30s and '40s, he had a romantic fling with Marxism. "When we talked," says one of his characters in "After the Fall" to an old compatriot, "it was like some brotherhood opposed to all the world's injustice." Though he lost faith early on in communism's ability to right injustice, Miller was even more aghast in the '50s to see onetime idealists unable to find work, investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, pressured to "name names" of long-ago acquaintances. In the witch trials of 1692, he found a dramatic parallel -- the same rumored conspiracies, rituals of public confession, coercion to inform.

"`The Crucible,'" Miller says, "describes the way social panic is generated. It has a dream quality to it: People without any truly rational reason lose a grip on reality and begin accusing each other and consuming each other with suspicion."

Miller blames the political climate for the play's frosty reception in 1953; as he watched the opening-night audience, "an invisible sheet of ice formed over their heads, thick enough to skate on," he wrote in "Timebends." Oddly, an off-Broadway production with what he considered an inferior cast was a great success five years later. Some critics praised Miller's revisions, but he hadn't made any; what had changed was not his script but the times.

Between the play's debut and its revival, Miller himself was subpoenaed by HUAC and asked to identify writers he had seen attending Communist gatherings in living rooms

years earlier. He declined. "Until that point, no one had gotten away with it," remembers Robert Miller, at the time a schoolboy frightened for his father. "They'd folded or left the country or gone to prison." Arthur Miller was found guilty of contempt of Congress, but the U.S. Court of Appeals overturned his conviction in 1958.

The ordeal seems remote to Miller now, he says, "because the whole apparatus is gone. But the psychic potential for it never goes away. We have the seeds of that in us" -- and so do other societies. Over the years, he's been able to track geopolitical trends by noticing where in the world -- Poland, China, South Africa -- "The Crucible" is a hit. It is his most-produced play.

Political passions having cooled, "The Crucible" now seems less a reference to any particular repressive regime, Miller finds, than a reaction to general suspicion and anxiety. (A number of film critics have also seen in it allusions to the issue of children's sexual abuse. A valid but unintended interpretation, the playwright says.) "There may be hanging in the air today a feeling that we really don't understand reality, to the point where anything can happen," he theorizes. "The elevator can suddenly dive, an airplane turn over on its back."

A prime example: "With all our spying and expertise, a whole industry of intelligence, I don't think anybody really expected the Soviet Union to collapse. The largest single event in this part of the century!" Miller, who's visited Russia and several Eastern bloc countries, was as astonished as anyone. Talk about God as comedian! "Here we spent our lives for 25, 30, 40 years leaning against that door," he says, "and suddenly the whole building collapses."

In this uncertain universe, "the play is working on a different level," he says. "I find it hard to name, but it's there -- there is some apprehension that has no definition."

Years ago, in the midst of that other apprehension, Miller would have thought it impossible for a major film studio to back "The Crucible." It has never been a movie in English before, though there was a French version. "It was precisely about what Hollywood couldn't make a movie about," director Hytner notes. While it was still no easy sell, the Hollywood types' concerns this round were refreshingly mundane. They worried about the downbeat ending; after all, the protagonist is destined for the gallows. And about the cultural icon issue: The would-be screenwriter was Arthur Miller. "How do you tell him to punch up the second act?" Robert says.

As it turned out, however, "he could not have been more eager to take the pieces apart and put them together again," Hytner reports. Initially nervous about asking one of America's Leading Dramatists to reconfigure a classic, before long, "I'd call up and say, 'I can't afford to film this scene,'" Hytner says. "'Could you write a new one, please? In 24 hours.' And it would come by fax, next day."

It was, all parties say, a happy collaboration -- even before star Daniel Day-Lewis fell in love with and married Miller's daughter Rebecca, an artist and filmmaker. The first time

Hytner showed Miller a rough cut of the whole movie, "he stood up afterwards and said, 'This is the greatest film in the history of American cinema,' " Hytner says. A little joke, but he was pleased -- and everyone else was relieved.

Now -- there's that celestial comic at work again -- it's entirely possible that Miller will be called to the stage at next spring's Oscarcast to pick up a statue for screenwriting. It's a scenario that would have frozen the hearts of an earlier generation of Hollywood big shots: Arthur Miller -- who'd jostled with industry censors and apologists even before he was subpoenaed -- given an open microphone, a worldwide audience and 30 seconds or so to say what he will. What might that be?

Miller chuckles. "I hadn't thought about that yet," he says. "That's something to keep me busy."

Though in the end it doesn't really matter. "He has been addressing the world audience for the last 50 years and will go on addressing it for 200 or 300 years, as long as there are plays," Hytner points out. "Thirty seconds on TV? He doesn't need it."

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