February 11, 2005

AN APPRECIATION

A Playwright Whose Convictions Challenged Conventions

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Arthur Miller may or may not be the greatest playwright America has produced - Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams both have equal, if not more, claim to that phantom title - but he is certainly the most American of the country's greatest playwrights.

He was the moralist of the three, and America, as some recent pollsters rushed to remind us, is a country that likes moralists. The irony, of course, is that Mr. Miller's strongest plays are fired by convictions that assail some of the central ideals enshrined in American culture.

If O'Neill's concerns were more cosmic, and Williams' more psychological, Miller wrote most forcefully of man in conflict with society. His characters have no existence outside the context of their culture; they live only in relation to other men. Indeed, it was a fierce belief in man's responsibility to his fellow man - and the self-destruction that followed on his betrayal of that responsibility - that animated Mr. Miller's most significant work.

His greatest concerns, in the handful of major plays on which his reputation will last, were with the moral corruption brought on by bending one's ideals to society's dictates, buying into the values of a group when they conflict with the voice of personal conscience. To sell out your brother is to sell out yourself, Mr. Miller firmly believed.

Like all artists, Mr. Miller was a product of a particular historical moment. He lived through the Depression, absorbed the fiery righteousness of Clifford Odets's agitprop, and began writing plays just before and during the years of World War II. His first great success, "All My Sons," produced in 1947, fired a warning shot in the face of the country's growing complacency, in the wake of a war that was seen as establishing America's reputation as both the world's policeman and its moral conscience.

Mr. Miller's play scorchingly questioned that status, shining a harsh light on the ethos that underlay an exclusive veneration of individual rights. "All My Sons," in which a middle-class businessman looking out for his family causes the deaths of Army pilots, argued that a moral code that heedlessly placed the interests of the individual over responsibility to the group could breed corruption and destruction.

The roots of Mr. Miller's art stretch back to Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright who used tropes of melodrama to expose rents in the fabric of bourgeois society. But with "Death of a Salesman," inarguably his masterwork, Mr. Miller broke free from the conventions of naturalistic drama to write in a more stylistically unfettered manner. In this impressionistic portrait of a deluded man discarded by society, he achieved something akin to poetry. As Harold Clurman astutely put it,

the poetry in "Death of a Salesman" is "not the poetry of the sense or of the soul, but of ethical conscience."

In "Death of a Salesman," Mr. Miller stated in clean dramatic terms his belief that the tragic hero of the American 20th century was the average man, a belief that caused ripples of contempt in academic circles even as it struck a powerful chord with audiences. Tragic or merely piteous, Willy Loman's desperate struggle against the onrushing knowledge that he has slaved in service to a false ideal of worldly success was a powerful repudiation of the hollow promises of the American dream.

As he sourly noted more than once, Mr. Miller was not long fashionable with many of the country's theater critics. Even in his finest work, he sometimes succumbed to overstatement. He was probably the least subtle of America's Big Three - and neither O'Neill nor Williams was a particularly subtle playwright. Themes, motifs, moral conclusions often glare from his plays like neon signs in a diner window.

But, like all significant artists, in his finest works Mr. Miller transcended his flaws. In the case of "Death of a Salesman," he even made a virtue of them: The repeated iterations of the play's sonorous lines - "Attention must be paid," "Nobody dast blame this man" - have the solemn and unforgettable effect of a bell tolling deep, loud and long. And, as continual revivals of "The Crucible," "All My Sons" and "A View From the Bridge" attest, his plays are so strongly saturated in trenchant observations about man's flaws, and his struggles against the social forces that will exploit them, that they retain their full power to engage and move us.

In the last decades of his life, Mr. Miller continued to write plays in the face of critical indifference; he never lost faith in the value of the writer's work. His decline in popularity coincided with Broadway's loss of hegemony in the American theater, although he had nothing but contempt for the crass atmosphere of the commercial theater. The playwrights associated with the Off Broadway movement that bloomed in the 1960's - Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and others - wanted to tear down the conventional structures that had served so solidly as the vessels for Mr. Miller's ideas. And yet in their stylistically far different analyses of the contaminations of late 20th-century life, and their use of the American family as an image to be ruthlessly dissected, can be heard distant echoes of Mr. Miller's vision. "Death of a Salesman" has been cited by innumerable and wildly different playwrights as a seminal influence, from Lorraine Hansberry to Vaclav Havel to Tom Stoppard.

That his greatest plays have been produced widely on international stages suggests that the ills Mr. Miller diagnosed in America in the postwar years are not specific to the country or the era; they merely took firmest root in the soil of a country on a meteoric rise to the top of the global heap.

By now, the American dream has been thoroughly dissected, but American values continue to be touted by politicians as the country's most fruitful export. And so Mr. Miller's greatest plays, in which he used both his conscience and his compassion to question the prerogatives of American society, remain both as unfashionable and as necessary as ever.