

A Miller's Tale

Arthur Miller, one of the great playwrights of our times, victim of the McCarthy witch-hunt, and husband of Marilyn Monroe, talks about his life and times with *Eric Hobsbawm*

Let me begin with the McCarthy years, when you stood up so publicly to the anti-red witch-hunt. Why did the persecutors insist, at that time, on this public ritual of confession and denouncing your friends?

Of course we've always been orthodox when it came to certain things in this country. And once you've adopted the idea that orthodoxy is required, you've got to go through the Inquisition. It just seemed absurd at the time, with the smallest Communist Party in the world. In one way it's always been there: the alien, the dangerous alien - which is paradoxical in a country made up of immigrants. I guess it's a periodic sign of uncertainty.

But did you find people saying in the 1930s: 'You are communists and therefore you can't be American'?

No, because the Left, which was always tiny here, was part of the consensus that was pressing on the New Deal reforms. And the country's need was so great that I think they either tolerated it or welcomed it. So there couldn't possibly have been this kind of a red-hunt in the 30s; it would have been a contradiction of the New Deal's direction.



Arthur Miller won widespread critical acclaim in 1949 for his Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Death Of A Salesman*. Four years later his play *The Crucible* drew parallels between the 17th-century Salem witch trials and Senator McCarthy's anti-communist campaign. In 1957, a year after his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, Miller was convicted of contempt of Congress after refusing to divulge names to the House Un-American Activities Committee, a conviction which was quashed a year later. Miller's early works now enjoy greater international popularity than ever before. His adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy Of The People* is currently running at the Playhouse Theatre, London.

And did you on the Left have the sense of new times coming?

I'm just trying to think back. You see, the big practical event of that time, after 1937, was the organisation of the unions, and that had aspects of revolutionary emotions, because it swept up all kinds of people. However, it was very vague as to what the ends of this was going to be.

This feeling you write about, that suddenly there was solidarity, that you were helping each other, moving together. Now was this something that was part of what they call the 'American Dream', or just a temporary freak of the depression, and then it was back to dog-eat-dog. That's what we're back to now, isn't it?
Yup.

In other words, what's happened to the 'American Dream'? Is it any different from what it was?

This country develops at different rates in different places. Right now, there are parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, where people are talking the way they talked in the 1930s, because the industries have collapsed. And five hundred miles away things are booming, like in this state. It's impossible to make one generalised statement about the 'American Dream'. However, what reminds me very often of the 30s, is the tendency toward seeking out a new community: there is that in the American psyche. We do tend to try to set up a new association of some kind at the same time as we celebrate the individual standing apart from society and making his way with no help from anybody else.

That's what was in my mind.

You see, Dukakis did not correctly conceive the kind of community that was being called for. He thought it was in effect the Republican community run by Democrats. So all the definitions of that Democratic community went out the window, and he never could retrieve it.

There was one rather chilling thing about the election campaign. It seems that American patriotism measures itself against an outcast group. The right Americans are the right Americans because they're not like the wrong Americans, who are not really Americans. In this campaign this has been extended from socialists and communists to liberals. How do you explain this shift - real or rhetorical - to a politics of the Right?

I'll tell you my honest opinion, had a knowledgeable politician been nominated who had a sense of the country, you would never have thought to ask that question. I don't think it is a very profound shift.

But surely there's more to it than that. Isn't Bush, like Mrs Thatcher, tapping a genuine right-wing vein?

It appeals to that. But you can't run this

country on a right-wing agenda. But could I broaden this whole discussion? I think our conception of 'Left' and 'Right' fundamentally came out of the depression. But now I am not sure that the thing *ties* any more.

You mean the old Left-Right dichotomy?

It isn't operating. It just isn't operating. I don't know what *is* operating but that isn't. It's not ruling anything, it's not controlling anything. To be sure, there are sentimental attractions to the man who works with his hands. But applying some kind of historic virtue to these people, it's unheard of anymore. They're not the carriers of the future. There's a terrifically pragmatic view of businessmen now. A candidate could get people very worked up against capitalists on a specific issue. People will blame big business, on the other hand they will choose another big business as a good example. So that now there is no longer the idea that history is a system which one can stand back and look at and say: this is the direction in which the thing is moving. The history is in each individual now. It's an open-ended thing.

Yes and no. You say in your autobiography *Timebends* that you've abandoned the redemptionist future of marxism, because it's really a religious statement. On the other hand, does that mean that you've also abandoned what you call its 'prophecy of doom'? That isn't a religious statement, but it's about the reality of where the world is going. One statement does not imply the other.

I would say in the present context the real doom that we are confronting transcends both existing systems, the Soviet and ours, namely technology. As for the system itself, you don't have to have had a left-wing background to feel pessimistic. I know a couple of bankers, and if you want the doom, you ought to talk to them, not the Left, which knows very little about the system. Anyway, the whole prospect of the marxist view has taken on a wholly different aspect for me because from China to Russia to Eastern Europe, with rare exceptions, these countries were feudal countries and when you go from one to another, it has to occur to you that the marxist ideology may have been a reaction to feudalism, rather than capitalism. This is more obvious in China than in the Soviet Union, because it's an almost totally agricultural country still. That's where the feudal idea occurred to me, that this was an advance over the feudal past but still based on it. And that the idea of capitalism had never intervened here yet. It suddenly occurred to me, geez, I wonder whether in fact Marx was reacting unknowingly, perhaps, to the pre-capitalism around him.

That's an interesting idea, especially as so much of the incipient capitalism took over so much from a pre-capitalist past.

Perhaps this is what's working in us

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unbeknownst to us, namely that from the 19th century we inherited, in effect, a class-struggle ideology based on a feudal reality, and what's called capitalism has now moved into another sphere. For example, if you go to an enormous corporation - we have them right here in Connecticut - you find a mindset which is oddly similar to the Chinese. That is, they are totally organised. Their lives are comprised of a certain space, psychological as well as physical, in which they can move. They're tied to that. Theoretically they can go anytime they like. But almost all would prefer to be there. At the same time, the embarrassment of confronting unorthodox ideas. Any challenge to this structure ricochets in them so that they don't quite know how to handle it. Maybe feudal is the wrong word, maybe what I'm really saying is individuals deeply webbed in a social organisation, whatever its nature.

Somewhere in your autobiography you have a statement I find particularly tragic. It's when you visit Rome after the war. You say: 'It couldn't have dawned on me that in 40 years New York would admit to even more homeless than Rome had after the devastation of war, nor would I have easily believed then in the erosion of outrage, including my own most of the time, to the point where I'm used to this catastrophe as a merely sad consequence of life in imperial New York, the world's most exciting city.' What's happened to the USA? What's happening to us?

One thing is perfectly obvious. The idea of the *civitas*, of the society, is badly eroded, badly eroded. In New York, or any big city, we are witnessing the dissolution of the city itself.

Some of the things that happened here in the 1910s anticipated tendencies elsewhere, for instance, as you say, that then style consciousness was replacing class consciousness while collective consciousness was eroding. Do you think that this is a general tendency or merely American influence?

I think we hit it first. That is... How to put it? In place of the old economic conflicts, straightforward, simple, and what we would call real, you gradually develop symbolic ones, which have to do more with degrees of culture and different kinds of style. Look at our election campaign. It's terrible.

Let me shift the question a bit. Suppose some kid, like yourself when young, comes to you and says: I want to devote my life to saving the human race, making a good world right now. What shall I do?

I would tell him or her first to find a locus of his own professional life and deal honestly with everybody around him, and he'll find himself in trouble soon enough. And there will be the issue.

That would bring him up against what we used to call the basic contradictions. Yes? Absolutely.

At the same time you say somewhere, I think it's apropos of Tennessee Williams, there's a radical politics of the soul, which is different from the radical politics of the ballot box and the picket line. Just what do you mean by that?

It's got to do with the question of estrangement. You see Tennessee found himself sympathising with the underdog because his sexual preferences were inadmissible at that time. In a totally unideological way. In no way was he an ideologist. That's the politics of the soul. Without alienation there can be no politics.

Is that what feminists mean when they say the personal is political?

I think so, yes. I think so, sure. And it is.

Apropos feminism, I was very struck by a frightening observation you made about Hollywood. You said that while, say, at the court of Louis XIV of France women were subordinate, nevertheless they could hold and administer power, while in Hollywood no woman ever got within sight of real influence, they were just symbols or victims of men's power. This is an exceptional situation in history, when women were so reduced. Has this any bearing on the development of feminism in the postwar USA? After all, in some ways Hollywood was supposed to be the model of quintessential America, wasn't it?

Well, it was. Hollywood until the 50s, even into the 60s, accurately represented the position of women in the country. Today we have a very large number of women in the entertainment business in high positions, and that's the result of feminist organisation.

The Hollywood thing naturally brings me to Marilyn Monroe. Here's my question. Hollywood was full of extremely beautiful women selected for their sexual allure, radiance and all the rest of it, and yet this one seems to have had a special role - at least that's the way it came out; it wasn't planned from the start.

No, quite the opposite.

Exactly. What was it about this particular woman?

Well, it was a combination of things. One was her beauty and just her physical grace. That's important, if not decisive. But the other element, I think, is the myth around her, that contrast between her terrible childhood, abandoned and abused, and the absence, to all appearances, of anything but sweetness and intelligent wit in her, despite that background. She had a certain kind of visceral directness, which itself was sexual, but which was also disarming, so that the most cynical person had to think that there was more to this person than simply a body. She herself was a marvellous harbinger of what was to come. Very early on, thinking she had no future - in reality, if it was, it was going to be short - she simply kicked over the traces. She wasn't a lady: she was Marilyn. She foreswore the hypocrisy that goes with being a star. And her

naturalness simply swept people away. You put all that together...

You don't think being a potential or actual victim played a part in this?

Oh yeah, very important, very important. People wanted to reach out to her and help her. They also wanted to kill her.

Could she have been helped?

No. Well, in an ideal world, sure. But you see, by the time she was an adolescent, she could never really and truly believe in her own value, even as she was trying to assert it.

Let me now ask you about yourself as a creative artist. You are one of the great playwrights of our time. Who do you think are some of the other major figures?

Well, in America, O'Neill was our best. The other ones ... My own emotional relations were with Clifford Odets back in the 30s, but I always found his work thin.

That's right.

I kept hoping and waiting for more to come, but it didn't. The others really didn't mean very much to me, quite frankly. I was really obsessed for a long time with Ibsen and the Greeks, and later on Chekhov. What was attractive to me about them, because I came upon them during my youth and the depression, was that they were forms that allowed, or even demanded, that the individual psychology and society move together in a seamless connection, as it is in life, excepting only that we're only half aware of it. The water is in the fish and the fish is in the water. There's no separating the two. And that, in those forms, was gorgeous to me. In reality, I guess I've tried, in a different way, to carry on that tradition. I never did cotton on to a lot of Brecht, I think because of the conditions under which I worked in this country. I felt that, with certain exceptions, like *Mother Courage*, one or two others, he really required an audience already convinced of his ideas. It was so distant from the broad American consciousness I'm talking about, not the avant garde.

Are there any other 20th century dramatists that you admire?

O'Casey, especially the early work, the two big ones - just the possibilities of language in them ... I had some good feelings, oddly enough, about Ionesco, who would seem to be the last one connected with me, but he isn't really. Genet's *The Balcony* was another play that I got something from.

Beckett?

Yes, but Beckett came into my life at a bad time. It was in the 50s that a moment when I was really afraid that we were moving toward a kind of occupied country. You weren't supposed to register what was really happening, you know, in the Left or

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even among liberals. It was desperation time, but it was totally unacknowledged. So I approached Beckett with a prejudice, that here was work that was involved with a kind of hermetic world, while we were all dying. Then later on, as things eased up a bit, I began to see what he was after.

What about your own work?

The play that I'm more frequently proud of than anything else is *The Crucible*, because it has proved to be inherently useful to people all over the world. *Salesman*, of course, I guess that's always there. See, *The Crucible* is far more widely produced than *Salesman* is. In a large part of the world, we don't pay too much attention to that in the West, the theatre has a certain desperation connected with it, because it's the only place that there is any freedom. So such plays are important.

Your plays are staged all over the world, but they are deeply American. Don't they have to be misunderstood abroad, as we misunderstand ancient Greek drama?

I have to rely, admittedly in a gingerly way, on the idea that way down we're all the same, more or less, and that somewhere the original idea is seeping through. I guess the best example of all this was in China, where I directed *Death Of A Salesman*. The play worked because it's fundamentally about a family, and the family's extremely central in China. The differences are basically those of etiquette, quite frankly. For example, the Chinese will never speak familiarly to a parent, either the mother or father. And many of them thought that Willie Loman was like their mother, not their father. There are other differences, but I don't think they are profound.

Now let me ask you a strange question. There are three reasons why people are likely to think of you as an important person. One is that you're a great dramatist, another is that you're a man of the Left who faced and fought discrimination and persecution, and the third is that you were married to Marilyn Monroe. Is there, in your mind, any kind of connection between those three?

Only in the sense that ... initially she seemed to me to be somehow connected with truth, with speaking truth, the emotional truth as opposed to the formal social formulations of truth.

Not in the sense that in some way it was losing the cause that pushed you into the situation where you might have been open to this extraordinary experience?

Actually, Marilyn was a rebel, she was a real one. She had no stake in society of any kind, property meant nothing to her. Money was purely symbolic of her standing, she wanted to make as much as the next actress simply to show that she was worth that, but she didn't know how to save it and she didn't know how to spend it. It was all an abstruse thing with her, she had no bourgeois sensibi-

lities. So, in that sense it is related. Probably our coming together had something to do with the times in which I found myself. But that's rather speculative and remote to me.

Do you feel a sense of living in a lower gear today, because the most intense periods of your life were the 40s and 50s?

Something happened here in the recent period. The theatre became far less of an important phenomenon. The New York theatre is sterile, it has no capacity to start any new work. It can only take over what has been done elsewhere, in England or in regional theatres. I came into it when it was, at least our illusion was, that it was of immense personal, aesthetic and social importance. The *heart* went out of it and, I must confess, it went out of me too. I've written plays since ... But I don't think anyone finds it a tribune anymore, from which you once spoke. And it *was*. Even though the bulk of the American theatre was trival at that time, it had a, I don't want to use a highfalutin word, but it had a cultural, moral mission. By the time I came along, that tradition was taken for granted. With all the commercialism it had some connection with the salvation of the human race somewhere along the line. By the time the 60s were over, I couldn't detect anything of that kind anymore. The consensus was gone, the society that supported all that was gone, literally gone, it was dispersed.

Let me ask you one last question. Somewhere in your autobiography, which is a book people should read, you say that in the 50s you didn't know whether you were going to live, but you wanted to leave behind some statement of absolute truth. Do you think you've done it?

I think plays are journeys within, my kind of play anyway. They are simply explorations of where I am at any particular moment of time, and I have very few illusions about their longevity, because everything is so relative in the world. I often wonder whether 50 years from now any of this culture is going to be comprehensible, at the rate at which changes, at which all these values change. The idea slips into my mind that, for example, Americans don't save money any more. We save less than any civilisation extant.

Living in a permanent present?

Yeah, in other words, there's no future. And if there's no future, there's really no past either. The theatre, as anybody ever conceived it, is based on the manipulation of time. The difference between a play and a book is that it has to be done in one sitting. At most you can go out to dinner and come back but, effectively, one span of time. From the Greeks, the central problem of the play was how to make rapid development occur in what is really the space of an hour, or two or three, a development that, in real life, might take decades.

When you pluck time out of experience, which is what we effectively have done, you get people without a past. Maybe, for instance, Chekhov, Ibsen, any of these plays that rely heavily on time passing, on ageing, on temporal ideas, maybe it's all going over the cliff? I can't believe it for myself, and I'm not going to change what I do, because I couldn't anyway.

'I suppose if I have any justification for having lived it's simply, I'm nothing but faults, failures and so on, but I have tried to make a good pair of shoes'



Just an afterthought. Supposing it comes to the Day of Judgment, and they say: 'Make a case for yourself.' What are you going to say?

I suppose if I have any justification for having lived it's simply, I'm nothing but faults, failures and so on, but I have tried to make a good pair of shoes. There's some value in that.

You're good at your trade.

Yeah. When I hear about plays going on in Bulgaria, I've got five plays running in Hungary right now, so there must be some human communication going on. One feels that, apart from my ego, it seems to be an absolute good that they go on, that they feel somehow they're being communicated with by a man they've never laid eyes on. Just as I, when I pick up some Chinese novel that I admire and I understand, I feel that I've stretched myself, that I've lived a little more, especially if it comes out of a different culture.

But I want to go before the Day of Judgment comes. •



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