ARTHUR MILLER
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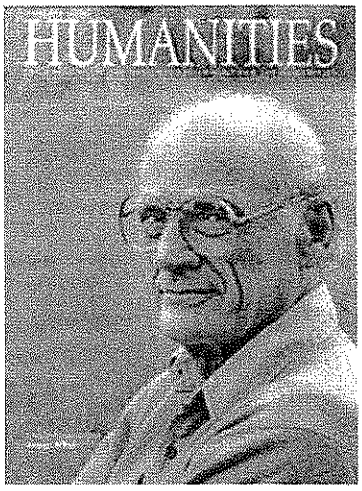
For the March-April 2001 issue of *Humanities* magazine, Arthur Miller talked with NEH Chairman William R. Ferris about morality and the public role of the artist.

William R. Ferris: : I'd like to begin with *Death of a Salesman*. In the play Willie Loman's wife says, "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." What kind of attention do you mean?



Arthur Miller: I suppose she was speaking about the care and support that his family might give him, in that context. Of course, there is a larger context, which is social and even political-that a lot of people give a lot of their lives to a company or even the government, and when they are no longer needed, when they are used up, they're tossed aside. I guess that would encompass it.

Ferris: *When Death of a Salesman* opened in 1949, Brooks Atkinson wrote in his *New York Times* review that you had written a superb drama. He went on to say, "Mr. Miller has no moral precepts to offer and no solutions of the salesman's problems. He is full of pity, but he brings no piety to it." Is there more of a moral message in Salesman than Atkinson saw there?

Miller: It depends on your vantage point. Willie Loman's situation is even more common now than it was then. A lot of people are eliminated earlier from the productive life in this society than they used to be. I've gotten a number of letters from people who were in pretty good positions at one point or another and then were just peremptorily discarded. If you want to call that a moral area, which I think it is, then he was wrong. What I think he was referring to was that the focus of the play is the humanity of these people rather than coming at them from some a priori political position. I think that is true.

Ferris: : So many of your best plays, *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, besides being personal tragedies, are also a commentary on society, similar to Ibsen's work. Do you feel one person's story can transcend itself and speak to all of us?

Miller: I think it depends primarily on the writer's orientation. There is a lot

of work being done today which is very sharp, but there doesn't seem to be a moral dimension to them. In other words, they are not looking out beyond the personal story. That is a difficult thing to trace in a work. I suppose if you took *Moby-Dick*, he could have written that as an adventure story about a whale and hunting it. Instead it became a parable involving man's fate and his struggle for power, over God even. The intensification of a work generally leads in the direction of society if it is indeed intense enough.

Ferris: : How do you take daily life and turn it into the stuff of art?

Miller: Well, that's the secret.

Ferris: : You're not talking.

Miller: I really don't know the answer to that. It is part of temperament. It is a part of a vision which is only definable through the work of art. You can't start analyzing it into its parts because it falls to pieces.

Ferris: : Then what do you think are the core issues that a playwright should deal with?

Miller: There is no prescription that I know of, period. Whatever he feels intensely about and knows a lot about is the core issue for him. If he feels sufficiently about it and is well informed enough about it, factually and psychologically, emotionally, then that's the core issue. You make an issue. The issue isn't there, just lying around waiting to be picked up off the sidewalk. It is what the author is intense about in his life.

Ferris: : Would you say there is a process of playwriting that's been a constant since Greek drama, or has this process changed over time?

Miller: You know, the Greeks used to use the same stories, the same mythology, time after time, different authors. There was no premium placed upon an original story--and indeed, Shakespeare likewise. A lot of people wrote plays about great kings. They didn't expect a brand-new story. It was what that new author made of the old story. It is probably the same now. We disguise it by inventing what seem to be new stories, but they're basically the same story anyway.

Ferris: : When you wrote *Death of a Salesman*, how were you trying to take drama and make it new, as Ezra Pound said?

Miller: That play is several inventions which have been pilfered over the years by other writers. It is new in the sense that, first of all, there is very little or no waste. The play begins with its action, and there are no transitions. It is a kind of frontal attack on the conditions of this man's life, without any piddling around with techniques. The basic technique is very straightforward. It is told like a dream. In a dream, we are simply confronted with various loaded symbols, and where one is exhausted, it gives way to another. In *Salesman*, there is the use of a past in the present. It has been mistakenly called flashbacks, but there are no flashbacks in that play. It is a concurrence of a past with the present, and that's a bit different.

There are numerous other innovations in the play, which were the result of long years of playwriting before that and a dissatisfaction with the way stories were told up to that point.

Ferris: : In your recent article in *Harper's Magazine*, you write about a colorful script doctor called Saul Burry who used to hold court at Whelan's drugstore in New York City. You say that he advised one writer, "You've got too much story. Slow it down. Examine your consequences more. We're in the theater to hear our own hearts beat with brand-new knowledge, not to get surprised by some stupid door slowly opening." Is that Saul Burry or Arthur Miller talking?

Miller: That was Burry. Burry was a very insightful person. He was the best critic I ever encountered, and he was perfectly capable of talking like that. In fact, I wish I could remember more of what he said, but it's so long ago that a lot of it's just slipped away. He had a marvelous way of encapsulating ideas that had to do with playwriting and the theater.

Ferris: : What does Saul Burry's advice mean for the audience?

Miller: Pay for the ticket and arrive on time, and nowadays, not to have a cell phone go off. He expected the audience to cooperate and to appreciate what was in front of him as best he could. He also, I would have thought, probably wanted them to educate themselves so that they were less inclined toward what was specious and stupid.

Ferris: : In many of your plays, from Willie and Biff, Joe and Chris Keller, to Victor Frank and his father's memory in *The Price*, fathers and sons are a theme. You grew up during the Depression and you've said that you witnessed a lot of grown men lose themselves when they lost their jobs. You've also said your relationship with your own father was "like two searchlights on different islands." How has what you saw during the Depression influenced your work?

Miller: Fundamentally, it left me with the feeling that the economic system is subject to instant collapse at any particular moment--I still think so--and that security is an illusion which some people are fortunate enough not to outlive. On the long run, after all, we've had these crises--I don't know how many times in the last hundred years--not only we but every country. What one lived through in that case was for America a very unusual collapse in its depth and its breadth. A friend of mine once said that there were only two truly national events in the history of the United States. One was the Civil War and the other one was the Depression.

Ferris: : I think that's so true.

Miller: It leaves one with a feeling of expectation that the thing can go down, but also with a certain pleasure, that it hadn't gone down yet.

Ferris: : What is it about father-son relationships that provides such good material?

Miller: The two greatest plays ever written were *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*,

and they're both about father-son relationships, you know. So this goes back.

Ferris: : It is nothing new.

Miller: It is absolutely nothing new. This is an old story. I didn't invent it and I'm sure it will happen again and again.

Ferris: : Three plays are usually named as the great works of the early twentieth century--your *Death of a Salesman*, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I heard that after you saw *Streetcar*, you rewrote the play you were working on at the time, *Inside of His Head*, and that turned into *Death of a Salesman*. What did you see in *Streetcar* that changed your vision of your own play?

Miller: Actually, *Salesman* was practically written by the time I saw *Streetcar*. What it did was to validate the use of language the way *Salesman* uses language. People have forgotten that, thank God, that Willie Loman isn't talking street talk; Willie Loman's talk is very formed and formal, very often. It's almost Victorian. That was the decision I made: to lift him into the area where one could deal with his ideas and his feelings and make them applicable to the whole human race. I'm using slang in the play and different kinds of speech, but it is basically a formed, very aware use of the English language. Of course, Tennessee was similarly a fundamentally formal writer, and he was not trying to write the way people speak on the street. So it had a relationship.

Ferris: : What about O'Neill? Did he influence your work? Did other playwrights?

Miller: He really didn't. When I started seriously writing in the late forties, he had come to a hiatus in his writing. He hadn't been writing or hadn't at least been producing or publishing plays for some years. His vantage point was basically religious rather than personal at that time. I'm speaking now of the late thirties and up to the end of the forties and early fifties. What certainly was a force was his dedication and his integrity. Those were maybe more important than anything else because I don't have to tell you that the spirit of Broadway is always vulgar, it's always a show shop, it's always the same thing. It never changes. To try to impose upon it something with a longer vision is very difficult. These plays usually fail the first time around and are rejected, if not worse. You need strong teeth and to hold on like a bulldog, and that was a great example.

Ferris: : Is there something coming out of theater right now that is setting standards the way those three plays did in their day?

Miller: If there is, I don't know about it. I don't go to the theater all that much, but I do go where there seems to be something of value. I'm not aware of anything at the moment, but that doesn't mean there isn't. It's simply I don't see enough to make an overall judgment.

Ferris: : In our society of sound bites and short attention spans, is theater anachronistic?

Miller: Not at all, not at all. No, it isn't by any means. Quite obviously, there is an enormous audience still there. For all I know, it's bigger than it's been in the past years. *Death of a Salesman* just finished a national tour, and there was no problem getting an audience. There is a problem on the so-called commercial stage in New York, of course. The price of a ticket is exorbitant, and there are no longer original productions possible, apparently, on the commercial stage. They are all plays that were taken from either England or smaller theaters, off-Broadway theaters, and so on. The one justification there used to be for the commercial theater was that it originated everything we had, and now it originates nothing. But the powers that be seem perfectly content to have it that way. They don't risk anything anymore, and they simply pick off the cream. It leaves most theater at the mercy of the market, and that doesn't always reflect what's valuable. So, there you are.

Ferris: : What would you like to see in theater today?

Miller: Good stuff. There is no definition for these things. Theater is a very changeable art. It responds to the moment in history the way the newspaper does, and there's no predicting what to come up with next.

Ferris: : In your life, you've often taken a very visible stand for what you believe in, whether it was refusing to name names at the House Un-American Activities Committee or doing advocacy against censorship. What is the artist's role in political life?

Miller: I would hope that he would just be a good--if I may use that corny old phrase--a good citizen. People do look to others for some leadership, and it's not bad for them to supply it when they feel that way. I wouldn't lay it down as a rule that an artist has to do anything he doesn't feel like doing, but sometimes there are issues. For example, censorship is of immediate importance to us. They should be taking positions on that and any number of issues that are very close to us, for example, whether or not the humanities are financed, and financed sufficiently, and how they are administered. All that is political policy, but it certainly affects the arts.

Ferris: : Do you see a public life having an impact on your creative life?

Miller: In a way, sure. You gain a lot of different kinds of experience that way, and it's not bad to take a cold bath in a public pool occasionally. It's hard to trace it, but you become more and more aware of what things mean to people.

Ferris: : When you took *Death of a Salesman* to China in 1983, were there any surprises?

Miller: There were a number. I wrote a book called *The Salesman in Beijing*, a daily diary of what was happening during the course of that production.

Ferris: : The cultures seem so different, one wonders how Chinese audiences reacted to what seems to be a very American story.

Miller: It is an American story, but its applications are pretty wide. It doesn't really matter where it's played. Of course, it's not played as much as *The*

Crucible. But it's played enough around the world, and it doesn't seem to matter where it is.

Ferris: : Although *Death of a Salesman* got rave reviews the first night, that was not so with *The Crucible*, though it went on to great success around the world. You write about colleagues walking out of the theater the night *The Crucible* was premiered and not even speaking to you. What was it like to witness that?

Miller: It was very discouraging. At the same time, I felt a certain happiness that the play had dealt with the issue that everybody was worried about privately, and that I had brought it to the surface. There is an old rule of psychology that if something doesn't meet resistance, it is probably not true.

I knew *The Crucible* was what it was. I withstood the coldness at the moment, but it certainly wasn't comfortable. But I have the ability to slough things off when they get too tough.

Ferris: : I want to thank you for taking the time from your writing to do this interview. It has been a pleasure talking with you.

Miller: Thank you.