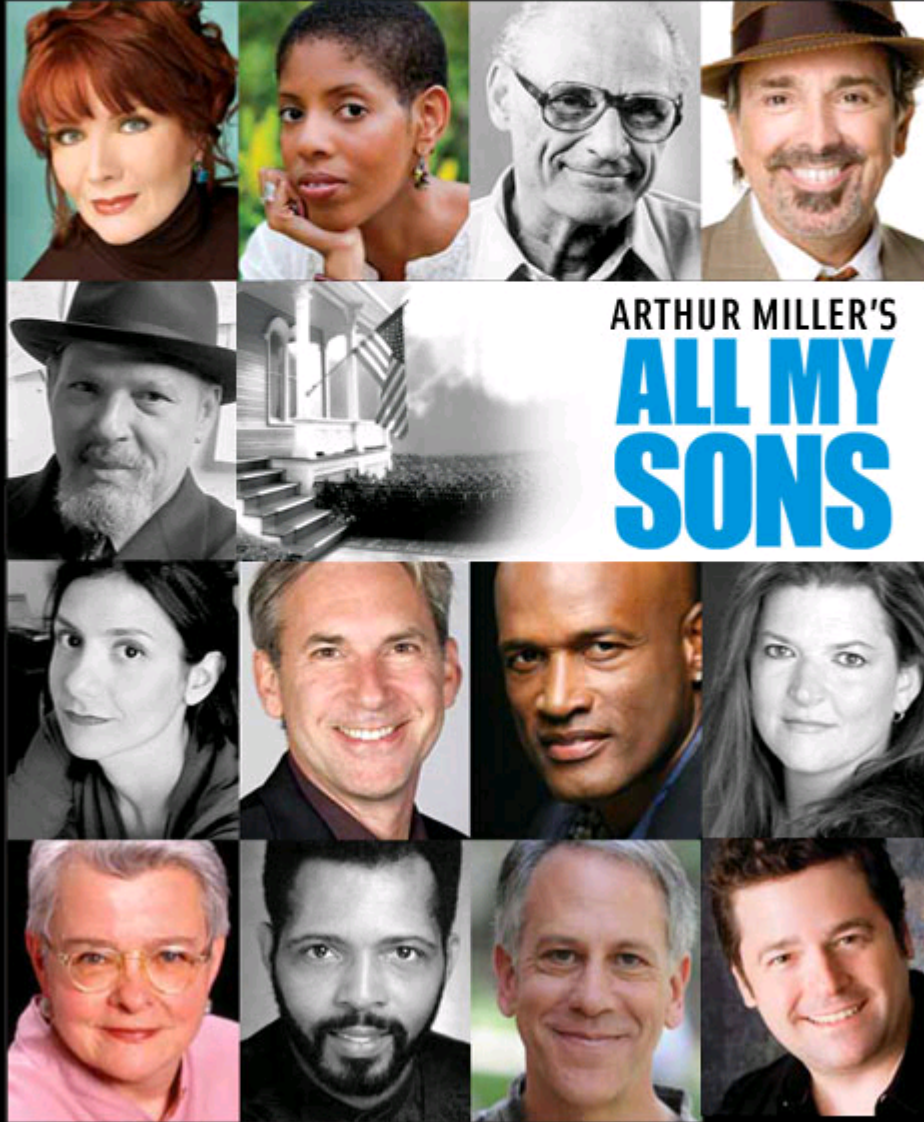




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# American Tragedy

Arthur Miller's Common Man



*"It is time, I think, that we who are without kings took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man."* — Arthur Miller

When Arthur Miller began writing his breakout drama *All My Sons*, he started with a suggestion from his mother-in-law. She told Miller the story of an Ohio woman who turned her father over to federal investigators after learning he knowingly sold defective aircraft parts to the Army. From this simple situation the author saw the roots of a play. "I never knew the people involved, and it turned out that it wasn't a daughter, but a son in my play," Miller recalled. "All I knew was . . . that this had happened in the Middle West. I never saw it in the paper or anything."



A Missouri Air National Guard Pilot, World War II

Miller later claimed that it was the only play he took directly from real events — a half-truth in the light of the thinly veiled portrait of his relationship with Marilyn Monroe in *After the Fall* or the shadows of the McCarthy communism hearings that can be seen in *The Crucible*. But the first acclaimed tragedy that Miller wrote remained the one he considers closest to an anonymous true-life experience of a common person, a fitting reflection of a philosophy he would articulate in the years that followed.



The shop floor of a WWII aircraft factory, 1944

Following the two-year Broadway run of *All My Sons*, Miller premiered his next play, *Death of a Salesman*. In *Salesman*, critics found that the playwright had reconceived tragedy for a modern age, an impression that Miller encouraged. "The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing — his sense of personal dignity," Miller wrote in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man." "From *Orestes* to *Hamlet*, *Medea* to *Macbeth*, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society." To see the classic kings and princes fall was to question the state of the nation, Miller argues, asking whether the same can apply to the everyman.

In his obituary, *The New York Times* called Miller the "most American of the country's great playwrights," even though he was more of a moralist than a patriot. Instead, he challenged his country by telling stories with polemic questions at their heart. In *All My Sons* and elsewhere, he portrays average businessmen in suburban vistas and leaves their failures unresolved. Like the classic tragedians, Miller fiercely interrogates the ideals of his country about success and responsibility through *All My Sons*' single Midwestern family, asking where the gap exists between private greed and the public good.

— Charles Haugland

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## Director David Esbjornson Brings Miller's Mature Vision to an Early Play



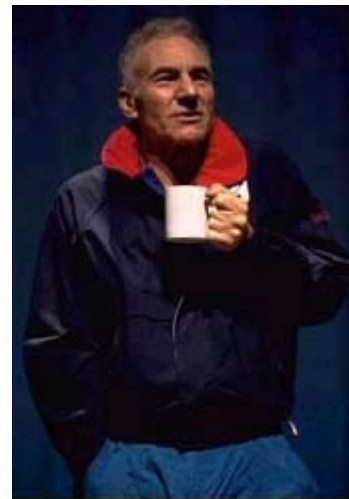
Arthur Miller & David Esbjornson  
at the Public Theatre in 2000

**A**ll *My Sons*, which premiered in 1947, was written by a relatively unknown Arthur Miller, a man with one flop to his name. The typical biography reads that this play established the writer who created arguably the most important American play — *Death of a Salesman* — a mere two years later. Miller then goes on to write *The Crucible*, stand up to Joe McCarthy, wed and divorce Marilyn Monroe, and then...the story peters off. That "typical" biographical sketch glosses over the disciplined, arduous development of Miller as a young writer as well as his life-long pursuit of excellence in theatre. Miller had been writing stage and radio plays for eleven years before *All My Sons* became a hit. His career spanned seven decades.

An aging artist is something of an embarrassment in American culture. An angry, young man vigorously shaking up the establishment makes for good copy. Take a moment to picture Miller. Around which image does your memory of the greatest American post-war dramatist crystallize? Standing with Marilyn Monroe in a black and white photo? Testifying before HUAC? It's a good guess that you are picturing Miller sometime in the sixties; however, Miller worked until the last days of his life in 2005, often collaborating with director David Esbjornson who will come to Boston to helm the Huntington's production of his first hit, *All My Sons*.

In reviving *All My Sons*, how best do we encompass and honor the entirety of Miller's dramaturgy, early to late? For this production, Esbjornson will direct this early work with an eye toward the writer that Miller became. Esbjornson garnered a Tony Award nomination for *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* in 2000, and in conversation, he emphasizes that Miller remained interested in pushing the envelope his entire life. Because it is familiar, one forgets that *Death of a Salesman* uses an unconventional approach to form and staging. *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* includes surreal fantasy sequences and jumps around in time. According to Esbjornson, Miller remained very open to alternative ideas from his collaborators, and welcomed new interpretations of his work as long as they were respectful of his original intentions. How will these conversations influence the Huntington's production?

The life's work of a writer doesn't begin or end; it develops along a continuum, one play informing the next and the next play also informing the previous. It's tempting to look back at *All My Sons* as not only a great play, but as a shining moment of great potentiality; however, to do so denies the reality of the man who grew and shrank and grew throughout his life, just like the rest of us. Our goal is to close the circle a little bit on this great dramatist and restart the conversation about him now that we know how Miller's story ends.



Patrick Stewart in Arthur Miller's  
*The Ride Down Mount Morgan*,  
directed by David Esbjornson

— Lisa Timmel

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# Victories at Cost:

War and Enterprise in World War II



**Senator Harry Brewster of Maine:** [What] if you had a son who was going overseas on one of these ships during the past month?

**J. Lester Perry, President, Carnegie-Illinois Steel:** Why, Senator, I don't for a moment condone poor steel, defective steel in ships or anywhere else that has to do with the war effort. Don't worry about how I feel about the sons going over there.

**Senator Harry S. Truman:** The Senator has a son over there.

**J. Lester Perry:** I feel for him.

—*Transcript, U.S. Senate Hearings, March 23, 1943*

Arthur Miller's 1947 drama *All My Sons* is known as a 20<sup>th</sup> century classic and regarded in the 21st perhaps as a lens into our past. When Miller began writing, though, nothing about the play said period piece. "I wrote *All My Sons* during the war, expecting much trouble," the playwright recalled in 2000, "but the war ended just as I was completing the play, leaving some room for the unsayable, which everyone knew — that the war had made some people illicit, sometimes criminal fortunes."



Senator Harry S. Truman (third from left) chairs a 1942 session of the Special Committee to investigate the national Defense Program. Photo: Truman Library, National Archives

*All My Sons* was based in part on a true crime that Miller's mother-in-law read about in an Ohio newspaper, but headlines from throughout the era tell of the war effort's conflicted relationship with business. From *The New York Times*, beginning in 1941, we read "Plane Worker Indicted," "Poor Plane Parts Charged in Suit: Castings [...] Are Said to Bear Marks of Pre-Delivery Repairs," and "Truman Committee Declares Army and Navy Got 'Defective' Items."

The Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, casually called the Truman Committee, was formed in 1941 to examine the windfall profits earned by corporations with government ties. But, the close examination of the businessmen who supplied weapons, rubber, uniforms, and other necessities of war unveiled limits to the empathy of these men who thought of the war as "over there." Truman, speaking in 1942, warned of a ghostly question that hung over "every businessman, every farmer, every American citizen:

"What will happen to our jobs, to our businesses, to our farmers, after the war?"

Truman's committee's investigations uncovered surprising motives from men who defrauded their country yet considered themselves deeply patriotic, caught in the impossible breakneck speed of a worldwide conflict that remapped the American economy. "I want to say unequivocally I am an American citizen, and like you fellows, I am just as patriotic, and our people are just as patriotic," Carnegie-Illinois Steel President J. Lester Perry asserted in his 1943 testimony. The company was blamed for the U.S.S. *Schenectady's* hull failure, and Perry spoke with passion, "We want to do a job; we will do a job, and I assure we will [...] do it promptly, but there has been a lot of heat on here these days."

"Arthur Miller understood that there's nothing more insidious or ultimately more destructive than when patriotism and profit become aligned and go along a common path," *All My Sons* director David Esbjornson recalls. "He would go to Washington all the time to make speeches about this, trying to fight these forces and let people know that these issues were still very much alive." In *All My Sons*, we see the first provocations of a life-long crusade from a man who trenchantly questioned how personal survival conflicts with societal good.

— Charles Haugland



# In His Own Words

Arthur Miller On Theatre



"The production of a new play, I have often thought, is like another chance in life, a chance to emerge cleansed of one's imperfections. Here, as when one was very young, it seems possible again to attain even greatness, or happiness, or some otherwise unattainable joy. . . . At such a time, it seems to all concerned that the very heart of life's mystery is what must be penetrated."

— "American Theater," *Holiday*, January 1955

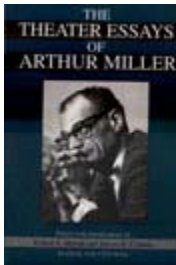


"For the fact is that art is a function of the civilizing act quite as much as is the building of the water supply. American civilization is only recently coming to a conscious awareness of art not as a luxury but as a necessity of life."

— "The Family in Modern Drama," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1959

"To me the theatre is not a disconnected entertainment, which it usually is to most people here. It's the sound and the ring of the spirit of the people at any one time. It is where a collective mass of people, through the genius of some author, is able to project its terrors and its hopes and to symbolize them. . . . I personally feel that the theatre has to confront the basic themes always. And the faces change from generation to generation to generation, but their roots are generally the same, and that is a question of man's increasing awareness of himself and his environment, his quest for justice and for the right to be human. That's a big order, but I don't know where else excepting at a playhouse where there's reasonable freedom, one should hope to see that."

— "The Contemporary Theater," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Summer 1967. (From a speech delivered at the University of Michigan, February 28, 1967)



"In place of a social aim, which called an all-around excellence — physical, intellectual, and moral — the ultimate good, we have set up a goal which can best be characterized as 'happiness' — namely, staying out of trouble. This concept is the end result of the truce which all of us have made with society. And a truce implies two enemies. . . . There is a kind of perverse unity forming among us, born, I think, of the discontent of all classes of people with the endless frustration of life. It is possible now to speak of a search for values, not solely from the position of bitterness, but with a warm embrace of mankind, with a sense that at bottom every one of us is a victim of this misplacement of aims."

— "On Social Plays," *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. New York: Viking Press, 1978

"The actor brings questions onto the stage just as any person does when we first meet him in our ordinary lives. Which of them a play chooses to answer, and how they are answered, are the ruling and highly consequential imperatives which create the style of a play, and control what are later called the stylistic levels of its writing. In a word, the actor's appearance on the stage in normal human guise leads us to expect a realistic treatment. The play will either be intent upon rounding out the characters by virtue of its complete answers to the common questions, or will substitute answers to a more limited group of questions which, instead of being 'human,' are thematic and are designed to form a symbol of meaning rather than an apperency of the 'real.' It is the nature of the questions being asked and answered, rather than the language used — whether verse, ordinary slang, or colorless prose — that determines whether the style is realistic or non-realistic. When I speak of style, therefore, this

is one of the relationships I intend to convey."

— "Introduction," *Eight Plays*, 1981

"I think people go for tags for any writer; you don't have to think about what he's doing any longer, especially if he's around a long time. But then simply you know what you think you want to expect. It may or may not have much to do with what he's doing. But, they find whatever in the work fits that expectation, and the other is simply not dealt with or is rejected."

— "The Will to Live," an Interview with Arthur Miller, *Modern Drama*, September, 1984

"Watching a play is not like lying on a psychiatrist's couch or sitting alone in front of the television. In the theatre you can sense the reaction of your fellow citizens along with your own reactions. You may learn something about yourself, but sharing it with others brings a certain relief — the feeling that you are not alone, you're part of the human race. I think that's what theatre is about and why it will never be finished."

— Quoted in Peter Lewis, "Change of Scene for a Mellow Miller," *The Sunday Times*, November 3, 1991

"Life is not reassuring; if it were we would not need the consolations of religion, for one thing. Literature and art are not required to reassure when in reality there is no reassurance, or to serve up 'clean and wholesome' stories in all times and all places. Those who wish such art are welcome to have it, but those who wish art to symbolize how life really is, in order to understand it and perhaps themselves, also have a right to their kind of art."

— "The Good Old American Apple Pie," *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, 1993

"I suppose that to me a play is the way I sum up where I am at any particular moment in my life. I'm not conscious of that when I'm working, but when I look back at what I've written, it's quite clear to me that that's what I'm doing, trying to find out what I really think about life. Like everybody else, I think I believe certain things, and I think I disbelieve others, but when you try to write a play about them, you find out that you believe a little of what you disbelieve and you disbelieve a lot of what you think you believe. The dramatic form, at least as I understand it, is a kind of proof. It's a sort of court proceeding where the less-than-true gets cast away and what's left is the kernel of what one really stands for and believes."

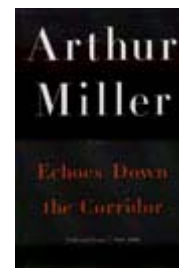
— Address at the Guthrie Theater Global Voices, Forums on Art & Life, March 23, 1997, printed in the Guthrie Theater Introductory guide to the 1997-98 Season

"My plays are always involved with society, but I'm writing about people, too, and it's clear over the years that audiences understand them and care about them. The political landscape changes, the issues change, but the people are still there. People don't really change that much."

— Quoted in "Arthur Miller: A Dramatist for the Ages," Dan Hulbert, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 2000

"It is necessary to employ the artificial in order to arrive at the real. More than one actor in my plays has told me that it is surprisingly difficult to memorize their dialogue. The speeches sound like real, almost reported talk when in fact they are intensely composed, compressed into a sequential inevitability that seems natural but isn't. But all this, important though it may be, is slightly to one side of the point. Experimental or traditional, the real question to ask of a work is whether it brings news, something truly felt by its author, an invention on his part or an echo."

— "Notes on Realism," *Echoes Down the Corridor*, 2000



"The director and critic, the late Harold Clurman, called theatre 'lies like truth.' Theatre does indeed lie, fabricating everything from the storm's roar to the fake lark's song, from the actor's calculated laughter to his nightly flood of tears. And the actor lies; with all the spontaneity that careful calculation can lend him he may nevertheless fabricate a vision of

some important truth about the human condition that opens us to a new understanding of ourselves. In the end, we call a work of art trivial when it illuminates little beyond its own devices, and the same goes for political leaders who bespeak some narrow interest rather than those of the national or universal good. The fault is not in the use of the acting arts but in their purpose.

"[Art] has always been the revenge of the human spirit upon the short-sighted. Consider the sublime achievements of Greece and her military victories and defeats, the necrophilic grandeur of the Egyptians, the Romans' glory, the awesome Assyrian power, the rise and fall of the Jews and their incomprehensible survival — and what do we have left of it all but a handful of plays, essays, carved stones, and some strokes of paint on paper or the rock cave wall — in a word, art? The ironies abound. Artists are not particularly famous for their steady habits, the acceptability of their opinions, or their conformity with majority mores, but whatever is not turned into art disappears forever. It is very strange when you think about it, except for one thing that is not strange but quite logical — however dull or morally delinquent an artist may be, in his moment of creation when his work pierces to the truth, he cannot dissimulate, he cannot fake it. Tolstoy once remarked that what we look for in the work of art is the revelation of the artist's soul, a glimpse of god. You can't act that."

— "On Politics and the Art of Acting,"  
*The 30th Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities*, March 26, 2001

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# In Others' Words



"To summarize [Arthur] Miller's views, a social play, in contrast to a nonsocial or a psychological play, demonstrates the impact of social forces — the class structure, the economy, the system of norms and values, family patterns, etc. — on the raw psychology and lives of the characters; exposes the basic similarity of men, not their uniqueness; and, finally, addresses itself to the question, as did classical Greek drama which Miller regards as the forerunner of all social plays, "How are we to live?" in a social and humanistic sense. . . . One of the most overriding themes in Miller's plays . . . is what might be called the quest for community. How in the modern world is it possible to recapture the "primary group" values of affection, compassion, solidarity and responsibility? It is the tragedy of the industrial world, according to Miller, that the idea of community has withered, atrophied, and the humanistic links connecting man to man have been severely damaged. A great respecter of the engaged, the committed, the connected, the 'political' man, Miller is correspondingly impatient with the complete privatization of life, both by ordinary men themselves in the course of their daily existence, and by playwrights who write psychological drama of unconnected, unrelated, atomistic men. He sees this theme as really the concern of all great plays: this struggle between what he calls 'family relations' and 'social relations' and what those in sociology would call a tragic struggle between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) values."

— Paul Blumberg, "Work as Alienation in the Plays of Arthur Miller,"  
*American Quarterly*, Summer 1969

"Arthur Miller is a problem playwright, in both senses of the word. As a man of independent thought, he is profoundly, angrily concerned with the immediate issues of our society — with the irresponsible pressures which are being brought to bear on free men, with the self-seeking which blinds whole segments of our civilization to justice, with the evasions and dishonesties into which cowardly men are daily slipping. And to his fiery editorializing he brings shrewd theatrical flights: he knows how to make a point plain, how to give it bite in the illustration, how to make its caustic and cauterizing language ring out on the stage."



— Walter Kerr, *New York Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1953

"Each of the plays written prior to *The Misfits* [1960] is a judgment of a man's failure to maintain a viable connection with his surrounding world because he does not know himself. The verdict is always guilty, and it is a verdict based upon Miller's belief that if each man faced up to the truth about himself, he could be fulfilled as an individual and still live within the restrictions of society. But while Miller's judgments are absolute, they are also exceedingly complex. There is no doubt that he finally stands four-square on the side of the community, but until the moment when justice must be served, his sympathies are for the most part directed toward those ordinary little men who never discovered who they really were.

"A Miller protagonist belongs to a strange breed. In every instance he is unimaginative, inarticulate (as with Buechner's *Woyzeck*, the words that would save him seem always to be just beyond his grasp) and physically nondescript, if not downright unattractive. His roles as husband and father (or father-surrogate) are of paramount importance to him, and yet he fails miserably in both. He wants to love and be loved, but he is incapable of either giving or receiving love. And he is haunted by aspiration toward a joy in life that his humdrum spirit is quite unable to realize. Yet, in spite of all these negative characteristics, Miller's protagonists do engage our imagination and win our sympathies. I think this ambiguity stems from the fact that his own attitude towards his creations is so contradictory.

"On the one hand, he finds them guilty for their failure to maintain (or fulfill) their role within the established social structure. . . . On the other hand, while it is certainly true that the

system is ultimately affirmed, it cannot be denied that the system is shown to be in some ways responsible for creating those very conditions, which provoke the protagonists' downfall."

— Robert W. Corrigan, "Introduction," *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1969

"One could say a playwright is not a great playwright unless he can use things — in themselves — thematically, not simply as properties to be touched and then discarded on the way to discovery, but somehow as the discovery itself. At this point, the drama extends itself into poetry, and metaphor swells with movement to a broader, historical reality. Arthur Miller operates in this vision with reserve and intelligence and surprise."

—Marianne Boruch, "Miller and Things," *Literary Review*, 1981



"Arthur Miller understands that serious writing is a social act as well as an aesthetic one, that political involvement comes with the territory. . . . A writer's work and his actions should be of the same cloth, after all. His plays and his conscience are a cold burning force. I wish there were more like him."

— Edward Albee, *Arthur Miller and Company*, 1990

"His dramas endure . . . because, along with a talent for stage writing that is unsurpassed in our lifetime, he has put his integrity and uncontrived ethical sensibility into his plays, with the result that they are always about something pertinent and always about something of stirring importance to people who are concerned. His conflicts are disturbing and charged powerfully, like those we experience inside us as individuals and those we helplessly observe unfolding around us constantly in the perilous world in which we live."

— Joseph Heller, *Arthur Miller and Company*, 1990

"Critics have adduced many subtle reasons (and will continue their analyses for generations) to explain Arthur [Miller]'s mastery as a dramatist, but few are likely to come up with the crucially simple truth that he is a consummate storyteller. Having watched him on numerous occasions, clad in his gentleman farmer's rumpledness, sidling into my crowded living room, I have etched on my mind his expression of richly amused dejection, that of a man experiencing both pleasure and anguish, one deathly afraid of bores and of being bored yet warily hopeful for that blessed moment of communion that sometimes happens. And after a while it usually does happen. Arthur has found an audience — or, more significantly, they have found him, which is the rarest tribute of all since only a great storyteller can exert such magnetism without a trace of self-devotion. As the yarn unwinds Arthur's eyes sparkle and his voice becomes sly, conspiratorial, reflective, studded with small abrupt astonishments, the denouement craftily dangled and delayed: he is also an actor of intuitive panache. Is it a performance? Perhaps. But whatever it is, it unfolds with eloquence and his listeners are lost in it, and it is then that I am able to perceive, simultaneously, the inspired vision of the playwright and the energizing charm of the man."

— William Styron, *Arthur Miller and Company*, 1990

"I was weaned on your work. My children studied you at school. You've formed and continue to form generations of thoughtful and inquiring minds. And every tear, every laugh, each emotion and each thought is hard-earned there. You're rare, dear friend, you're not only an audience's playwright you are a playwright's playwright, a source for us all."

—Arnold Wesker, *Arthur Miller and Company*, 1990

"In almost all of his plays Miller explodes the myth of private life and emphasizes the value of social responsibility. He extols individuality while simultaneously suggesting that only democratic principles can provide moral solutions to the problems of our age. He espouses a doctrine of freedom that confers upon the individual the power to make independent choices and to convert those choices into noble actions. In Miller's world, freedom necessitates social responsibility. Regardless of the often overwhelming external and internal forces in his characters' lives and their success or failure in meeting personal challenges, the individual in Miller's plays generally has the ability to oppose deterministic forces; to resist destructive

impulses from within oneself; to raise oneself from inertia; to oppose any form of injustice; to construct a society based on humanitarian and democratic principles, creating order out of the chaos and giving meaning and dignity to human existence."

—Robert A. Martin, *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller (Revised and Expanded)*, 1996

"Miller is so often praised, and occasionally decried, for what is taken to be his realism a realism expressed through the authentic prose of a salesman, a longshoreman, a businessman. But Arthur Miller is no simple realist and hasn't been for fifty years. Moreover, he is incontestably a poet: one who sees the private and public worlds as one, who is a chronicler of the age and a creator of metaphors . . .

"A metaphor is the meeting point of disparate elements brought together to create meaning. Willy Loman's life is just such a meeting point, containing, as it does, the contradictions of a culture whose dream of possibility has foundered on the banality of its actualization . . . [Miller's work] grows out of an awareness of the actual, but that actuality is reshaped, charged with a significance that lifts it into a different sphere."

— Christopher Bigsby, "Poet Chronicler of the Age," *Humanities*, March/April, 2001

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# Collaborators in Conversation



David Esbjornson

**T**hroughout this season, we will feature artists interviewing other artists working at the Huntington. Below, All My Sons director David Esbjornson talks with playwright Craig Lucas, author of *Prelude to a Kiss*. A condensed version appears in the All My Sons program.



Craig Lucas

**David Esbjornson:** You've certainly spurred some important thinking on my end about the play in your questions. I don't know if I can be articulate in answering them, but I can certainly try.

**Craig Lucas:** So, I sort of remember what Elliot Norton taught us about the play back in my undergraduate days and I actually went back to my notes from Elliot's class. And it seemed to me that a lot of what he taught us about the play isn't true. We were taught that it was a kind of modern attempt to do what the Greek tragedians had done and that [Arthur] Miller was obsessed with the gods putting things right. And then, you know, I've since done my own translation, or adaptation rather, of *Oedipus*, and I have read those plays a little more carefully, and they're not about justice at all!

**DE:** No.

**CL:** The gods are always punishing people for doing things that they had no control over, and didn't even mean to do, and often unwittingly did. And the point of them all is that, if you're a human being, you're going to pay.

**DE:** Right. And you had to cope with whatever was being dealt you.

**CL:** Yeah, that's just it. You're just going to have a rough go of it. We're mortal, and we're going to get shit on, and we have to, as you said, just cope with it. But that doesn't seem to me to be . . .

**DE:** I think where it maybe ventures back into some of the Greek plays is maybe in the idea of free will and if there are moments in which human beings are free to make choices for themselves in the midst of all that. And, you know, you brought up *Oedipus*, which is what made me think that perhaps that element is something maybe Miller was interested in.

**CL:** Well clearly, he is the very kind of fixated, in a way, on personal culpability, but also the thing that I can't quite wrap my mind around still which feels deeply, deeply personal to him which is familial responsibility, that in a sense, okay, not to . . . here's that little thing that appears in *Mad Men*: [Spoiler Alert] Larry's suicide is a very strange gesture in the midst of a war where his life could mean the life or death of other soldiers. To take his own life in a response to what he hears about, mostly from the newspapers, is his father's culpability is such strange and rash act. And then I was thinking Miller's whole body of work and how much suicide there is in it. You know there's the guy who throws himself off the tracks in *After The Fall*, of course there's Willy Loman; the plays are filled with it.

**DE:** Right. And one of the things about *Ride Down Mount Morgan* that we discussed at length was what was Loman's; what was he doing on that road and what did he think he would accomplish by trying to make it down that highway in a blizzard. And there was a lot of conversation about how cuspy all of that is, in terms of whether one wants to live or die and, in a sense, letting fate make the decision for you if you're not strong enough to make it on your own. I remember kind of intense conversations about that and trying to sort that out in terms of the playing of it, and I just found that really, the fact that he occupied that place in regards to suicide was fascinating to me.

**CL:** It's not particularly American; it's almost Japanese.

**DE:** You were mentioning Ibsen, and I think Ibsen is very much in that world too. Perhaps it's a little old fashioned for us to think about it. But there is this thing that comes from Scandinavian culture — and I know from having grown up in it in Minnesota — that what society thinks is really, really important and the notion of one's self in society and doing something that blackens your name is really profound. And, you know, when you think of *Hedda Gabler* or even *Enemy of the People* where the character is completely immobilized and, to some extent, can't function in the way they once did simply because they've made a terrible mistake and suffer this humiliation with society.

**CL:** Well, the idea that there even is a community at all to be part of. You know, all of those neighbors that the Kellers' have who keep hopping across their backyard and, first of all, you couldn't afford to put them on the stage in a modern play, so there's no community in modern plays, because nobody can afford to have these neighbors and a husband and neighbors come over and start complaining or talking about what the community thinks or feels.

But what if we actually lived in a world where . . . I was thinking about these notes . . . not just culpability but accountability and what's happened in the decade since the Second World War you get John Mitchell or [Lewis "Scooter"] Libby to take the rap for what the powerful people do. I mean, it's not just Republicans who do this although it would certainly seem to be one of their favorites which is to commit a terrible crime and lie and, whatever it is, give Valerie Plame's name to the papers . . . or break into the Democratic headquarters and steal their files and then lie about it and then get somebody else in your camp to throw themselves on the sword. And though everyone knows that [Dick] Cheney did it, [Karl] Rove did it, we don't even have enough of a popular movement to get them thrown into the clink.

Then here's this artist, who does feel like a very American artist in many ways, but also feels, as you say, very European or very sort of foreign and old fashioned in that he says "Wait a minute, if my father does something bad, I can't live." We've gotten so far from that.

**DE:** I know, and I think that's really the challenge of putting it on the stage right now, except that I think that there's a longing for that that exists. I think that both the draw to this play, and also perhaps its trap, is just the nostalgia of a culture that cares about each other, you know, where people care about each other. When has it ever been an option to risk the lives of other citizens for your profit? But at the same time, what is going on right now, and what is the health care fight about. This is very much part of our American DNA and I think it's something Miller was struggling with at that time and certainly we're doing it in exactly the same way, although the circumstances, as you say, have changed rather significantly.

**CL:** But I think it's clear that he doesn't come from money, because if he came from money there wouldn't be that infant, wide-eyed sense of responsibility, there'd just be a wink and a cover your track, get out of there and so what if they die. The Republicans figured out in the last 20 years that Americans did not like enlisted soldiers to die in foreign wars so they created a mercenary army. And if you add up all the people, Americans, who are being paid to be over there outside of the military in Iraq and who have died and who have of course committed crimes that we won't ever know about and then you say, oh no, they really were enlisted, or, God forbid, drafted, people would be up in arms. We've deviated so far, it seems to me anyway.

**DE:** I think what Miller is checked is that there's something interesting about—they're not as far a-field as what you're describing.

**CL:** Certainly Kate [Keller, the wife in *All My Sons*] is not.

**DE:** They do have a moral compass enough so that they know when they're off and they're not going in a true direction. It almost seems as though what you're describing at least, and it's certainly been my experience too, is that feels as though morality is really just out the window and it's really just about whether or not you get caught doing what you're doing.

**CL:** And I think we can trace that sort of in Ayn Rand. And it is a little bit in Joe [Keller, the protagonist], that thing of, you know, he says "If there's something more than family, I'll put a bullet in my head," and that would seem to be what goes down in the Cheney family. That it's just your family. That seems to have been the case in the Bushes, and the Nixons, is that it's okay to do it, that it's okay to steal hundreds of millions of dollars in the S&L scandal as long as the money is staying in your family.

**DE:** Well, and the notion of family becoming more and more specific like that and less about the family in the large sense is part of this trend as well. Because, I think when you're looking at Miller's characters, what I mean by the fact that they know when they've been bad, they actually understand that. This play is really not about have you done something wrong, but the denial that goes along with it. And there are no obvious villains here, just people who are afraid, and desperate, and they made really bad choices, and then they tried to run away from those choices, and cover them up, and make worse ones. If you don't have that problem to begin with, then you wouldn't have this play. I'd be very curious as to if he were to rewrite the play, if he could rewrite the play today, would make any changes?

**CL:** Are there things in working on the play, David, strike you as being the most interestingly gnarly that you're trying to pull forward or things you think "Oh, that takes care of itself"?

**DE:** I think that one of the reasons that the play succeeds is because it does have these satisfying characters and they're all in conflict. They all want something desperately. I think they're caught in a kind of purgatory, a self-made purgatory. It's called prison in some instances. You know, as you mentioned, the poplars, and the fence, and all that stuff as being kind of trap in time. And it seems to me that Kate is the character that somehow it feels that she is so full of all this pain, and emotion, and guilt that she looks like she's going to explode every second. I guess I was kind of interested in seeing if the play would bear some more hallucinatory sort of moments, dream-things that she might be involved with, that could include Chris and could include some of the nightmare imagery that I think Miller sets up with the apple tree in the beginning and if that could be carried through in the play and offer little nuggets of more surreal moments.

**CL:** Oh, that sounds wonderful. Because she, to me she seems the most current — someone who actually has the knowledge, and is living with the knowledge, and is keeping it to herself. Some of the more present American plays [are] carrying this idea forward; the one that springs to mind the most vividly to me is Wallace Shawn's *The Fever*, which is simply about knowing the consequences of how one's money has been amassed, and one's comfort, and safety, and pleasure, and all the American privileges, and not wanting to know at the same time, that if you came on board, that this was bought at the cost of other people's lives, often through the means of torture and certainly the sale of arms. The fact that America is now to the world, we have this inability to quite accept who we are, which is that we are the arms merchant to the world, that is our primary export to the world. It's not food, it's not technology, it's not entertainment, it's not medicine. We can think it is those things, but what we sell to the world is weapons. So whenever there's war somewhere, we get rich. It doesn't matter if we win or not. No, never mind whether or not we win in Iraq, we've already won. We've already made Haliburton and the Carlisle Group and those people who make weapons delivery systems have made hundreds of billions of dollars in Iraq. The play seems to me to look forward to this moment in a way; that he was incredibly prescient.

**DE:** And I think he understood that, in a really serious way, that there's nothing more insidious or ultimately more destructive than when patriotism and profit become aligned and go along a common path. That was something that followed him right up until the end of his life. He would go to Washington all the time to make speeches about this, and other things that concerned him of course, and continued to write editorials, and was very active in that way in trying to fight these forces and let people know that these issues were still very much alive.

**CL:** So, I'm fascinated that you're looking at her as kind of the full repository of the full breadth of the madness, that what the cost to her is she must believe that Larry is still alive. It's important to her that she stay in that place, almost like a neurotic symptom.

**DE:** I just keep saying that there's got to be some kind of valve that lets some of that out once in a while. And that's got to happen privately, because it doesn't happen in the play, it doesn't happen publicly. So, I think her restlessness at night — her dreams, her hallucinations so to speak — they kind of foreshadow in a way Willy Loman and some of those qualities which will come up in *Death of a Salesman* and which Miller was really continuing to try to explore in his later plays. I think the play is pretty well made and it has all that structure. There's something about both honoring that and at the same time mixing it up a little bit if we can that could be exciting.

**CL:** Yeah, it'll take care of itself — the plot mechanics.

**DE:** You know, you had also mentioned Ann [Deever, the brothers' fiancée] and you

really got me thinking about that. Why Ann — first of all why she brings the letter and also why she waits to use it. Did you have any more thoughts about that?

**CL:** No. I'm curious; I'm very curious. I did start to think it through and thought well if I were directing this, of course I couldn't say to the cast "You know, this is nuts," I'd have to find a way into it and I do think it's all there, but I'm curious.

**DE:** I've thought about it and I looked at it and I read the section over where she produces it. And she keeps saying, "I don't want to hurt you, I only brought this in case I needed to use it." It feels to me that she is a woman who has, in a sense, a gun in her pocket and is prepared to use it from the beginning. And, of course, does not want her love and her future on those terms, but if necessary she's got the tenacity and the need to fight hard enough to get Chris [Keller, the present son, to marry her]. She'll do it if she has to, and she does. And she's such an embodiment of goodness, and she's pretty, and sensible, and quiet, and beautiful, and yet at the same time there's this other side to her that I think is really quite fascinating and a bit modern. And I like the fact that she comes and gets what she wants.

**CL:** Miller has gone on record saying that when he wrote the play he felt that he didn't know women very well, and I think that's just not true. In a way, making the men kind of the embodiment of less conflicted, in some ways less neurotic . . . Chris is the voice of a very clear idealism. That, "if those soldiers had been a little more selfish, they'd be alive today," or "I keep reaching for things . . ." whatever that line is about "and then I realize the bloody cost of them and I have to pull back." But so, in some weird way, that he didn't know women very well, which is a very kind of mid-century very man notion, he somehow managed to give himself permission to write — they're very dimensional. I mean, the woman who's married to the doctor — that's a very interesting part. She's not just like a harridan; she's practical, she's the one like, "How do you put kids through school on research grants?"

**DE:** Right. I think he did very well in this first one. I think there are some other plays perhaps in which he's a little more challenged. You know I didn't really understand Linda [Loman] until I met Inge [Morath, Miller's third wife] and she suddenly made a lot of sense to me. And I got that she doesn't have to be a dishrag, that she's a vital, incredibly vital, important woman and personality in her own right. But she just has a more practical — practical is probably too soft a word — but there's something very pragmatic about her. Again, there's an old fashioned notion, which I don't see existing in my life as much, but I do see it in generations before me where it was you stand by your mate, you stand by your man. There's something about that loyalty, that fierce loyalty of not letting anybody divide you.

**CL:** Also, I think all those marriages that were made before or in the early days of that war and then with the children were coming of age in what was supposed to be this very hard won period of freedom. My parents were appalled when I started to question American foreign policy or when I started to question bourgeois values because they had survived such a horrific depression and lost lives.

**DE:** And there were so many sacrifices that were made, not just in terms of lives, but in all other ways — sacrifices of people sending one child to college instead of two, those kinds of things, and living without, and this sense of doing personal things that would be good for everybody. And, God, I think that we miss that as a culture. For those who remember it, of course it was horrible, and hard, and difficult, but on some level there was something deeply meaningful about people who could actually band together to make society and the culture survive over their individual needs.

**CL:** Well, because it's working class and also because there were millions of immigrants who came here and people did sacrifice to give their children the chance to write plays that win the Pulitzer Prize and marry Marilyn Monroe; there was this sense of sacrifice. . . . Didn't Miller do an adaptation of *Enemy of the People*?

**DE:** Yes he did. And a good one.

**CL:** Has that ever been revived?

**DE:** You know, I had read it because the Goodman was considering doing it and wanted me to direct it. But it didn't happen. But, yeah, I think people still do it when they do it.

**CL:** All I'm really trying to say is that there's a seriousness of purpose that one still sees in plays like [Lynn Nottage's 2009 Pulitzer Prize winner] *Ruined* or [Tony Kushner's] *Homebody/Kabul*. I'm curious about why you think *The Iceman Cometh* was decried in '47 when it first appeared and the New York critics were much more

comfortable with *All My Sons*.

**DE:** I don't know that I know the answer. I think that [Eugene] O'Neill, as brilliant as he was — there's some extraordinary stuff there — but I don't think he has the same accessibility that Arthur does. I think Arthur is able to find a way of being direct, muscular, spare; I think both actors and audiences really tap into those characters and really find themselves identifying and becoming deeply involved in them. I think actors enjoy performing them. I think audiences enjoy seeing them; they recognize certain aspects of themselves in it. It just may be that O'Neill's poetic style, and it's a four-act play. It just may be that it wasn't as easily understood at the time. I wasn't there; I don't know.

**CL:** I guess the thing is that O'Neill really grew out of reading Strindberg, and he found something in those insane, dark plays that really kicked him into gear. Miller so obviously found the same in Ibsen.

**DE:** It's really fascinating because those two guys shared a kind of, well first of all they were contemporaries, and they were rivals. In fact, if you go to Ibsen's study there's a little picture of Strindberg over his desk, kind of as a scourge to keep him writing. I don't even know that they ever met.

**CL:** Oh no, they did! Apparently, there's a really wonderful story of where Ibsen, who did admire Strindberg, Ibsen told him how much he admired him. Strindberg's response to his wife was "Can you believe he said that shit to me? He's trying to kill me."

**DE:** I mean, they both kind of dealt with each other that way. Because Ibsen kind of used him as a troll, as a kind of presence of making himself a better writer, and somebody to remind him that there's something else out there that's equally interesting.

**CL:** But here we have this whole century of great American tragedy and drama that was an outgrowth of something that American audiences don't really like.

**DE:** Wow, I wouldn't go so far. But, I understand what you mean. It's now testing them a lot, in that arena. Is that what you're saying?

**CL:** I'm just saying that O'Neill and Miller both found in this foreign soil the seeds of something they made uniquely American and it's interesting that of all the places in the world and all of the cultures and things they could have written about it wasn't Ireland, it wasn't the Second Avenue Yiddish theatre. It was Nordic.

**DE:** See us Nordics, our influences in this way is strongly felt. It really doesn't matter where we are.

**CL:** I'm sure Oskar Eustis [artistic director of The Public Theater] would agree with you completely.

**DE:** He may be the only one in the American theatre who does.

**CL:** The other thing that seems to be tied in the play in terms of disowning what we know are the great Shakespeare tragedies at the heart of the American experience. In each one is a person who's disavowing what they actually know to be true. It isn't pretending that Lear really doubts Cordelia's love for him, but he needs to hear it, he wants to hear it. And in going to that place, he creates his own tragedy. And the same thing happens, over a different matter of knowledge being disavowed, in each one of the great tragedies. Hamlet disavows the knowledge that his uncle did commit murder and he must act on it. The Scottish king [Macbeth] disavows the real consequences of what happens when you commit that kind of crime. And, it's interesting that in *All My Sons* the crime is long past, it's the consequences now.

**DE:** Right, and the consequences of this one moral lapse fester and grow like a cancer to the whole family. I think when we talk about this purgatory, what's happening is that the younger people are not allowed to move forward with their lives; they're held back by this thing. And, until they can break it free, break free from it, there is no future for them. They can't define themselves. They'll always just be in the shadow of this thing. And so, I think Ann and Chris are at the breaking point. It's either they dissolve into this mire for the rest of their lives or they break out and try to find some happiness. In a way, there's no option for them except to explode it.

**CL:** Just one other thing David. There's something I feel in Miller's plays. It's very difficult to put my finger on, and maybe others have written about it. It isn't just that he seems to be dismayed by people taking more than their share, about greed and



how taking more than others is going to have a terrible cost, but there's this barely spoken feeling that to take at all — that somehow the only thing one can do is sacrifice if one wants to be righteous. There's some kind of weird, original sin, kooky Christian thing, which you wouldn't expect in the play. Do you feel that at all?

**DE:** I would put it a little differently, and maybe this is coming a little bit from my knowing Arthur, but I think that you can take as long as you're prepared to give back — the proportion is important to him. Does that make sense?

**CL:** Oh yes, that's what sort of get stated overtly. But there's also just something about taking for oneself at all.

**DE:** I actually think that these characters are a little more selfish than that. I think they are. That's what I meant by Ann coming to get what she wants and for Chris saying, "This is the moment; I'm going to have to go for it." Whatever is going on there, these people are sort of brought up to a point where they have to take an action that could be ultimately destructive to life as they know it. It's because their needs are so strong and they need to take something for themselves. Chris says that over and over again: "Every time I try to take something for myself, somehow it's harming other people." So I think you're right to tap into that; that is very much a part of it. But I don't know that that's what the author would say, "You shouldn't take it"; I think the author would simply say, "Take in proportion to what you give and be careful about the nature of what you consume, because maybe you'd be eating yourself up at the same time."

**CL:** I feel like with Willy's death that Willy didn't do anything terribly wrong. Okay, he bought into this idea of the American dream, but his suicide feels that somehow just being alive and just having human needs is so dangerous; it's a minefield how one is going to go about taking what one wants. I don't know.

**DE:** No, I totally understand what you're saying. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I see that as the plays and I don't see that as him. I see a man who is quite comfortable in the world and who has gained a great deal and simply wants things to be in proportion. I don't know whether my perceptions are profound in anyway. But I never got the sense that he struggled with this. It was a dramatic device that he used to push the envelope and make these arguments go far enough to have impact. I don't know; I didn't know him that well. I suppose it's possible that those things were kicking around and there maybe something deep-seated there. Because he's — I keep saying "is" — he was a pretty private man in many ways.

**CL:** Well, thanks for the opportunity to read some of the plays again and think about them. I can't wait to see your production David. Who have you cast as Kate?

**DE:** It's Karen MacDonald.

**CL:** Oh, I went to college with Karen; she was a year above me at BU. Please say "hi."

**DE:** I will. And Joe is Will Lyman, from the Boston area as well.

**CL:** He's married to my god-sister.

**DE:** Oh, is that right?

**CL:** Well, I went to school in Boston, and his wife's father was in the FBI with my father so it's all horribly complicated and incestuous.

**DE:** I like his sort of rough-cast quality; I thought that that was right. Miller's characters in this play are working class and must feel that way.

**CL:** Well, he's a great actor; they both are great actors.

**DE:** Most of the people are from the Boston area and it's really going to be a thrill for me to be able to get to know that pool of actors in that region. I've never worked up there.

**CL:** Congratulations, David.

**DE:** Thank you, Craig.

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