Great Variety

In the inaugural volume of its collected edition of Millers plays, The Library of America gathers the works from the 1940s and 1950s that electrified theatergoers and established Miller as one of the indispensable voices of the postwar era. Among the plays included are All My Sons, the story of an industrialist confronted with his moral lapses during World War II; Death of a Salesman, the wrenching tragedy of Willy Lomans demise; The Crucible, at once a riveting reconstruction of the Salem witch trials and a parable of McCarthyism; and A View from the Bridge, Millers tale of betrayal among Italian immigrants in Brooklyn, presented here in both the original one-act and revised two-act versions. This volume also contains the intriguing early drama The Man Who Had All the Luck, the first of Millers plays to be produced on Broadway, along with his adaptation of Ibsens An Enemy of the People, the autobiographical one-act A Memory of Two Mondays, and Millers novella The Misfits, based on the screenplay he wrote for Marilyn Monroe.

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My Personal Review:
This volume of the earlier plays by Arthur Miller is not only very well done, it is a really interesting way to immerse oneself into the art of this very important American playwright. I am always delighted with the volumes produced by the Library of America and continue to stress that we owe them our support and gratitude.

The plays collected here begin with "The Man Who Had All The Luck", the first of Miller's work to be produced on Broadway and ends with the novella Miller crafted from the screenplay for the movie "The Misfits" that Miller had done for Marilyn Monroe (his wife at the time). This is the period of "All My
Sons, "Death of a Salesman", and "The Crucible" and several other of his best known works for the stage.

Miller was born in New York City in 1915. As an aside, he did attend the University of Michigan here in Ann Arbor for a few years and that connection still matters. The University later gave him an honorary doctorate (one of those honorary degrees that is actually deserved for the significance of his life's work) and is now building a theater named after him.

While his first Broadway play, "The Man Who Had All The Luck" was not a commercial success, it does, I think, provide us an insight into the recurring theme of Miller's work as well as its strengths and weaknesses. It is a play about a man who, for some strange reason, feels burdened for having a life full of good fortune and blessing. He wants to feel like he has earned his success and somehow, no matter what terrible fate is staring him in the face, some fortunate accident happens to turn lead into gold. David Beeves tempts fate with a very risky investment into raising mink and ends up betting his entire net worth on this crazy scheme.

I don't want to discuss the ending of the play (because you should read it), but it seems strange to me that someone facing real life would feel burdened by success and look for pain and hardship to validate him. Yet, it is probably a real psychological state for some. Others have pointed out that this can also be a metaphor for the history of the United States and its internal struggles to deal with its own fortune in the world. And it is this emphasis on psychology and metaphor that can get in the way of the emotional beauty and honest observation of Miller's art. When Miller was writing these plays, psychology was at its zenith of popularity and like all popular ideas; it was simplified to the point of being vastly misunderstood. Now, decades after the fact, it seems for me like seeing someone wearing a wristwatch in a movie on the Roman Empire. For me, it isn't strongly convincing and gets in the way of enjoying the plays as much as I would like.

This is particularly true of "A View From the Bridge" where Eddie's repressed (and maybe unadmitted even to himself) desire for his niece leads to hurt and pain for everyone's in the play. This is on display in both the one-act and two-act versions provided here. The reason this is hard to swallow fifty years later is that sexuality is not repressed in our public or private expression (no matter what Hugh Hefner or Larry Flynt and their ilk continue to preach) and yet people are more obsessed and troubled by sex ruining their lives and relationships than they were when this play was written!

"The Crucible" presents another powerful and popular story. It uses the Salem Village witch trials as a not too subtle commentary on the HUAC hearings, where Miller "refused to name names" as is commonly noted. The drama is a strong one and again uses the notion of repressed
sexuality as the heat that starts the fire and then fans into a wildfire of fear and persecution that results in awful executions. Of course, this play only uses the names and some of the broad gestures of the lives of those people. The history of the Salem Village trials is quite different (and actually more interesting) than the play as is the actual history of the HUAC, McCarthy, and spying by Communists and their sympathizers in the U.S. government. However, just as this play has become the "history" of the witch trials, it is also a popular understanding of the oppression of political minorities. Again, this kind of manipulation is powerful and probably expresses Miller's honest belief and understanding (as does his adaptation of Isben's "Enemy of the People" included in this volume), however it is also an example of how art can actually get in the way of understanding by being so effective.

"Death of a Salesman" is clearly Miller's masterpiece and it has held the stage ever since its premier. Here Miller uses shifting perspective that almost sings a song about a proud insignificant man whose life is ending in confusion and pain. It is a fine expression of familial misunderstanding and an inability to move past and forgive hurt. To make this into some kind of universal story of how life is or pointing towards some kind of societal change is to cheapen this hymn for specific kind of man. Still, this play resonates deeply in people and its power cannot be denied. However, if you begin analyzing Willy's choices, he and Biff are quite easy to criticize. Hap is as irrelevant as his mother finally notes, and why the wife wasn't more active sooner remains a mystery. Willy's friend, Charley, not only provides Willy's great eulogy; he is also an example of a patient and great friend who constantly reached out to Willy only to be blocked by Willy's pride.

This is a fine collection of important plays. Whether you end up taking Miller's art into your heart is a deeply personal choice. However, it is really impossible to become literate in American letters without knowing these works and thinking about them in a serious way. While I find the note of despair too pervasive and too heavy for my own sense of life, I respect Miller's skill and deep commitment to his art. He is an important and significant playwright whose works deserve to be read and performed.

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