

MILLER AT 75

Arthur Miller who notches up three quarters of a century in October, talks to Gerard Raymond about the productions this year in the UK to celebrate his 75th

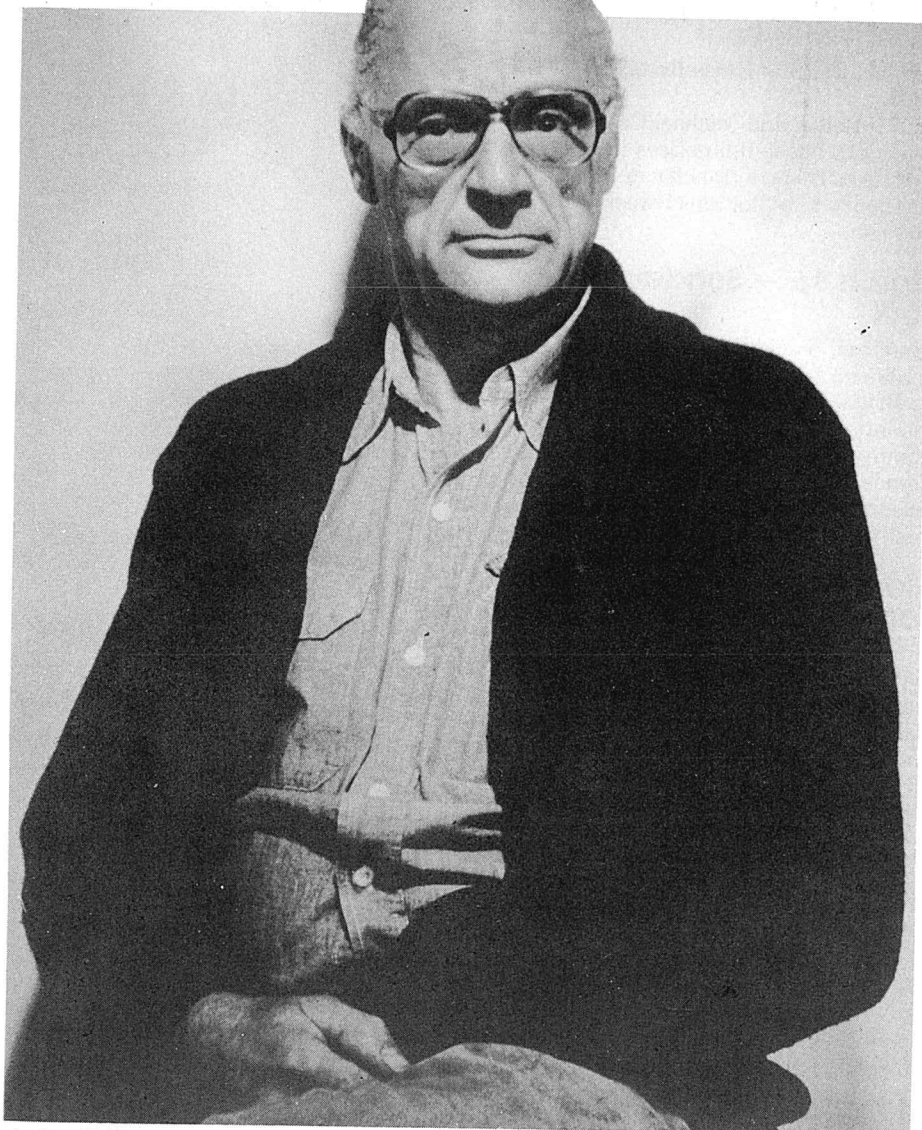
Why is the playwright who has often been described as the American Ibsen produced more often in London than in New York? 'It's because we don't have any theatre here in New York,' Arthur Miller explains with some resignation. 'We have shows and that's not the same thing at all. In London the whole history of drama is on all the time'.

For a decade between 1944 and 1954 Miller was one of the dominating influences of the New York theatre scene. His work is still constantly produced in regional theatres across America, but there were only four major revivals of Miller's plays in New York during the 'eighties. In London's subsidised climate it is possible for the work of a major artist to be sustained, by both critics and audiences, even when it is not commercially viable. In the next few months the Young Vic's current revival of *The Price* will be followed at the National with the British premiere of *After the Fall* and a revival of *The Crucible*. Miller's rarely performed first play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), will make its English debut at the Bristol Old Vic.

Miller's last hit in New York was *The Price* in 1968. Since then critics turned against him, so much so that his recent plays like *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (produced at the RSC in 1986) and *Two-Way Mirror* (The Young Vic, 1989) have still to be produced in New York. In his autobiography, *Timebends: A Life*, published three years ago, Miller bitterly reflected on the plight of American playwrights in their own home: 'the celebratory embraces soon followed by rejection and contempt . . . for any playwright who takes risks and does not comfortably repeat himself.'

'I generally have had pretty good luck in London,' the playwright comments, adding, 'they do them very well, their productions have been extraordinary.' The Young Vic, who present *The Price* under David Thacker's direction this month, is highly regarded by Miller. 'I like the atmosphere in the place, which is one of devoted work. They are as poor as church mice but they have a hard-working, practical attitude toward the theatre. They are really trying to do modern work that has something to say to all citizens, not just specialists. I like that attitude.'

Young Vic director David Thacker is a great fan of Miller's work. He directed *The Crucible* in 1985/6, *Two-Way*



Arthur Miller who will be 75 in October — an event celebrated with a rash of revivals at the Young Vic, National and Bristol Old Vic. Photo: Inge Morath

Mirror, a double bill starring Helen Mirren and Bob Peck, last year and the much acclaimed 1988 production of Miller's adaptation of Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*. Miller appreciates Thacker's uncluttered style and his ability to make the classics accessible to a wide audience. 'That's what I call modern. If he sees two points he makes a straight line between them. That's a relief, a breath of fresh air. He has got a good architectural sense as a director. He is always trying to dig into a play to find its inner connections. From a playwright's viewpoint that is wonderful.'

'The Price is about survivors,' Miller explains. In the play two estranged brothers confront each other, examining the choices they made in their youth. The author says it is a twin play to *After the Fall*, which will receive its British premiere at the Olivier in April. *After the Fall* opened in New York in 1964 generating a controversy because many people felt the playwright was exorcising the ghost of his ex-wife. 'It is not about Marilyn Monroe,' Miller

asserts. 'It is about the place of the survivor in the world he inherits and how he relates to those who didn't survive. What do we do with the Holocaust in our memories? What are the time-bombs left behind in this world by cataclysms that we live through every month?' The play will be directed by Michael Blakemore who returns to the National after an absence of 14 years.

Later in the year Howard Davies will direct *The Crucible* in the Cottesloe. The play, you will recall, is set in seventeenth century Massachusetts during the Salem witch trials but, as it was clear when it was first produced in 1953, it is a powerful allegory of the red-baiting McCarthy era. Yet as Miller found at a recent regional theatre revival of the play in the US it is 'thoroughly contemporary. There is nothing that needs to be added.' Indeed with its remarkable scenes of mass hysteria and paranoia the play possesses a universal significance, transcending the specific evil it depicts.

Miller's *The Man Who Had All The*

Luck, which Paul Unwin will direct at the Bristol Old Vic, is the only play he acknowledges which carries 'the freight of its period'. His first work as a professional playwright, it flopped on Broadway in 1944 after four performances, nevertheless winning for the author the Theatre Guild National Prize. The play is about a garage mechanic who prospers in both business and in private life but who distrusts his extraordinary good fortune and is convinced things must sometime go wrong. 'It was written at a time when Hitlerism was about to strike in Europe and some of us were really worried that it was going to wound the West,' Miller explains. 'The moral issue of the civilian helplessness of the West at that time is in the play.'

American audiences in London frequently complain they find faulty accents and inaccurate details distracting in British productions of American plays. (As a matter of fact the converse is true for British visitors to New York as well). Miller generally does not get involved with the London

productions unless he is invited by the director. 'I don't really want to oversee anything. I stay around for four or five days at most. What I can do, and what I have done with some good effect, is simply come in when the production is pretty well formed and quickly clear up any misrepresentation of any kind.'

With so many British productions of his plays in the works, does Miller have any concerns that the actors will not get the accents right? 'Oh, they never will. Why should they spend all that time imitating some accent? It is ridiculous. There is no virtue in simply repeating or miming some speech pattern. I don't care about that. I care about the spirit of the work. If they can get that, then it's worth doing.'

He refers in particular to Alan Ayckbourn's memorable 1987 National Theatre production of *A View from the Bridge*: 'the actors spoke in a rhythm which had absolutely nothing to do with the naturalistic rhythm of speech. The play was spoken like music, fast and slow according to considerations other than the customary way of saying those

lines. It was done in accents which don't exist on heaven or earth because they didn't know the New York Italian accent. But it was terrific, marvellous. The set could not exist in reality but it certainly could work on the stage gorgeously. I couldn't be happier.'

Miller is very pleased to find that plays he wrote 20 and 30 years ago hold up very well in revivals. 'I may be mistaken, but I find what I have written and the way I have approached it, with very few moments that are exceptional, are not anachronistic in any way.' Furthermore, even if the accents are unknown, and, like *The Crucible*, the events are specifically American, Miller's plays clearly do not lose their power or their contemporaneity when they cross the Atlantic. To Miller's detractors who find him outdated and old-fashioned, the success of his plays in London is perhaps his best vindication. 'History doesn't give prizes for how up-to-date a work is, or seems to be,' he once remarked, 'it only gives prizes for what seems to illuminate the human condition.'

David Thacker's production at the Young Vic of *The Price* with Bob Peck, Alan MacNaughton and David Calder. Photo: Gordon Rainsford

