

AUTHOR, AUTHOR

by Gerard Raymond



Dustin Hoffman and Arthur Miller during the filming of *Death of a Salesman*.

Barry Welcher

Bending Time With Arthur Miller

The playwright's new autobiography, Timebends, led him to explore his past, and come to terms with his present

Even Arthur Miller's detractors would admit that he is one of the most influential playwrights this country has produced. His autobiography, *Timebends: A Life*, which was published at the end of last year by Grove Press, is a fascinating glimpse into the mind of the 72 year-old artist. In his stage directions for his play *After the Fall* (1964), he described the effect he wanted as the "surging, flitting, instantaneousness of a mind questing over its own surfaces and into its depths." That effect is also found in *Timebends*, as Miller leads us on a journey through his memories and through time. The book took him three years to complete, with breaks in between to complete two one-act plays—presented as *Danger: Memory!* at Lincoln Center in 1987—and a new screenplay, which is scheduled to begin shooting in the spring. In a recent interview with *TheaterWeek*, Miller discussed

the book, his views on the theater, his art, and his concerns.

Gerard Raymond: *Timebends* has a certain stream-of-consciousness feel to it as it traverses back and forth through your life. Was that planned?

Arthur Miller: Well, I didn't plan it, frankly. I found that it was forming itself. I had no preconceived idea, I just hung loose to see what form it was going to be. I had no interest in writing some chronological tale, simply because that form itself has no appeal for me.

Did you refer to diaries and notes to jog your memory along?

First of all, I didn't keep diaries in a systematic way. I kept journals, which were spasmodic. However, where I did have any diaries, oddly enough, what was in there was

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tries to interpret what that communication is saying to us, and compares it to what the line of the party is at the moment. Whether it advances that line, retards it, or contradicts it, and so on. I've talked to Chinese actors who have despaired of the theater for this reason. What they thirsted for was a critic who would have aesthetic standards, rather than political, sociological, and psychological ones. What we have is the obverse. We have, by and large, critics who say, "Well, I was entertained." What this thing is about, why anybody bothered to write it or act in it, is strictly speaking not their business. I don't know which is worse.

In the book, you take a more favorable view towards the London critics than to New York critics.

Only because there are so many of them. You see, there is no one newspaper in England that decides the fate of the theater. I would never have made one remark about a critic if there had been many of them here in New York. And, indeed, I never did, while there were many of them. But now we have a real problem which, as I say in my book, the *Times* recognized when it first occurred in 1967 [when the *Herald Tribune* closed down], but has since not mentioned again. It is not something they invented, but the fact remains that there is this overwhelming and crushing influence if a single newspaper. I don't care who the reviewer is, this is not a good thing.

With regard to the plight of playwrights in this country, you take a somewhat fatalistic attitude: "The story of American playwrights is awfully repetitious—the celebratory embraces soon followed by rejection or contempt, and this without exception for any playwright who takes risks and does not comfortably repeat himself."

It's partly the consequence, incidentally, of the fact that our theater does not continuously produce the past, or give us any sense of the past. So all we know is what the man did lately. This is not typically American, but it is most obviously. It is clearly a part of our culture.

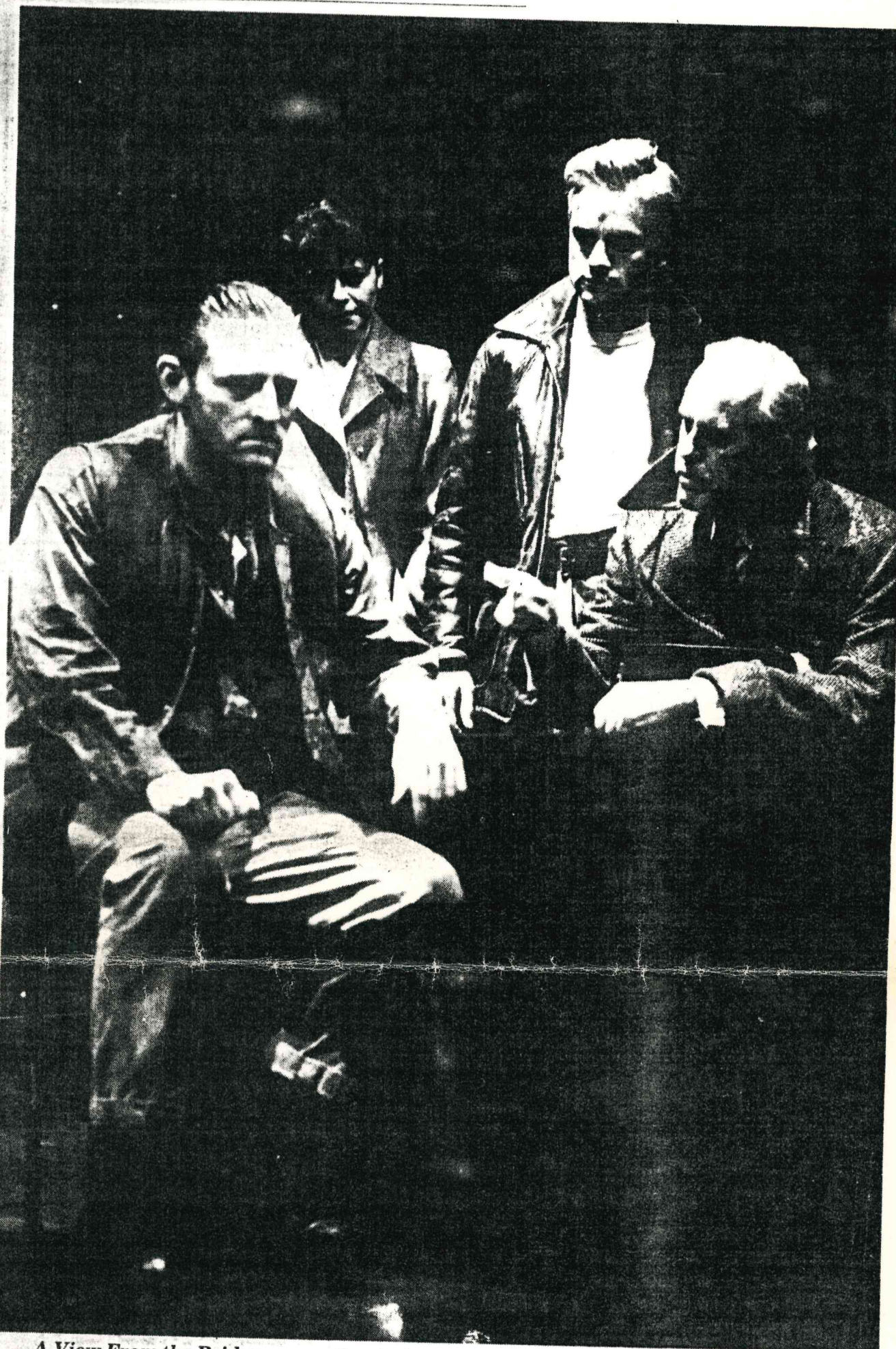
You have had your share of rejection, and your plays have been accused of being dated.

Well, I can only say that they are produced more now than they ever were. After all, you read a book that's a hundred years old, it either contains some light upon the human condition, or it is not of great interest. As long as that's the case, the work is alive. I don't care how avant garde it may seem. History doesn't give prizes for how up to date a work is, or seems to be. It only gives prizes for what seems to illuminate the human condition.

What are you working on at present?

I just finished a screenplay called *Almost Everybody Wins*. It's about an obsessive relationship between a detective and a woman. He is both sure and totally unsure that she is a key to a crime. It's got to do with what we think is real and what might be real, and whether there is such a thing as real. As Nabokov said, "When we use the word 'real,' put quotation marks around it." I had a long play, which I suspended when I went to work on the book, and I may go back to that. I'm sort of reconsidering at the moment, I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do next.

To get back to your book, one gets the feeling at the end that you have achieved tranquility and peace of mind through your "bending" of time. You describe your realization of "the first truth":



Nobby Clark

A View From the Bridge, currently playing at the National Theater in London.

*that "We are all connected... Even the trees." Was it the writing of *Timebends* that brought you to this point?*

The writing did solidify that concept. Because I realized, for good or ill, I was committing these things. They weren't just happening to me. We are constantly thinking of ourselves as being on the passive side of existence. An existence, rather like being in a stream or an ocean; a vast force in which you are moved by that force. But the fact is that you are doing, rather than moving. But we are unaware of this—it's like trying to see your own ears. I became more aware as I wrote the book. □

"I always used to ask, however, who directed Ibsen, or who directed Strindberg?"

almost always useless. The real engraving of memory was already there. I decided early on that I would go searching through journals and so on only if I was following some theme and I wanted to corroborate a time or a person. More often than not, I would not find what I was looking for. The only virtues of a journal I found in this work are that it gives one an on-the-spot sense of what it was like to confront a moment in time, and it revived my naiveté. Whenever I was writing about the past, I tried not to know so much about what was going to happen. And looking at a diary or a journal, you do get that sense again, of the future being an unknown.

In the form in which the book has emerged, the lack of straight chronology sometimes creates gaps and seems to give certain characters and incidents less attention than others. Did you find this a problem?

The book is about the forces that go into forming the person, rather than objective descriptions or documents. It's an arguable problem. In a novel, perhaps it would have been possible to follow all the characters around, but I chose to settle it this way. I could probably start at the same point—on the floor looking up at my mother—and go on for another 600 pages and come up with an entirely different book. Because, to be sure, one filters out an enormous amount, but in writing this book, I think I recalled a lot more than I normally would. At some juncture in my life, all the people in the book exercised some important influence.

You make a wonderful comment about your mother, the earliest influence in your life, that she had "a talent for being contemporary. To keep becoming, always to stay involved in transition. . . ." Do you aspire to that quality as well?

Well, I am always trying to find out where I am in time; that is, what is new. I'm very interested in that. I can't pretend to be perennial, to be 40 years younger than I am. But I am interested in how it all develops. How that big snake decides to turn and how it winds itself through time. I've said in another context that the tragic form is deeply linked with time in my mind. That is, it's the story of how the birds came home to roost. Somebody commits a deed or an act thirty years in the past with a certain intention, and the act returns—though with a completely different intention—but the man is held responsible for it and it might even destroy him. The Greeks were constantly laboring the point. The continuity, rather than the discontinuity, is important.

In your book you point out that Americans lack a "real continuity with the past." In recent times, your plays have been produced more often across the Atlantic than here. For example, there is the current National Theater production of A View from the Bridge, there are the premieres of An American Clock at Birmingham and the National Theater, The Archbishop's Ceiling at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and a forthcoming production of Danger: Memory!

I think the problem is fairly simple. We simply cannot afford to produce plays in New York. Where there are theaters in America that are, relatively speaking, non-commercial, my plays are on all the time; and so are Tennessee Williams's, Eugene O'Neill's, and everybody else's. It's not just me, it's everybody who is more than twenty five years of age. You see, we don't have an art theater, a true repertory

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PLAYS

All My Sons
 Death of a Salesman
 An Enemy of the People (adaptation)
 The Crucible
 A Memory of Two Mondays
 A View from the Bridge
 After the Fall
 Incident at Vichy
 The Price
 The Creation of the World and Other Business
 The Archbishop's Ceiling
 The American Clock
 Danger: Memory!

SCREENPLAYS

The Misfits
 Playing for Time
 Almost Everybody Wins

NOVEL

Focus

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Timebends: A Life

STORIES

I Don't Need You Anymore

REPORTAGE

Situation Normal

FOR CHILDREN

Jane's Blanket

WITH INGE MORATH

In Russia
 In the Country
 Chinese Encounters
 "Salesman" in Beijing

COLLECTIONS

Arthur Miller's Collected Plays
 The Portable Arthur Miller
 The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller

theater; the kind of theater you find in London. In London, the whole history of drama is on all the time. We don't have a non-commercial theater that would be able and willing to mount expensive productions and revivals for a limited period of time. *A View from the Bridge*, it happens, was so popular that they moved it to the West End, where it is a regular commercial production now. But they don't expect that to happen, it's just a bonus which occurs every few years with some productions. It would certainly not have been done in London if there were only a West End, only commercial theater. People should be asking why we don't have a theater here which is capable of doing this kind of thing.

I have a production of *Death of a Salesman* which is opening shortly in Paris with Francois Perrier, one of their best actors. He is probably going to play the role for about three months only, but that's okay. We can't do that here. There are a few theaters like the one at Lincoln Center, that are organizing themselves so that they are capable of doing this. But they can't

make any money—and they don't expect to.

Was the commercial theater in New York in the Forties and Fifties any different from the way it is today?

It was the same story. As far as I can see, there was only one basic difference, and that was, by custom and as a result of the economy, that the ticket was within the reach of far more people. You could be a high school teacher and go to the theater then. It's pretty difficult to do that now. The habit of theater still existed. There was also a tradition, which was still unbroken, that people, by and large, still expected to confront larger issues in the theater, and not simply diversion. You see, theater was, 40, 50, 60 plays going on all the time. By far the majority of them were inconsequential things, but the point is that you could get more shots at it. There was more activity going on. . . .

So the chances of something good coming out of it. . . .

. . . were greater. I find that theater today has been trivialized. The number of films, for example, that have attempted to deal in a mature, serious way with serious human situations is far greater, especially in the last ten years.

You wrote in Timebends that "Great drama is great questions, or it is nothing but technique."

Well, we are in the hands of a lot of technique, and it is justified by bored people as being a distraction, a diversion, which is also a way of escaping the hard questions.

You also mentioned that in the Forties and Fifties, the playwright was "king of the hill" and not the star actor or director. This is not the case today.

It's okay for the theater, but bad for drama. Theater can be any number of things: A magician doing tricks is theater. But a drama is a drama, a comedy is a comedy. The subjection of the playwright over these last 20 years or more has been a disservice. You see, the best directors, such as Elia Kazan [*All My Sons* (1947), *Death of A Salesman* (1949), *After the Fall* (1964)], Marty Ritt [*A View from the Bridge* (1955)], and even maniacs like Jed Harris [*The Crucible* (1953)], used to say that they were proud of the fact that they had made a body of words come alive on stage. Implicit in that was that they were serving the script. The idea that a director would impose an entirely new concept on a work, substantially changing the tone, the meaning or the circumstances of that work, would have been embarrassing. Even though it did happen, of course, they would have been at pains to deny it. There were important directors in the past, both here, in Europe, and in Russia, who did exactly that. I always used to ask, however, who directed Ibsen, or who directed Strindberg? We know who directed Chekhov, but Chekhov was always complaining about Stanislavski. As a matter of fact, it is actually due to the Stanislavski mentality that a lot of this has happened.

You don't seem to hold a very high opinion of critics in general. Do you see a need for critics? Can they help a playwright?

Kenneth Tynan, I thought he shed light. But you ask if we need critics. . . . I directed *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, where there are no critics. What they have instead are newspaper reports about what the play means. The play is a form of philosophical, political, sociological, psychological communication and the reporter