The Power of Denial

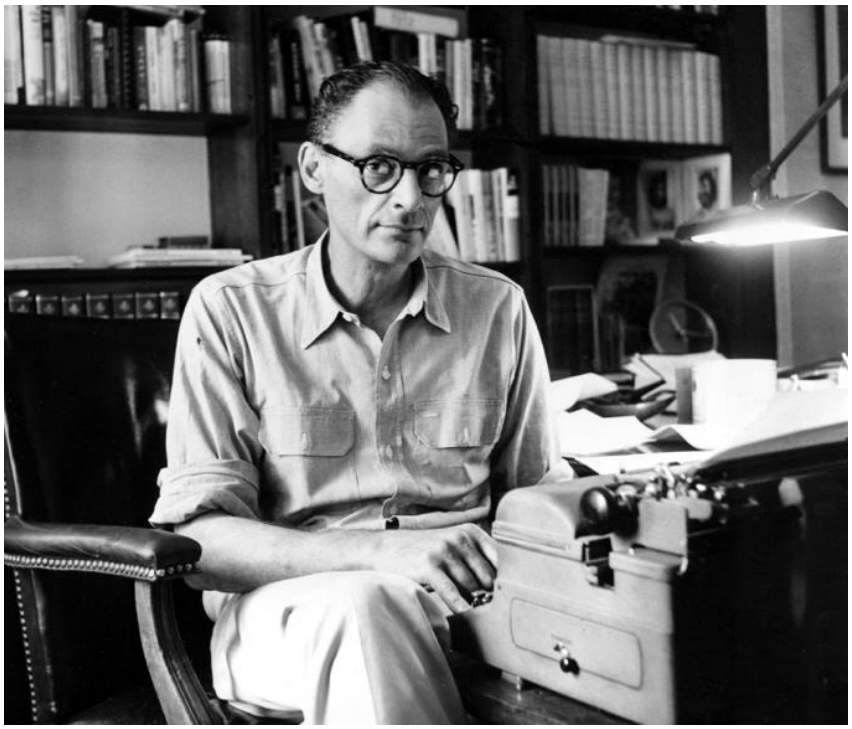
Arthur Miller's Life and Times

By Jerry James

(This essay first appeared—in a slightly different form—in the supporting materials for *Death of a Salesman,* January 2022)

"I have never been able to separate public and private. The way you live your life has consequences for the way everyone else lives his life."

—Arthur Miller



Arthur Miller (1915-2005)

The Great Depression of the 1930s made Arthur Miller who he was. It made him a titan of mid-20th century theatre, a champion of liberal causes and a man who risked prison by refusing to name names to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).

It also made him emotionally constricted, self-centered and—for one whose plays insisted that attention must be paid—remarkably able to deny reality when it was useful.

Drawing on his Depression experiences, his best plays feature a father with a failure in his past—a failure whose existence has long been denied—and a pair of brothers, one favored and one not. Arthur Miller escaped the Depression. But at what cost?

Childhood



Arthur Miller and his mother

Arthur Asher Miller was born into a well-off Manhattan Jewish family on October 17, 1915. His father Isadore owned Miltex Coat & Suit. Young Arty was an indifferent student, unlike his brother Kermit, three years his senior. Then came the Crash of '29, two weeks after Arty's bar mitzvah. Although Isadore Miller kept his firm, Kermit had to drop out of college to work in it. The family was forced to move to Gravesend, far out in Brooklyn. There, Arty, working at odd jobs, took in the lessons that accompanied failure to succeed under capitalism.

His schoolwork continued to be mediocre, and after graduation, Arty took a job in a warehouse. But he also applied to the University of Michigan. (A neighbor went there.) He was summarily rejected. For most young men of the era, that would have ended things. Arty, however, denied the rejection. He wrote a letter to the Dean of Admissions, asking for a chance. The Dean relented, and Arty Miller's life was changed. But, according to Martin Gottfried, in the back of Miller's mind, there always remained the nagging guilt that he had fled "his ruined father, his devastated mother and his sacrificial brother."

The Young Writer

Art Miller arrived at college a year older than most of his classmates. As he worked three jobs to pay his way, he noticed that every year, Michigan offered the Hopwood Prize (in cash) in various writing disciplines. In his second year, despite never having written a play, Art decided he would compete for the prize in playwriting. A play "seemed more tangible," he later said. *No Villain*, heavily influenced by Clifford Odets, won $250 ($6,025 today) in 1936. The next year, aided by a professor, he won New York's Theatre Guild Bureau of New Plays prize of $1,250 ($29,078 today) with a revised version.

After graduation, Art moved back to Brooklyn. His plays were rejected by producers, so he survived by writing for radio. When the draft threatened, he married his college girlfriend, Mary Slattery. After Pearl Harbor, he took a draft-exempt job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, working nights and writing days. His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) closed after four performances. Devastated, Art promised himself that if his next play failed, he would give up playwrighting. That next play was sent to Elia Kazan.



Arthur, Mary and Jane Miller

Kazan & HUAC

Elia Kazan came up with the leftist Group Theatre in the 1930s, playing roles in plays by Odets. Later success as a Broadway director led to Hollywood. He and Miller shared similar experiences of the Depression and capitalism. Kazan had even been a

member of the Communist Party. Art Miller now presented him with *All My Sons*, suggested by a story Mary's mother had told him. It featured a father with a long-denied failure, a favored son and an unfavored son.



Elia Kazan & Arthur Miller

All My Sons (1947) won the NY Drama Critics Circle Award. The Miller family would never want for money again. Art and Mary bought a home in Brooklyn Heights and a country place in Connecticut. Perhaps feeling guilty about profiting from capitalism, Miller supported many progressive causes, including the 1949 Waldorf World Peace Conference, widely seen as a Communist front.

Miller and Kazan's next play would be *Death of a Salesman,* for which there were several sources. Arty had had a grim summer job, carrying a salesman's samples around the Garment District. Later, Art had an unpleasant encounter with his Uncle Manny, a salesman, outside a Boston theatre. And brother Kermit Miller, having returned from the war with PTSD, became a salesman for the rest of his life.

Of course, the play featured a father with a long-denied failure and two sons, one favored, one not. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) won the Pulitzer Prize. Garson Kanin observed that after the play opened, Art Miller "became *Arthur Miller*." He also denied his past, painting himself as a proletarian born in Harlem, exempt from military service because of a football injury, and speaking with a Brooklyn accent.

There seemed to be no limit to what Kazan and Miller might do. Then came the Red Scare. When Kazan publicly testified before HUAC in April 1952, he named names. Miller would not speak to him again for ten years. Instead, he wrote *The Crucible* (1953). It denounced a literal witch hunt, rather than HUAC's metaphorical one. Miller deftly denied the play was about HUAC by refusing to confirm it was. Today, *The Crucible* is the most produced of Miller's works.

Next came the short version of *A View from the Bridge* (1955). Its main character, Eddie Carbone (whose name echoes Elia Kazan) is an informer with, yes, a long-denied failing. The cast features a pair of brothers. Miller would later expand the play into a full-length.



Miller before HUAC

When Arthur Miller was finally called to testify before HUAC in 1956, he faced a possible year in prison. But he did not name names. Instead, he denied HUAC's power by changing the subject. Meeting with reporters at the lunchtime recess, he announced he was going to marry Marilyn Monroe. Miller would be tried, convicted and sentenced, but on appeal, the sentence would be reduced to a month, suspended.

Marilyn



Marilyn Monroe & Arthur Miller

Numerous books can furnish details on what *Life* called, "The most unusual marriage since the owl and the pussycat." A few facts: In 1951, Elia Kazan introduced Miller to Monroe. In 1955, Mary Miller threw him out. In 1956, Miller and Monroe married.

The Misfits (1961), based on Miller's experiences in Reno while waiting for his divorce from Mary to become final, was written for Monroe. "I just thought it would be a terrific gift for her," he said, "because she'd never had a part in which she was supposed to be taken seriously." Instead, it led to their breakup. In 1961, they divorced. Monroe died in August 1962. For the rest of Miller's life, he would refuse to answer questions about her.

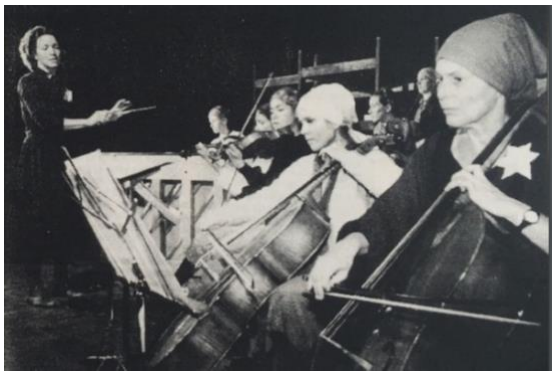
What now for Arthur Miller? His stature grew worldwide. But it would take Elia Kazan to get his next play out of him. How was the rift between them bridged? Did Marilyn Monroe force their hands together at a party? Or was it being offered the honor of writing the play that would open the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center?

After the Fall (1964) was intended as an earnest, honest examination of a man's tortured life. However, that life included characters obviously based on Miller, his wives, and Kazan. Miller denied it in an article for *Life* but to no avail. *After the Fall* became fixed in popular culture as, "That play where Miller spit on Marilyn's grave."

After *After the Fall*

Miller's last play to enter the standard repertoire was *The Price* (1968), written in the father-failure-two-brothers template.

Afterwards, Miller wrote more than a dozen plays, but none were successful in the U.S. However, his CBS teleplay, *Playing for Time* (1980), adapted from a memoir about the Auschwitz Women's Orchestra, won four Emmys, including one for Miller's script. In England, *Death of a Salesman* was voted the second-greatest play in English of the 20th century. (*Waiting for Godot* was first.)



"Playing for Time"

And yet, Miller could never shake Monroe. His last play, *Finishing the Picture* (2004), detailed the struggle to complete a movie being shot in Nevada with a female star who was mentally ill and deeply into drugs. Arthur Miller died on February 10, 2005, denying to the end that the play was anything but fiction. Nothing to do with any real people, living or dead.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.