

International Theatre Institute ITI

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Arthur Miller 1963

Unlike some other attempts to celebrate an institution internationally, this recognition of the theatre in so many countries at the same time has a reality about it. The fact, of course, is that the theatre has almost always been international. So that a special occasion of this sort registers an already existing truth rather than a mere aspiration. The only new significance, it seems to me, is that whereas in former time a Russian play performed, let us say, in America would not echo very far beyond the doors of its theatre, today, as in almost everything we do, the question of man's annihilation is somehow touched upon. In a time when diplomacy and politics have such terribly short and feeble arms, the delicate but sometimes lengthy reach of art must bear the burden of holding together the human community. Whatever can show us that we are still of the same species, is a humanly valuable thing. It is valuable that at this moment tens of thousand of people, perhaps millions, are pausing in their pursuit of entertainment or, hopefully, of a deeper experience, to recognize that on this planetary stage the largest cast in history must find a true catharsis, a release from terror by a saving insight-or the catastrophe is upon us. The anonymous playwright who has dealt us our parts, that great ironist, that incredible humorist, has turned the stage into our world. The thrust of scientific knowledge has turned us all into actors; there is no longer any audience for the great silence that threatens will leave none of us outside its deadly path.

I am speaking, of course, of the contemporary problem of war, but implicit in all the plays that ever mattered is the fate of man. The only difference now, and it is sizeable, is that we rather than an isolated hero who must find the resolution or die. The ultimate irony is that as we feel ourselves in the grip of remorselessly destructive forces we cannot find what we have always demanded of our tragic heroes-a point of reconciliation, a moment of acceptance if not resignation, a split second when we recognize that the cause was not in our stars but in ourselves.

How many of us in these years, even faced from time to time with the real fear of destruction, have been able to repeat Shakespeare's insight, and to say with him that the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves?

That is why we must have a theatre: for above all, the theatre places man in the centre of the world. We must have a point of adventurous stillness, the quiet eye of the storm, from which to witness the age-old revelation of a man challenging God, in the working out of his fate.

The living stage is singularly fitted to do just that. It needs but a man and a candle to make a play. The motion picture and television, it is now clear, must strive to attain the nakedness and simplicity native from the beginning to the dramatic form. For like all machines, like science itself, the version these media give of a man amplifies his material nature, his environment, the very pores of his skin, and as they magnify his most perishable elements they move away from his essence which is unseeable. Indeed, it is precisely the gradual revelation of the unseen and unseeable that is the hidden matrix of dramatic form itself. A play is fine not for what it shows but for its underlying revelation, and the race has always honored exactly those plays which reveal the universal in man, those elements in his nature which in fact are international.

The bizarre fact is that today, as the world appears to be most definitely split politically, art and especially theatre, quite clearly demonstrate that his deeper identity is universal. More and more, the plays that succeed in one country find their mark abroad. The cultures of the world were always parts of one another, but they are growing together in most obvious ways. Yet in critical matters of life and death we face one another like creatures from separate planets. The theatre, unwittingly, and certainly without conscious intention, has proved in our time that the human race, for all its variety of cultures and traditions, is profoundly one. I do not think that at any previous time contemporaneous plays were so quickly understandable in the world. An opening of importance in New-York is quickly repeated in Berlin, Tokyo, London, Athens. And if my own experience is any guide, the reception is not very different from one place to another. In this sense too the metaphor has become fact-all the world is a stage now, and all of it at the same moment.

And it is a good thing that drama, perhaps above all other forms of communication through art, should be the chosen instrument. For on the stage man must act, and against a background of human values. In our time, when futility has overwhelmed the spirit, when a deathly inaction threatens the heart, it is good that we possess a form whose very existence demands action. And if in these past years the so-called anti-drama, as well as the drama of the absurd, would seem to contradict the fundamental role of dramatic form, this is no contradiction but only a paradox. The drama, which eschews purposeful action, reflects the international cul-de-sac, a widespread disbelief in the power of men to affect their own situation, the rejection of all meaning but irony. It looks at man entirely from the tip of the grave, the only inevitability it sees is self-defeat; it reflects man disoriented, knocked silly by the explosion of one cherished system of beliefs after another. These plays are most convincing if performed the day before the world ends. Better still, the day after. But thus far they have had long runs, which means they give people pleasure, the pleasure, perhaps, of acting out vicariously the widespread that nothing we know is really very true.

So that even here the stage betrays inaction and the end of purpose, for if these plays refuse to act their very refusal is a challenge to some of us at least, a challenge to discover an interior order deeper than paralysis which will reflect not only the death in life and the irony of action, but the life even in death; an order-indeed, a new kind of play which will give the human animal no less a hope for freedom and identity than contemporary physics allows matter. The scientist now knows that there is no such thing as an observer; that by observing a phenomenon he changes it. The playwright observing despair has likewise changed it, if only by raising it to our common consciousness. And if the sight of it has not always changed the playwright it must change his audience. For when we witness despair on the stage, and the theatre form it has engendered in our time, we have a right, indeed it is now a scientifically well-founded right, to say, "Yes, but as one of the atoms you the playwright has observed, measured, and weighed, I have to tell you now that the curtain of your eye has fallen-I am just a little different than when you saw me last. I am, even as the other atoms, ever so slightly free."

Which is to say that perhaps the time is near for the theatre of will, the drama whose root is that ever so slight freedom which has nevertheless set man's wonders on the earth, placed his hand upon the stars, and called us together in this and so many other cities to share a hope for man.