

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

by

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EXTRACT

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Arthur Miller died quite recently, in 2005. In his long life [1915 - 2005] he wrote many great plays, some film scripts, short stories and other prose works, and was married three times - most notoriously to Marilyn Monroe.

Though he continued to write all his life, his best period was the late 1940s and the 1950s. In this span of years he wrote those plays for which he will be long remembered: *All My Sons*, 1947; *Death of a Salesman*, 1949; *The Crucible*, 1953 and *A View From The Bridge*, first written as a one-act verse-drama in 1955 and then revised into the form in which we now know it, in 1956.

An enduring theme of Miller's is that of the ordinary man faced with extraordinary circumstances. In these circumstances, who knows how the ordinary man will react? He may not have much in the eyes of the world, but what he does have he prizes highly, and what he has is his good name - his reputation. It is this that lifts such as John Proctor in *The Crucible* from humble and adulterous farmer to tragic hero, as he struggles with his own flawed nature and at last finds his 'honour' and restores his reputation so that his sons can hold their heads up high. It is the loss of his good name, how he will be seen in the eyes of the world, that finishes Eddie Carbone, but not before this ordinary man has achieved something of the stature of a tragic hero.

I think it is interesting that the play was a verse-drama first of all. Some of that spills into its style still, especially in the speeches of Alfieri's which, though written in prose, use a heightened language akin to poetry. Miller's ear for speech, the accuracy with which he renders difficult ideas through the filter of minds that are grappling to grasp things outside of themselves, is extraordinary. The paucity of the vocabulary, the way the characters grope to express themselves, these things become as elliptical and suggestive as verse and achieve a beauty all their own.

Miller had worked in the Brooklyn Navy Shipyard for a couple of years in the 1940s. Earlier, in the Depression years, he had earned the money he needed to attend University, working as a warehouseman. Both these experiences, especially his job in the Shipyard where most of the workers were Italians and Sicilians, fed into the atmosphere of the play. Miller knew these people, through close observation. He listened to the way they spoke and emulated it in his characterisations within the play. He understood their family attitudes and their values. There is nothing far-fetched about this tragedy. It was common practice for Italians to be smuggled in as illegal immigrants. There was poverty in such areas as Brooklyn but there was still greater poverty in Southern Italy and Sicily from where so many of these immigrants came. Miller visited Sicily in the 1940s and was struck by the strings of people waiting around in the town squares, by the fountain, in the hopes of a few hours' work or a job for the day. The play, then, as all Miller's works, comes from personal observation, experience and deeply held values.

Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the synopsis and character sketches that precede this section.

I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind. Often this could be just the most obvious and other subtler interpretations might add richness to the character.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. When experimenting with a character this is especially important. At the end you will need to go through all your work on each character once more, checking that your decisions make sense. People can be contradictory in real life, of course, but not to the point of absurdity!

ACT ONE

THE FIRST STAGE DIRECTIONS

Miller is very precise and detailed in the directions he gives as to the setting of the play. Nonetheless, there are already problems to resolve:

The main action, he says, is in the living-room interior of the Carbone's tenement house.

The outside of the house, which includes a stairway up to the front-door of their apartment that continues up to the apartment above, and the street, must also be shown.

At times a lawyer's office is needed and also a telephone booth.

Though much of the description appears naturalistic, Miller uses the words 'skeletal' and 'representing' within the description, indicating that a fully realised realistic set is not what he has in mind.

Clearly the living-room is the most important area for the majority of the play. It should therefore take up the majority of the stage. Miller mentions a forestage, on which is the desk representative of the lawyer's office. He also indicates the street passing in front of the Carbone's house which leads upstage too and off to the opposite side from the Carbone's. The street leading off in three directions give three useful exits and entrances. In addition, the doors to unseen rooms and the stairway leading up to the unseen apartment above the Carbone's provide various exits and entrances. The setting indicated shows Miller's superior grasp of staging and retaining visual interest for the audience.

In groups, following these clear stage directions, map out on a large sheet of paper how you would suggest all the elements discussed above. Make sure that you have considered the following:

How would you make sure that Alfieri's desk does not intrude on the production at any other time than when it is in use? Would you take it off after the opening and bring it back when needed?

Where would you have the telephone kiosk? Would you bring it on when

needed?

Not mentioned in this opening is a prison cell, which is used near the end. Where would you place this?

It seems that, apart from the streets indicated by ramps in Miller's description, an overspill of the street is needed for the ending in particular and for other moments where crowds of onlookers are used. How would you cater for this need?

How would you suggest both the inner and the outer side of the tenement? How important is the atmosphere of poverty to conjure up, and how could this be done?

What colours might help give atmosphere to the setting?

When answering the above discuss the use of the following as potential answers to problems:

a largeish forestage [bear in mind that too large might cut the audience off from action in the house]

scaffolding [to create outlines, levels, etc.]

a multi-layered set [the use of such as gauzes to exclude parts of the set - such as interiors - whilst the action focuses on exteriors. This idea might need the suggestions of tenement buildings, in outline, painted on the gauzes]

trucks [to bring on such as telephone booth, or even the desk]

a set on many levels [allowing the audience to realise the height of these tenement buildings, their higgledy-piggledy nature, to add interest, to allow development of the poverty angle]

Could the set be developed over the top of the forestage, above the street, thus making sure that the apartment rooms are not set back from the audience? You'd have to be very careful about sightlines for this, and for audience comfort [cricked necks, etc!]

In your groups, come up with both a front-on view of the stage and a bird's eye view. These needn't be particularly artistic but should give some idea of the size of areas of the stage in relation with each other, colour and atmosphere of the setting.

As group homeworks, research the following from the internet or library books of photographs. Different aspects could be given to different groups.

Find:

pictures of the docks at New York's Brooklyn harbour, as close to the 1940's as possible

pictures of downtown New York - tenement buildings, streets, in the 1940s: Brooklyn, Red Hook [an area in Brooklyn]

groupings of people in the 1940s in the USA. These should be groupings in town streets in the poorer areas. Note how people use the dwelling places in these streets: clustering in doorways, moving up and down outside fire-escapes. Look at their clothes, their hats, their body-language.

Having discussed and planned a setting using Miller's descriptions as your basis, discuss how far it is necessary to follow Miller's ideas. Are there other solutions to the multi-locational set?

How might it be to make a more symbolic setting for the play? Bearing in mind that you might change your mind by the time you have finished your studying of the play, what themes and locations are suggested by the play on your preliminary reading? Might you want to emphasise the poverty and narrowness of these people's lives? The presence of the docks and the sea?

Brainstorm the kind of things you find at dockyards; cables and chains, huge storage containers, heavy machinery, huge looming shapes, the presence of the sea, gulls, rats, dark corners....etc. Could any of these elements be woven into your set design? What might be gained by so doing? What lost?

Try designing a setting in your groups again, this time using brooding dark shapes that suggest buildings, narrow alleyways between them. Could the interior of the Carbone's arise out of the opening of dark blocky shapes - like a doll's house opening - or by turning the shape around on a revolve? What would the effect of such a setting be on the audience and the way they viewed the play?

Could you build in other dock-land features, such as the cables and chains? As part of the design, might this help suggest the trapped nature of these people's lives?

Having tried both ways of designing for the play, discuss whether it is possible to meld some aspects of the symbolic approach with the naturalistic approach discussed earlier. Could, for instance, the dockyard looming shapes be a background to the Carbone apartment?

Finally, make a group decision now as to which you are going to go with for the purpose of practical work on the play. This decision of course does not prevent you having your own ideas that you would want to use for answering questions on the play in an examination.

Having made your decision, set out your studio or classroom space as far as you can, so that everyone has a clear idea of where places are in relation to each other. Use such things as chairs with a gap between them to indicate entrances. Use blocks, if you have them, to indicate where raised levels are used. Indicating the space you are working in is an important part of the practical work you will be undertaking. For that reason, it should be done at the beginning of each session that you are working on the play. Make sure that once you are satisfied with the use of space, you all jot down where the front room, street, Alfieri's office, etc, are located. Everyone needs to be clear on this.

ALFIERI'S OPENING SPEECH [Pages 3-4 Heinemann; 11-13 Penguin]

Louis and Mike, two longshoremen - that is to say, two casual dockland labourers - are 'pitching coins against the building on the left'. How you do this will depend very much on how far you have gone down the realistic route in your set design. Presumably, pitching coins is a kind of game of chance. The two players decide on heads or tails and whichever way up the coin falls will dictate who wins it.

What does this opening suggest to the audience? Poverty? Idleness? What could be the attitude of the players?

Try out the game [which could be played like jacks if you prefer] with the players:

noisy and raucous - laughing and joking with each other

grim and silent, the two men watchful and suspicious, as if always expecting trouble

lackadaisical, uncaring - the game played without any real heart, out of nothing better to do

Discuss the different atmospheres created by each opening. Then bring Alfieri's entrance in. How would the different attitudes affect the way the men nod to Alfieri? Which gives the best focus on the entrance and leads us into some understanding of Alfieri's standing in the community? Bear in mind that Alfieri himself says 'You see how uneasily they nod to me?'

Alfieri's speech acts as a prologue to the play and prepares us for the tragedy to come. Despite dwelling on the area and painting a picture for us of the type of people living in it, the conclusion of the speech is that this tragedy is as timeless and as inevitable as anything written by the ancient Greeks. By lifting the tragic hero, Eddie Carbone, out of his time and place and linking him with the ancient tragedies, we are invited to see him as a much larger than life character. Alfieri gives him a stature, almost a grandeur, that might appear strangely at odds with the poverty of the setting. But it is, of course, quite deliberate. Miller specialises in making genuine tragic heroes - flawed human beings that we feel a sympathetic link with - out of the most ordinary individuals: a travelling salesman in *Death of a Salesman*, an adulterous farmer in *The Crucible*, and here a docker, a longshoreman.

The best Greek tragedy was, according to Aristotle, written according to a number of rules. The three Unities - that of Time, Place and Action - which serve to magnify the emotional impact of a play, only partially apply to *A View from the Bridge*. Nearly all of the play takes place in one location - Unity of Place. Unity of Time is not adhered to: the play takes place over some weeks. Unity of Action is the concentration on one plot to the exclusion of all others. Shakespeare, for instance, often has a number of subplots going so does not adhere to this tragic principle. In *A View from the Bridge* the concentration on the character and motivation of Eddie Carbone gives the play all its driving force and its intensity - the inevitable unrolling of events towards a tragic conclusion that Aristotle means by Unity of Action. Most of all, Eddie Carbone fits the idea of the tragic hero in all but one way: he is not a king or general - a great man - like the heroes of Greek tragedy. But there is a kind of dignity about him; he is proud and honest and values his reputation. He is likeable and that is important. For the audience to feel for his fate, there has to be a sympathetic link with him as a person. And finally, he is flawed, as all tragic heroes are supposed to be. Eddie's flaws are his inability to face up to his possessive, even his sexual, feelings for the niece he has brought up and his pride, which will not allow him to back down.

Alfieri acts like a Chorus - a figure both inside and outside of the action. The speech helps to point out his role as an outsider: he is a lawyer, his wife considers he could work for a better class of clientele, for instance. Are there other ways of opening the play that might underline both the fact that he is outside the action and the other important fact that the Prologue shows one time and then flips us back into the past?

Alfieri already knows what happens in this story and hints at its tragedy, a device familiar to those who study Brecht. Knowing that the play is a tragedy and that Eddie Carbone is the tragic hero, we are invited to concentrate on WHY the tragedy happens rather than being sucked into the excitement of experiencing the whole thing in the here and now, as if happening for the first time before our eyes.

Try some alternative ways of opening the play:

With more than just the two longshoremen - a crowd of people, that could even include Beatrice and Catherine in the house and Eddie entering from the upstage area of the street, coming home from the docks. As Alfieri enters, everyone freezes. He passes by the two longshoremen, who follow him with their eyes and then freeze. This would emphasise Alfieri as part of the community and also as the outsider of whom they are suspicious. The freezing would emphasise the fact that this is a story being told - it is in the past.

As Miller has written, i.e. with just Mike and Louis - but other characters in position seen in shadow only. The pair only are lit, light spilling slightly into the surrounding street. Changing the light and bringing shadowy figures into sudden focus after Alfieri has finished his speech would once again emphasise the time-change. The uneasy look given to the lawyer by the two

longshoremen are thus in the future, as it were - after the tragedy, and give added weight to that - especially if the ending takes us back to this exact moment. After the speech is finished, the lighting changes, lightens and brightens to light the shadowy figures of the past and to flip Mike and Louis back into that time.

Freezing the two longshoremen on the uneasy looks, so that Alfieri can start his speech and comment on the humour of their attitude to him as he walks perhaps between them, or as he passes. This emphasises his separateness from the action too. In this version the shadow figure of Eddie is also there with the longshoremen though not lit till towards the end of the speech when, frozen with his mates, Alfieri can walk up to him and point him out to us.

Experiment with these and any other ideas that might occur to you and discuss the different findings you have made.

Working in groups, pick out all the parts of the speech that create an impression of Alfieri that might be useful for a character study of him. How fully drawn a character should he be? I think it is clear that he is to some extent a cipher, who points out some of the main themes of the play to us but he is also given a physicalisation by Miller and if his physical description seems somewhat typical, what he says shows that he is not a typical lawyer in his insistence on working with the poorer end of society. Untypical, too, is his sensitivity to things that can only be hinted at, half-known -- the stuff which makes up legend and which links human kind with our past and with archetypes.

Experiment with this man's physicalisation now. He is 'portly' but not fat - a belly perhaps. He is in his fifties. The speech tells us that he is relaxed about the surroundings in which he works - he no longer has a gun in his desk. The first thing he does when reaching his desk is to remove his hat and run his fingers through his hair - perhaps this is a personal habit - something he always does.

From these clues and any others you may have found, move Alfieri down the street and into his office. Take off his hat. Sit him in his office chair. Let him busy himself around his office for the moment. Concentrate on giving him a centre of weight, perhaps in the belly and see if that helps you. What does centring the weight at the base of the belly do to the way you carry your shoulders, angle your back? Try other weight centres too - such as further back in the bottom and decide which you like most.

Now experiment with the voice. He moved from Italy when he was 25, so there may still be a colouring of an Italian accent - not overdone though. Perhaps his Italian background will spill over into gestures - the characteristic shrugs and hand movements of the Latin. However he is thoughtful - not over-excitabile - so this may slow his speech down. And he is good-humoured which may give a lightness to his tone, a smiling wryness.

Improvise a brief interchange with Mike and Louis now, to feel your way into the voice and the further physicalisation of the character. There is not much work to be had at the moment and Mike and Louis have not found anything today. Alfieri asks them about this and politely after their families. The two longshoremen's responses are cagey, giving as little as possible away. The scene ends as Alfieri makes his way to his office.

Next take any of the first part of the speech trying out the voice and gestures that you have found.

The theme of Justice is introduced by Alfieri. Look at the part of the speech - in the third paragraph - where Justice is first mentioned. **At the end of that paragraph, what is**