

Ivona Mišterová

Drama and Democracy: An Exploration of Democracy in Arthur Miller's Plays on Pilsen Stages¹

Abstract:

*The aim of this article is to analyse the rendition of democracy in Miller's plays performed on Pilsen stages in terms of the significant social and political events and developments in the second half of the 20th century. Not long after World War II, the formerly tense wartime atmosphere seemed to come back to life on the stage. To state a particular instance, *All My Sons*, produced on September 25, 1948 under the direction of Zdeněk Hofbauer with Ota Ornest's translation, not only mirrored the wartime era, but, in some respects, also anticipated the era that was to come. The next production of a play by Miller, *A View from the Bridge*, under the direction of Jiří Dalík using Jan Grossman's translation, had its premiere only in 1962. It was staged during the directorship of Václav Špidla (1959–1963), whose version of *Macbeth* (1963) established a short, new theatrical era in Pilsen Theatre. During Jan Fišer's directorship (1963–1969), two productions of Miller's plays were staged: *Incident at Vichy* (1965) and *The Crucible* (1967). With respect to the socio-political climate, both interpretations might have anticipated the loosening of the political atmosphere towards the late 1960s, which was nevertheless disrupted by "normalization". It is thus possible to suppose that democracy might have constituted a distinguishing feature of both*

1) This study was supported by the The Czech Science Foundation Project GAČR 405/09/P035.

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stage interpretations, but rather, there appears to be a parallel between The Crucible and the so called Jewish conspiracy within the Czech Communist Party.

The article furthermore aims to prove or disprove whether the aforementioned performances served only to entertain and educate audiences, or to voice objections to the authoritarian regime as well. Finally, the study intends to indicate the extent to which American democratic visions affected Czech theatrical interpretations.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, All My Sons, A View from the Bridge, Incident at Vichy, The Crucible, democracy, World War II, the 1950s state trials, the J.K.Tyl Theatre in Pilsen

Klíčová slova: Arthur Miller, Všichni moji synové, Pohled z mostu, Případ ve Vichy, Čarodějky ze Salemu, demokracie, druhá světová válka, politické procesy z padesátých let, Divadlo J. K. Tyla v Plzni

Arthur Miller's plays have undoubtedly represented a significant segment of Pilsen theatres' repertoire since World War II. The aim of this article is to explore the rendition of democracy in Miller's plays performed on Pilsen stages in terms of the significant social and political events and developments in the second half of the 20th century. In addition, a chronological perspective will be used to argue that the productions of Miller's plays represented both an ideological and tendentious means of distributing information about the *Western* world as well as a subversive element undermining the proclaimed political unity and at the same time announcing the loosening of the political climate in Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s.²

All My Sons

Shortly after the World War II, Czechoslovakia underwent radical social and political changes. The first parliamentary elections since WWII, which took place in late May 1946, demonstrated the increasing influence of the Communist Party, confirmed by the February 1948 Communist *coup d'état* and Klement Gottwald's becoming the first Communist president. Czechoslovakia found itself under a Soviet tutelage and control, resulting in the reversal of the Marshall Plan in 1947 and a systematic Sovietization and communization of the country. Though Stalin labelled Czechoslovakia as a People's Democracy (FAWN, Rick, 2000, p. 14), in reality the society was to be atomized and reconstituted under Communist control. In order to eliminate private ownership, large

companies and agricultural lands were nationalized. Censorship was introduced and religious persecution and staff purges began. A certain political plurality typical of the period immediately after WWII was thus definitely discontinued and Winston Churchill's *Iron Curtain* (*The Sinews of Peace* speech, 1946) descended on Europe both metaphorically and virtually and shaped the development of the former Czechoslovakia for more than forty years.

The first of Miller's plays to be produced, *All My Sons*, was staged in Pilsen on September 25, 1948 under the direction of Zdeněk Hofbauer using Ota Ornest's translation. In the spirit of the post-February 1948 socio-political atmosphere and pro-Communist propaganda, the production became a means of depicting capitalism as "a great social evil" (JK, 1948, p. 5). Familial, social, and psychological aspects of the play were thus eclipsed by a considerable ideological load confronting the prosperous and ideal socialist reality with the destructive nature of capitalism transforming people into "inconsiderate, predatory, and inhuman" beings (JK, 1948, p. 5). In this simplified pattern, Joe Keller (Jaroslav Benátský) was portrayed as a prototype of Western capitalist society, though such perceived from the *socialist* standpoint. Keller hence represented a successful entrepreneur, a kind-hearted yet barefaced man whose humanity and conscience evaporated due to his incessant hunt for dollars. Contrary to Miller's own perception of the play (ABBOTSON, Susan, 2007, p. 45), Keller's death was not a failure of an imperfect individual refusing to accept his own responsibility for his actions, but rather an unavoidable consequence of the destructive power of capitalism. The ideologically biased period review,³ which is to be approached with objectivity and distance, went even further by turning the production into a manifesto and apology of social and political changes in the Czechoslovakia of the time. In the spirit of the Marxist ideology, the review (though it is not entirely evident as to the production itself) literally indicates that "[moral] suasion is not sufficient" and offers a more radical solution: social shifts must be concluded with revolutionary changes and "a scientifically reasoned way to socialism" (JK, 1948, p. 5). Though Miller was apparently an author drawn to Marxism (BIGSBY, Christopher, 2005, p. 77), the period review delimits the multilayered play – and especially the Pilsen stage production through its ideological discourse – into a portrayal of capitalism destroying and devouring its own children. Thus, Joe and Chris's awakened conscience as well as their quests for their selves in the Ibsenite sense of living in truth or lie disappears. Likewise, Keller's emphasis on his own family and business which is to be handed to his sons ("Chris ... Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you." [MILLER, Arthur, 1961, p. 158]) fades out and melds with Keller's profiteering. A certain shift emerges also in Kate Keller's portrayal (Marie Rintová) as a wife and mother hoping for her son's return from war though at the same

2) *The analysis of particular plays is based on period reviews and the DJKT Theatre archival material.*

3) *The period review may be misleading in order to serve the official ideology.*

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time being infected with her husband's business activities. The vision of a well-situated middle-class American family was supported by Antonín Calta's set, which gave the impression of a well-furnished and notably *cold* American ambience (JK, 1948, p. 5). The whole production was marked by a presentiment of dark fatality.

It is almost impossible to grasp and unambiguously judge the 1948 production of *All My Sons*. A persuasive tone of the period review, though possibly misleading and dogmatic in its analysis of the performance, suggests a picture of a peculiar theatrical rendition of Miller's play given the time and place of its staging. It is thus conceivable that the production mediated a simplistic (and unfair) portrayal of American society.

A View from the Bridge

The 1950s were marked by tragic and disgraceful socio-political events. In 1950, Milada Horáková and several other prominent non-Communists were charged with treason and espionage and consequently sentenced to death or life imprisonment. In late 1952, the state trial against the secretary general of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Rudolf Slánský, indicted of Trotskyism and Titoism, represented an intensification of anti-Jewish persecutions throughout the Moscow sphere of influence (COX, John, 2009, p. 151). Slánský and 10 of his 13 "associates" were executed shortly after the trial. In June 1953, the promulgation of currency reform instantaneously provoked a mass protest of thousands of discontent Škoda factory workers in Pilsen, directed against the political establishment. In addition, throughout the 1950s a strict form of socialist realism slowly became the cultural norm. The plots of classical dramatic works were modernized and adapted in order to depict social and political issues.⁴

A View from the Bridge premiered on November 24, 1962 under the direction of Jiří Dalík in Jan Grossman's translation. In a polemic with a Freudian interpretation of the play, though not overemphasizing its social aspects, Dalík staged a depiction of one man's tragedy. Eddie Carbone's (Jiří Chmelař) path to self-destruction predestined by his love for his niece and resulting in the betrayal of his own creed and the people of his own *blood* was communicated through apt comments of the omnipresent Alfieri (Alois Ostr). It was not Eddie's incestuous or semi-incestuous desire, but rather a passion of an adult man for a young woman, that was a determinant factor and driving force of the production. Eddie's emotions, oscillating between love and jealousy towards Catherine, resembled in many aspects Othello's strife-torn and tormented soul. As with Othello, Eddie also listened to a treacherous insinuation, though it was one of his own mind and emotions. Chmelař portrayed Eddie as a "perversely pure" man, whose "eyes were

like tunnels" (FABIAN, František, 1962, p. 3, MILLER, Arthur, 1961, p. 45). Thus, certain ambivalence of Eddie's character, underscored by Alfieri's figurative speech, provoked ambivalent feelings of either sympathy for his actions or trepidation from their sinister consequences. The dominant theme of the production was intentionally underlined by Beatrice's (Netta Deborská) early aging and her sedentary lifestyle. Though a caring and loyal wife, her love was probably too obliging and binding for Eddie. Beatrice was nevertheless an honest woman of a strong character, trying to stop the process of her husband's disaffection and regain his love. It is significant that she eventually gained Eddie's attention at the moment of his death. Marco (Jaroslav Choc), the Italian immigrant and temporary dweller of the Carbone's flat, underwent a considerable transformation from a rigidly disciplined man into a passionate avenger ablaze with the anger and hunger for revenge, not dissimilar to Eddie then. The period review does not comment on the interpretation of the characters of Rodolpho and Catherine, which disrupts the overall presentation of the performance.

Dalík's production was the tragedy of a doomed individual. Together with Christopher Bigsby (2005, p. 207), we can argue that Eddie was a man who had the "wrong dreams and desires" and eventually was faced with his nemesis. Dalík managed to balance both psychological and social aspects of the play appropriately. The social facet was presented especially in the depiction of the grief over the thwarted lives of others. "A great power [of people] was wasted pursuing small goals: longshoremen have been waiting for a torn-up bag with coffee or a broken whiskey container the whole day." (FABIAN, František, 1962, p. 3). The social aspect of the production was marginalized, albeit not omitted. It is thus conceivable that the production did not serve the ideological function which the previous 1948 performance apparently did. Generally, the 1962 version of *A View from the Bridge* offered a somewhat traditional rendition of Miller's play featuring a tension between adulthood and youth, passion and its repression, and the inevitable disaster.

Incident at Vichy

Incident at Vichy premiered on October 17, 1965 under the direction of Václav Hartl in Jan Grossman's translation. In view of any stage production as well as the play itself, its real background, which intensifies its sense, acquires a specific function. The subject matter draws on a true story told by Dr Rudolf Loewenstein, who was hiding from the Nazis in Vichy during World War II. The Jewish psychoanalyst was temporarily taken in and kept with other detainees at the police station where he witnessed how the lucky ones were freed and allowed to leave whereas others were taken away, never to return. Though having false documents and being thus highly jeopardized, Dr Loewenstein was eventually saved through the intervention of a stranger (BIGSBY, Christopher, 2005, p. 248). Based on a true story, Miller's conception of the title protagonist Von Berg was moreover inspired by the Austrian Prince Joseph von Schwarzenberg (Joseph III [1900–1979]),

⁴ In this respect it would be inspiring to explore the production of *Death of a Salesman* that was staged at the National Theatre in Prague in 1959 with Karel Höger and Blanka Waleská.

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who refused to collaborate with the Nazis and spent WWII carrying out manual labour in France. The figure of Von Berg was hence meant to represent both a political resistance as well as a cultural integrity. On the whole, the play aimed to show the destructiveness and absurdity of the Holocaust, though it was rather "the impossibility of understanding something as absolute and irrational as the Holocaust" (BIGSBY, Christopher, 2005, p. 249).

Even twenty years after WWII, the Holocaust was a synonym for the forced Aryanization, mass deportations to concentration camps, the establishment of the Theresienstadt [Terezín] ghetto, and the extermination of the Jewry. Moreover, an unspecified place of temporary detention in 1942 Vichy might have evoked the Petschek Palace in Prague, the then headquarters of the Gestapo, where the resistance members were tortured during the Nazi occupation. Broadly speaking, the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and pursuit might have also reminded the audiences of the considerably publicized state trials of the 1950s.

In an almost Beckettian microcosm, the individual protagonists, deprived not only of their freedom but also of their pasts and social identities, gradually reveal their true selves while waiting to learn their fate. Like Joseph K. in Kafka's *Trial*,⁵ the detained men are not given any reason for their detention, forcing them to speculate about the nature of their assumed crime and *guilt*. Be that their *ethnicity*, which is, however, never acknowledged openly, they are both symbolically and literally damned. Lebeau's question: "Does anybody know anything?" shows a desperate search for some concrete cause of detention other than their Jewishness. In addition, the confinement underscores the unlimited power of the Nazis to detain and interrogate any individual without probable cause. With a closely impending disaster, it is only the *status quo* that matters. The oscillation between awareness and repudiation of the state of affairs is further supplemented with another dimension: the guilt and responsibility of the survivor (BIGSBY, Christopher, 2005, p. 248). In addition, the contempt for the Gypsy, shared by all detainees, implies a cannibalistic projection of moral superiority that is further underlined by Leduc's claim that "even Jews have their Jews" (OTTEN, Terry, 2002, p. 138).

Though the multilayered character of the play allows for various interpretations, it is presumable that the Pilsen production stayed only on the surface of the subject matter, which resulted in a certain flatness of the performance. In her evaluation of the production, the theatre reviewer attributed a certain schematization and lack of drama to Miller's concept of the play (HOLUBOVÁ, Helena, 1965, p. 3). Miller was indeed criticized for creating a medieval morality play with abstract protagonists, or rather schematic prototypes of protagonists (qtd. in BIGSBY, Christopher, 2005, p. 250), which may be,

vice versa, perceived as Miller's intention and a comparative advantage. With regard to the 1965 Pilsen production, Von Berg's (Ladislav Fišer) gradual transformation from a shy man into a decisive man of action especially stands out.

The Crucible

The year 1967 brought some positive changes; the most noticeable of them took place in the field of economy. Central planning underwent decentralization, as Ota Šik's innovative economic reform was applied. Some betterment was perceived in the cultural and social spheres as well. A short period between the years 1967 – 1968 was hence marked by the loosening of the political atmosphere, which was, nevertheless, put to an end when Warsaw Pact forces invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

The Crucible was staged on February 12, 1967 under the direction of Svatošlav Papež using Milan Lukeš's translation. The production, marked by the socio-political atmosphere of the later 1960s, attempted to show that the crime of public terror lies in depriving people of their conscience and selves. Thus, the quest for self-reflection and understanding became the focal point of the production, in which the notion of a man as a "random and helpless being without will and dignity" was disproved (HOLUBOVÁ, Helena, 1967, p. 3). The Salem community members were hence characterized in terms of their humanity, albeit not all of them were human and could have been humanized.

Given the play's historical context, the time and place of its staging acquire a significant importance. The 17th-century Salem witch hunts became an analogy (rather than allegory) not only of McCarthyism, but especially of the 1950s state trials against Milada Horáková and Rudolf Slánský,⁶ during which the so-called anti-establishment conspirators were imprisoned and put to death on treason charges. Drawing on apparent historical parallels, the director skilfully changed this social reality into a personal reality. The climax of the production was thus reached at the very end when John Proctor (Jiří Samek) eventually found his true self and won a moral victory. His liberating words at death's door in response to Hall's desperate utterance that Proctor will hang ("I can. And there's your first marvel, that I can." [MILLER, Arthur, 2003, p. 251]) returned Proctor his dignity and cleansed him entirely of his sin. Proctor's sin of adultery was, however, overshadowed by a more symbolic layer of his own moral quest. It was thus rather the projection of his sin into the hysteric Salem reality which had the effect of Proctor's imprisoning. Proctor's immoral yet entirely concrete act of sexual intercourse outside of his marriage blended with its symbolic interpretation delivered in terms of Proctor's self-quest and search for the moral code of conduct as reverberated in the words of the

5) Terry Otten finds the most striking similarity between Kafka's protagonist and Lebeau as they both share "the existential crisis" (OTTEN, Terry, 2002, p. 136).

6) As David Patterson states, Miller discerns a correlation between the Salem trials, McCarthyism, and the Holocaust (2002, p. 126).

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theatre reviewer Helena Holubová, who, in attempt to finish reverend Hall's sentence (Act IV), grasped the quintessence of the production:

Hall	Man, you will hang. You cannot! (...)
Holubová	You cannot sacrifice your life for your beliefs, lie, but save your life.

(HOLUBOVÁ, Helena, 1967, p. 3)

Proctor's refusal to do so is even more symptomatic of the production as it underlines Proctor's firmness that was not to be undermined or broken by any means. As Harold Bloom puts it (2010, p. 76), *The Crucible* shows how an individual can rise above the conditions surrounding him and transform guilt into responsibility and thereby defeat the determining forces, both within and outside him, that threaten to destroy his identity as well as his humanity. In contrast to Proctor's resolution, Reverend Paris (Jaroslav Choc) only intensified his anger which subsequently increased in proportion to his politeness. Reverend Hall experienced a painful transformation of his fate from an initial genuine faith into eventual damnation. Freeing Elizabeth Proctor from the manacles of Puritan coldness, Eva Wimmerová portrayed Proctor's wife as fair-minded though not cold and reserved. The scenes of hysteria inflamed by Abigail (Renata Olárová) were neither exaggerated nor obscene.

Despite a considerable amount of dialogical contemplation, the production did not evolve into a dramatized philosophical tract, though rather into a plausible reflection of reality. The pursuit for reality was nevertheless disrupted by a sporadic, hasty interpretation. In consequence, the entirely realistic and solid segments blurred with precipitancy and fragmentariness, which caused a certain flatness and amorphousness of the character renditions.

Altogether, it is reasonable to argue that the production retained its political resonance. It had evident relevance to both the state trials in the 1950s as well as to the short period of liberalization in Czechoslovakia at the time. It is conceivable that the performance expressed a call for a greater democracy and most likely indicated a digression from the official ideology.

Conclusion

The four productions of Miller's plays discussed in this article demonstrate a shift in the rendition of the subject matter to a greater democracy in relation to the socio-political events of the time. Following the Communist Party's election victory in 1946 and the communist *coup d'état* in February 1948, theatrical productions of Miller's plays on Pilsen stages can be seen either as interpretive of the official policy or, on the contrary, as subversive of dominant communist ideology. It should be, however, noted that *A View from the Bridge* seemed to have served neither an ideological nor subversive purpose. A shift

in tone of period reviews from an ideologically biased form of reporting to a more veracious account is to be observed as well.

All My Sons (1948) most probably juxtaposed the post 1948 *soi-disant* positive socialist reality against the oppressive complexity of the Western world. The rendering of the *dehumanized* Western society through the magnifying glass of socialism was meant to denounce capitalist powers and help to bring a better understanding of the socio-political changes of the time. Though the portrayal of the scramble for money and its tragic aftermath likely made a powerful impression, it might have also provoked the latent ambivalent feelings accompanying the post-February events.

The next production of a play by Miller, *A View from the Bridge* (1962), was staged during the directorship of Václav Špidla, whose *Macbeth* established a short, new theatrical era in Pilsen Theatre. Unlike *Macbeth*,⁷ which apparently alluded to socio-political issues of the time, *A View from the Bridge* seems to have lacked any ideological or subversive perspective.⁸ Characterized by a thematic unity and clarity, the production explored primarily the love of a grown man for a young woman. A combination of love and passion drove Eddie (Jiří Chmelař) into a jealous obsession he was not able to break out of. Social aspects of the play were hence considerably marginalised.

Incident at Vichy (1965) implied a noticeable resemblance to the Holocaust even twenty years after WWII. The allusion to the brutal grip of the Fascist regime and Nazi persecution was no doubt very impressive. It is, nevertheless, likely that beneath the cloak of Nazi persecution of Jews, the production revealed glimpses of the socio-political reality of the time.⁹ It is thus conceivable that the past experience of the Holocaust combined with the experience of the socialist society to demonstrate the evil of persecution of any individual or group by another group.

Depicting the 17th-century witch hunts, the production of *The Crucible* (1967) apparently drew a parallel with the state trials in 1950s Czechoslovakia. Opposition to and resistance against any misuse of authority thus became the chief concern of the stage interpretation. It is presumable that the struggle for truth which Jiří Samek's Proctor symbolised probably served as a subversive phenomenon. In addition, the production may have implied a fundamental desire for a more just social order. In this sense,

7) In her daring critique, the theatre reviewer Alena Urbanová (qtd. in ŠKANDEROVÁ, Ivona, 2005, p. 94) drew a direct parallel between the Pilsen *Macbeth* and Stalin.

8) With respect to the production of *Macbeth*, it is significant that the period review of *A View from the Bridge* kept the quota of criticism of capitalism within reasonable limits.

9) In addition, the detention and disappearance of people invokes George Orwell's dystopian vision of the world.

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the production reflected a short era of the loosening political climate during the years 1967–1968 until it was disrupted by the “normalization” period.

The brief discussion of stage productions of Miller's plays in Pilsen theatres in the second half of the 20th-century shows that the aforementioned performances served both to entertain and educate audiences as well as to voice objections to the authoritarian regime. In each case, the productions became an effective channel of both pro- as well as anti-establishment communication.

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