THEATER AND POLITICS IN THE USA: ARTHUR MILLER AND BERTOLT BRECHT

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Abstract

This paper examined the relationship between theater, politics, and society through the dramatic work of Arthur Miller and the theatrical ideas of Bertolt Brecht. Particular attention was given to the American social and political context in which Miller developed his dramaturgy, including the Great Depression, the postwar period, and McCarthyism. The analysis considered how plays such as All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, and The Crucible transformed questions of individual responsibility, social pressure, political fear, and the crisis of the American Dream into dramatic conflict. The paper also discussed Brecht's concept of Epic Theater and the alienation effect, through which the spectator was encouraged to maintain a critical distance from the action and to reflect on the social conditions represented on stage. Although Miller and Brecht employed different dramatic strategies, both regarded theater as a medium capable of questioning dominant social values and stimulating public reflection. Miller generally approached political and social tensions through moral, psychological, and family conflicts, whereas Brecht emphasized theatrical distance, historicization, and the active intellectual participation of the audience. The study concluded that their work demonstrates the capacity of modern theater to function not only as artistic expression but also as a space of cultural criticism, political consciousness, and debate about responsibility, power, and social change.

Keywords: political theater; Arthur Miller; Bertolt Brecht; McCarthyism; Epic Theater; social criticism.

Arthur Miller is one of the most famous writers of the twentieth century. He was born in Harlem, New York, on October 17, 1915, the first child of Isidore Miller and Augusta Barnett Miller. His father, a well-known textile merchant, was part of the *Manhattan rag trade company in New York* . When Arthur was still a child, his family moved from Harlem to Brooklyn. The Great Depression, which affected all classes of American society, and the great stock market crash on Wall Street, destroyed the business of his father, Isidore Miller. Even, in this regard, the renowned American theater critic, Michael Ratcliffe, would write in *The Guardian* : "The American crisis of the century caused by the Great Depression influenced all his work. Like Dickens and Ibsen, he learned from his father's financial disaster with the eternal conviction that disaster can strike without warning and that the shackles of social order are too thin to withstand it."[1]

But Arthur Miller would reveal his interest and connection with drama and theater at a very young age, which we also learn from one of his first interviews almost half a century ago when he says: *"When I was 12 years old, I remember my mother* taking me to *the* theater *one afternoon. We lived in* Harlem *and at* that *time there were 2-3 theaters there that were* constantly *giving shows . I remember it was a show that* had *to* do *with a big ship.* I *remember people who* were *drowning on* stage *and they were screaming. For me it was very exciting and entertaining because it was an unusual scene . The rest was with Chinese people, something more entertaining and in the center of New York. I remember that the Chinese had robbed a beautiful blonde. I don't remember anything else and these were the masterpieces that I saw before I sat down and I wrote it myself. But I had read Shakespeare and Ibsen in the meantime. Certainly not much."*[2]

Arthur Miller, during the Great Depression of 1929, would face many difficulties in life, like most other Americans. So he did various jobs that he thought would not only help his family, but also maintain his individual independence. After graduating from high school, Arthur

[1]Ratcliffe, Michael, *The Guardian* , Saturday, February 12, 2005.
[2]Gazeta *Shqip* , Tirana, Published on 25.11.2010

Miller worked in an automobile parts warehouse, which was how he managed to earn the money that would take him to Michigan where he would enroll in university to study journalism and English. What was very important for him is that he would discover his talent for theater quite early and this would turn into a passion, although he initially worked as a newspaper reporter.[3]

He would debut in the theater when he was only 21 years old, while, after graduating in 1938, he would attend a drama competition, on which occasion he would be accepted into the *"Theatre Guild" seminar* [4]*, which* had a special significance in opening new visions on drama and theater for this author. Thus, in one of the competitions of this seminar, in addition to leaving a very good impression, A. Miller would also win one of the prizes that brought a considerable amount of money in the amount of 1,250 American dollars, money that was very important to him in the difficult times that the American nation was going through. The project in which Miller won was led by the producers of the *Theatre Guild* [5]of New York. While, after 1938 Arthur Miller will join the *Federal Theatre Project* (FTP) [6].

This project was founded by former US President Franklin Roosevelt in 1935 as part of the *New Deal* as a creative effort against the Great Depression in the country. The FTP was also a deliberate attempt to help theater professionals. In 1936, Elmer Rice was appointed head of the FTP in New York, which would employ 5,385 theater artists in this great city. As a result, over the next three years, more than 12 million people would go to see theater performances.

After this play, Arthur Miller was pointed at as a communist by so-called fanatical American patriots who thought that any criticism, by anyone, that was made, and that targeted American life in one way or another, was in fact provoked and inspired by Sovietism and Moscow. And Miller knew that it was precisely the theater that had not lost its power to disturb the collective conscience, but also that the community had not abandoned its willingness to turn its faults back on the playwright, in which case, for the bad news, they would assume that the messenger was to blame .

For Miller, what was happening in American society, this witch hunt, was evil and terrible. Therefore, he decided to give the theatrical response to the situation himself. Since, as Arthur Miller himself had mentioned in the highly publicized interview of 1966, in his life one of the authors who had left an impression and created influences was Henrik Ibsen. For this reason, we think that it was no coincidence that Miller would choose to dramatize Ibsen's play The *Enemy of the People* , which affirms the shaped courage of a single man who appears ready to oppose the crowd.

In the drama *The Price* (1968), the author's biblical spirit is felt, while in the drama *The Creation of the World and Other Businesses* written in 1973, Miller delves into the roots of human violence. A fresco of American life during the Great Depression has been called the drama *The American Clock* written in 1980. In the teledrama *To Play for Time* written in 1981, Miller brings a derivative of the memories of the former singer Fania Fenelon, interned in Auschwitz, in which art becomes an instrument of survival, along with happiness and guilt. In 2011, Arthur Miller will continue with another drama in which two of her acts are set as if in a drama with themselves, entitled *A Kind of Love Story* and *Elegy for a Lady* . Meanwhile, in 1986 Arthur Miller will write the play: *Dangerous: Memory* , whose inspiration is the age of old age, but with all its splendor. *The Descent from Mount Morgan* was first presented at *the Wyndham Theatre* in London on October 31, 1991. It is the story of Liman Felt, who wakes up

[3] http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Miller (accessed 11. 05. 2012)
[4]Royal National Theatre: Platform Papers, 7. Arthur Miller (Battley Brothers Printers, 1995).
[5] *A Pictorial History of the Theater Guild* by Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall. Introd. by Brooks Atkinson. Crown Publishers. 1969
[6]The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was a project to finance theatre and other performances in the United States during the Great Depression. It was one of five such projects in America. The primary purpose of the FTP was to employ artists outside their workplaces, including actors, writers, and theatre directors, to entertain middle-class and poor families in the country, and to create a relevant art scene in America.

to find himself in a hospital bed all in plaster: he has had a car accident falling off a cliff on the road to Mount Morgan. At the head of the bed, next to the nurse and the lawyer, stand two women, who discover that they are part of a bigamy. The play closes between the man's attempt to extinguish his contempt for women, the memory of a past happiness, and the feeling of guilt for the deception and the meanness in not choosing one of them. But, what has particularly piqued our curiosity has to do with the fact that this drama, *The Descent from Mount Morgan,* has as its main character *Lyman Felt,* a bigamist Albanian married to two women at once.

Also, Miller's creativity is closely connected to the main events of the time, which also influenced other American writers. He began writing when he was a student at the University of Michigan and this was reflected in his subsequent works. Thus, *Death of a Traveling Salesman* influences *Mr. Peters'Connections* , *The Incident in the Dressing Room* predicts *After the Fall* , or *The Renaissance of Discontent* reflects *The Man Who Had All the Luck.* Biggs has found many surprising similarities in Miller's plays or those of other authors, such as Odets, Uraj, Fitzgerald, Hemingway. In Miller, the absurd also appeared, despite the fact that he publicly excluded this trend. His work is not disconnected from private life. Thus, critics note that in " *After the Fall* ", the author is obsessed with the image of actress Marilyn Monroe.[7]

Miller had a rich career. His work includes the novel *Focus* and several short stories such as *Prophecy* and *the Simple Girl,* etc. Miller also has *a Hegelian sense of tragedy* . [8]This is evident in *View from the Bridge* and is later abandoned in *After the Fall* . Miller poses authentic questions and provides answers to events. Miller's creativity and personality cannot be fully addressed without considering the fact that he was a Jew. For him, the concentration camp *"was a point of division, the place where civilization began to crack and the abyss appeared, it was the place where we were reminded that death dominates us"* .

Bigsby disagrees with some other prominent Jewish authors who accuse Miller of not being Jewish enough. He thus contradicts Martin Gottfried, according to whom Miller did not deal with Jewish themes or characters until the 1960s. According to Bigsby, especially after Miller's 1962 visit to Mathias, he addressed the Holocaust on a level that no other American writer had done. As Professor Terry Otten of *Wittenberg University calls him* , Arthur Miller was one of the true giants of twentieth-century drama. .

Denis Vland [9], a British scholar, analyzes Miller's work (1961) by referring to his literary predecessors, especially the American author and philosopher Henry David Thoreau. Miller, like Thoreau, believes that self-confidence is essential. Vland also responds to Miller's critics. Quoting Robert Brustein who states that he was isolated from his fellow artists, Vland replies by emphasizing that Miller was isolated from society like many other American writers, which is not the same thing.

Kineret Mayer, [10]analyzing Miller as a Jewish writer, quotes the author as saying, *"One day the true spirit of the matter will be revealed, the failure to imagine will make us die."*[11]

In his autobiographical work “Back in Time”, Miller reflects on being Jewish and his perception in the social, developmental context after the Holocaust. He dedicates this to his father, *for “universal expectations and emotions”* , alluding to Christianity and to Jewish-American relations. According to Mayer, through the novel *Focus* and other plays such as *After the Fall* , *Incident in the Dress* 1964, *The Game for Time* 1980, *Broken Glass* -1994, Miller clarifies his cultural position. In *After the Fall* , Miller’s universalism takes the form of a classical narrative Christianity. “ *The motives and mechanisms of betrayal, political, sexual, historical, that determine the structure of the work, prevent the audience from distancing*

[7]Ibid. p. 232.
[8]Ibid. p. 198.
[9]Wlland, Dennis. "Arthur Miller". New York: Grove Press (1961)
[10]Meyer, Kinereth. "A Jew can have a Jewish face": Arthur Miller, Autobiography and Holocaust
[11]Right there.

themselves from the basic premise of the play" - says critic Walter Kerr. [12]As Stephen Spender says based on *Rousseau's Confessions* , the entire drama is built *"on the attempt to shake the hand of God and humanity into admitting that they are equally evil."* [13]. The Holocaust in this drama is reduced to the level of a metaphor. Meanwhile, it is interesting that a year later, Miller comes with *Events in Vichy* , France, where he describes the European catastrophe. Compared to the previous work, Miller here breaks away from the previous semi-expressionism to emerge from the genuine realistic drama, which has always given him success. In this drama, the philosophical implications of the universalism of bestiality, sadism, etc. are treated. Through the actor Monko, the message is given that anyone can be a victim.
Arthur Miller died on Thursday, February 10, 2005. He died at his printing press in Roxbury from a cardiac complication. The chronicles of the day the writer and artist passed away indicate that at his bedside when he took his last breath were his sister, Joan Copland; his daughter, Rebecca Miller; and Agnes Bailey, the 34-year-old painter with whom the elderly Miller had a love affair.

Bertolt Brecht – politics in theater and its influence

With his fruitful creativity, Bertolt Brecht seemed to want to answer the questions of CV. I. Lenin: *"How and what should be learned?"*. [14]Thus, he created the influential theory of Epic *Theater* , according to which the performance should not push the viewer to identify emotionally with the actors of the action, but to cause in him, the audience, a rational reconsideration and criticism of what this audience sees on stage. According to this, it is plausible that *catharsis* [15]. Brecht thought that catharsis is an emotion that creates complacency in the audience. Instead, Brecht also wanted the audience to use its own critical power to find the evil in society and change it.
So, a high and individual style of Brecht's dramas and theatrical performances was in harmony, so to speak, with his theories, which were directed towards the public, namely to what he considered the return of public trust to the theater itself. [16]Strongly convinced of leftist ideas, Brecht described his dramas, but also his performances as *"collective political meetings"* [17]in which the public also actively participates. Therefore, according to this, it is noted that he rejected the elitist view of political leadership according to which politicians of the highest rank give orders to lead the masses. In fact, the target of this critical view on the part of Brecht was capitalist politics and the political elites who led Western countries, although his criticism of the issuance of "orders for leading the masses" was the fundamental doctrine of the politicians who had built the ideology to which this creator and artist blindly believed until the end of his life. In fact, perhaps precisely for this reason, it has not been said in vain that: Brecht wrote against the ideologies that built Western democracies, in favor of Eastern ideology, but as a creator he was increasingly understood and truly accepted precisely in the West.
Brecht, in order to achieve his artistic and ideological objectives, used techniques that, as he believed, would remind the viewer that the play is a photograph of reality and not only reality. Brecht called this *the alienation effect* (Verfremdungseffekt) which will be discussed further

[12]Kerr, Walter. "Miller's After Fall," New York Herald Tribune (January 24, 1964)
[13]Spender, Stephen. "Confessions and Autobiography", in Olney, pg. 120
[14]History of World Theater, Higher Institute of Arts, School Book, Part III, Tirana, p. 155.
[15] *Catharsis* (gr. kdtharsis - purification) according to Aristotle is the goal of tragedy, namely it has to do with the purification of the soul from the passions of feeling. Catharsis, in fact, defines tragedy as supporting the final serious action, of characters who act but do not confess, in which case, by causing fear and pity, the purification of such effects is achieved. And, precisely this purification, Aristotle has called *catharsis* .
[16]Grant, Neil, Istorija pozorista, Zavod za udzbenike Beograd, 2006, p. 150-151.
[17]Harvud, Ronald, Istorija pozorišta, Clio, Belgrade, 1998, p. 371.

in this study, which we will discuss in more detail later in this study. Thus, if we were to identify the actions that Brecht used in his works, then we could say that they are:
- *the actor's direct address to the audience,*
- *reciting the text in the third person or in the past tense,*
- *loud recitation,*
- *unusual lighting effects (in the show),*
- *exploitation of songs, and so on.*[18]

And, if we analyze the aforementioned actions that Brecht used in his dramatic works, then we can conclude that, by emphasizing the construction of dramatic, theatrical events, he strongly hoped that the theatrical audience would understand that, in fact, reality itself is a construction that can be subject to change.

In this context, we think we can also talk about *historicization.*[19] as one of his favorite techniques in dramatic creativity. We can easily decipher this from the very fact that his plays very often deal with historical characters and historical events. Through this, Brecht strongly believed that the audience, in this way, would be able to maintain distance from certain events and characters that have occurred and that they would be able to identify the facts by drawing parallels between the problems of people in the past and those of today. Even with this aim, we think that, in one of his first theater performances, Brecht used a billboard with the inscription *"Don't stare so romantically"*[20] (*Glotzt nicht so romantic* !). Thus, Brecht wrote plays with a strong theoretical basis, from which a powerful political theater was created in which (it is also a claim today of the directors who stage his work) the audience actively participates by interpreting the significance of the problem.

In the writings he published between 1920 and 1922, when he was also performing his duties as a theater critic, Brecht, so to speak, constantly criticized theater, evaluating it as a monotonous event and that it was not playing the role it should have, perhaps, *entertaining the audience. "Theater without contact with the audience is meaningless* ," he would write. *"It means that our theater is meaningless. Theater today has no contact with the audience because it does not know what the audience wants from it. What theater once could do, it can no longer do today, but even if it could, people would no longer want it. However, theater continues to do what it can no longer do, what is not even required of it. In all those imposing, heated, well-lit buildings that extort a lot of money, and in all that is done there, there is no longer even a penny of entertainment* ," Brecht concludes.[21]

The entire dramatic opus of Bertolt Brecht is built on this ideological and aesthetic concept. But, being himself persecuted by the Nazis, a considerable number of his dramatic works are *dedicated* precisely to this evil of humanity that created the great tragedies of the twentieth century: the horror of the terrorist power of the Nazis and the resistance to this great evil that ordinary people made by sacrificing themselves. *Rifles* in *the Cross, The Horrors and Misery of the Third Reich, Arthur Who, The Visions of Simon Masar* , *Schweik in the Second World War* , are among the main titles of his creativity that have these events as their subject. Meanwhile, the principles of *epic theater* and the techniques of the unusual were the basis of his later works, *story dramas* , which were considered *classic works* of Brecht, such as: *The Life of Galileo, Mother Courage and Her Children* , The *Good Man from Szechuan* , *Landlord Puntil and His Servant Matt* , *The Chalk Circle of the Caucasus* ; and, finally, *historical dramas* such as the drama The *Life of Galileo Galilei* , *Mother Courage* and *Her Children* , these works

[18]Right there.
[19]Right there.
[20]In fact, Brecht's theory of drama and theater continues to have a strong influence on contemporary dramatic and theatrical trends to this day, although there are opinions that the effects of epic theater begin to fade after a few performances. However, some of the innovations he brought to theater have already become common for the creators of the time that followed him. Also, in this context, it can be said that Brecht's influence was very strong and visible in contemporary cinematography. Thus, directors such as Lars von Trier, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Jean L. Godard used Brecht's theory of distancing in their films.
[21]Lazić R. Rečnik dramatic direction, Belgrade, Gea, Academy of Arts, 1996.

that speak about the existential and essential issues of human existence itself and that were also related to the reality that the author himself was living. So to speak, the dilemmas and position in society of the great and martyred physicist Galileo Galilei remind us, so to speak, of the dilemmas and position of the physicist, contemporary of Brecht, Robert Oppenheimer. Then, the fate *of Mother Courage* could be the fate of *the little man who, like* Anna Firling in *the religious war,* without thinking at all and without any wisdom, will set off in Hitler's wars of conquest to *participate* and benefit something no matter how small it is.
The play *Mother Courage and Her Children* was created, like *The Life of Galileo,* in the very twilight of the Second World War. In both, the action takes place in the first half of the seventeenth century - *Mother Courage and Her Children* on the battlefields of the Thirty Years' War in Sweden, Poland and Germany, while *The Life of Galileo* in the Italy of the Medici and Pope Urban, in Padua, Venice, Florence and Rome. And, while Mother Courage and Her Children is a story of the devastation caused by a "religious" war, carrying with it more signs and features of the Middle Ages than of the new centuries, The Life of Galileo Galilei speaks of the birth of a new era.

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