



Talawa Theatre production
of *All My Sons* (2015), (L-R)
Dona Croll, Leemore Marrett Jr,
Ray Shell, Kemi-Bo Jacobs

What, no Jews? The puzzle at the heart of Miller's plays

Arthur Miller is one of the most famous Jewish writers of the 20th century. On the centenary of his birth, **David Herman** asks why then, do Jews barely feature in his work?

At first glance Arthur Miller's career seems very straightforward. He was one of the great figures of 20th-century theatre. For half a century, from *All My Sons*, his breakthrough play in 1947, to *Broken Glass*, in the mid-1990s, Miller was regarded as America's greatest living dramatist. He was also a gifted short story writer, novelist and screenwriter. His appearance before the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), at the height of McCarthyism, and his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, established him as one of the most famous men in post-war America and he frequently appeared on British arts programmes like *The South Bank Show* and *Omnibus*.

However, look more closely and Miller's career seems more complicated, especially for Jewish readers. His best-known plays were hardly Jewish at all and only in the 1960s did he start – briefly – to address the Holocaust, in *Incident at Vichy* (1964) and *After the Fall* (1964).

Arthur Miller was born in New York in 1915. He was part of the extraordinary generation of Jewish American writers, which included Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller. In 1929 came the Wall Street Crash, an event that changed his life. His father's

clothing business failed in the Depression. "They were ruined by it," he said of his family's experience in the '30s, "just destroyed by it and very quickly." This experience haunted Miller's best work.

In 1932, still at high school, Miller wrote his first short story and then at college he wrote his first plays. In 1944 his first professional play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, was produced in New York. It was a disaster and closed after only six performances. Miller went back to the drawing board and changed his whole idea of drama. He turned to Henrik Ibsen, who remained a crucial influence for the rest of his career. Like Ibsen, he turned to the idea of a dark secret, which would be at the heart of his plays from *All My Sons* onwards.

All My Sons was Miller's first great play. Directed by Elia Kazan on Broadway in 1947, it ran for 328 performances and was filmed the following year with Edward G Robinson and Burt Lancaster. Then in 1949 came Miller's most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, the story of a hard-working salesman, Willy Loman, who is down on his luck. The play was an instant success

and spoke to a generation of theatregoers, like Miller, still haunted by memories of the Depression. In Kazan's production Lee J Cobb played the main part. It ran for almost 750 performances and was soon filmed with Fredric March. Willy Loman has been one of the great roles in modern drama, attracting actors like Rod Steiger, George C Scott, Dustin Hoffman, and most recently, Philip Seymour Hoffman.

This was the heyday of Miller's career.

All My Sons (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) were quickly followed by his adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1950), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). Miller's five most famous plays were written in eight

years, two of them filmed in this period.

These years coincided with sudden political fame. *The Crucible*, based on the Salem witch-trials of the 1690s, was widely interpreted as an allegory of McCarthyism. Miller was called before HUAC in 1956 and convicted of "contempt of Congress" for refusing to name suspected Communists. He emerged from McCarthyism as a figure of conscience and courage. That same year he married Marilyn Monroe, then the

"There is nothing Jewish about Willy Loman"



Arthur Miller at the time of writing *All My Sons*, 1947

most famous movie star in America. Miller was now one of the best-known writers of his time. In 1961, he wrote his first movie screenplay for *The Misfits*, starring Monroe and Clark Gable. He divorced Monroe the same year (she died in 1962).

Miller remained extraordinarily productive for more than 30 years. He wrote over 20 plays after *The Misfits*, four screenplays, two books of short stories and an acclaimed memoir, *Timebends* (1987). However, critics would argue that from this later work, only *Broken Glass* (1994) compares with his best early plays.

During these later years, critics also began to wonder about the playwright's silence on the Holocaust and the curious absence of Jewish themes in his work. Already in 1964, the critic Leslie Fiedler referred to "crypto-Jewish characters" like Willy Loman. Loman is always taken as a Jewish character, but in fact there is nothing clearly Jewish about him. Unlike Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, Miller's most famous characters never use Yiddish words or address Jewish issues. Why was a Jewish playwright so apparently uninterested in Jewish themes?

This is a complicated question. Miller's one and only novel, *Focus* (1945), was explicitly about antisemitism and

perhaps his best short story, *Monte Sant' Angelo* (1951), was about an American soldier coming to terms with his own Jewishness. In the early 1950s, however, Jewishness, let alone antisemitism and the Holocaust, were sensitive issues. Antisemitism in America was widespread. Bellow, too, failed to address the Holocaust until the late 1960s. Of the great Jewish American post-war writers, only Philip Roth, in 1959, tackled these questions directly.

Miller's real subject was social drama, the tragic stories of ordinary men faced with ruin, most obviously in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Sometimes this had a more political dimension (*The Crucible*), sometimes it was rooted in family conflict and sexuality (*A View from the Bridge*).

But always his heroes were ordinary: a salesman, a farmer, a businessman or a longshoreman. His plays are rooted in ordinary neighbourhoods, suburban homes and farming communities. They are centred on family life, the dynamics between husbands and wives, fathers and sons.

Miller's characters speak the language of ordinary people. His heroes are uneducated (the question of who has been educated at college is crucial in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*). But above all, his plays are about the dark side of the American Dream: salesmen cast off after working hard for a lifetime, manufacturers who kill pilots to turn a profit, the paranoid heart of the American Right.

Miller's best plays are among the great works of the post-war period. Their silence about Jews and the Holocaust should not be seen as a failure by Miller but as a worrying sign of the era he lived in. He addressed what he considered the central issues of his time – which resonate today because they remain among the great issues of our time. ■

David Herman is a writer with an interest in Jewish American literature. For more on Arthur Miller's centenary see Judi Herman's piece (right).

MARKING MILLER

Arthur Miller's centenary is being marked by a number of productions across the country, including the world premiere of a little-known screenplay and a production boasting an all-black cast

ALL MY SONS: TALAWA THEATRE COMPANY

Talawa are the UK's primary black-led touring theatre company and director Michael Buffong's production of *All My Sons* has been highly acclaimed. It stars Ray Shell as Joe Keller and Doña Croll as Kate Keller in Miller's searing investigation of greed and corruption in post-war America.

Mercury Theatre, Colchester 14-18 April. See What's Happening, page 35. Malvern Theatres, Great Malvern 21-25 April. See What's Happening, page 36.

DEATH OF A SALESMAN: THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Antony Sher is the downtrodden salesman Willy Loman and Harriet Walter plays his wife in Gregory Doran's production of Arthur Miller's 1949 Pulitzer Prize-winning play about the failed dreams and thwarted ambition of a father and his sons.

The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon Until 2 May. See What's Happening, page 36.

THE HOOK: THEATRE ROYAL, NORTHAMPTON

This hard-hitting 'play for the screen' gets its world premiere at the Theatre Royal, Northampton. Set in the dockyards of Brooklyn, it was originally written as a screenplay, but the FBI suppressed it, lest it cause unrest amid the political tensions of the 1950s and it remained unproduced. James Dacre, Northampton Theatre's artistic director, directs Ron Hutchinson's stage adaptation of the story of Marty Ferrara, a longshoreman who challenges the mobsters and gangs of '50s New York. "Over several years, I've created a transcript of this 'play for the screen' by collating copies of Miller's typewritten versions of the script and accompanying handwritten notes. . . every word will be Arthur Miller's," says Dacre.

Royal & Derngate, Northampton 5-27 June. See What's Happening, page 36. Everyman, Liverpool 1-25 July. >JH

SOUNDS JEWISH

What is striking about Miller's plays is how un-Jewish they are. There is not a single mention of Jews in his 1958 *Introduction* to his early plays. There are no references to the great Jewish subjects of his time: immigration, antisemitism, the Holocaust. But his plays often feel Jewish. Why? It's in the rhythms of speech he uses, such as these examples from *All My Sons*: "What, killed?" "What ice does that cut?" "What must I be forgiven?" "I spoiled the both of you." *All My Sons* is actually his most Christian play in terms of imagery. The central moral figure is Chris(t) and there are constant references to 'The Holy Family'. Ultimately, Miller was a humanist, interested in universal figures not Jewish ones. His characters ask not "Am I a Jew?" but "What kind of man should I be?"

