



*"From a Cold War Liberal to a
Skittish Radical, with love":
Arthur Miller on Tennessee Williams*

*"De um Liberal da Guerra Fria a um
Radical Arredio, com amor":
Arthur Miller sobre Tennessee Williams*

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Abstract

This essay explores Arthur Miller's comments on Tennessee Williams's works and impact on American drama and on his own writing. First it explores some parallels between both playwrights, commenting on their different styles. Subsequently, the essay exposes Miller's eulogy for Williams highlighting the powerful contribution of the latter not only to the American theater but to the political ideas that marked Williams's dramas. It concludes with a cry over the necessity of exploring more of Williams's dramas especially those overshadowed by the ideology of the critics.

Keywords: U.S. playwriting; Eulogy; Legacy; Politics.

Resumo

Este ensaio explora os comentários de Arthur Miller sobre as obras de Tennessee Williams e o impacto no drama estadunidense e em sua própria escrita. Primeiramente explora alguns paralelos entre os dois dramaturgos, comentando seus diferentes estilos. Posteriormente, o ensaio expõe o louvor de Miller a Williams, destacando a poderosa contribuição deste último não apenas para o teatro dos Estados Unidos, mas para as ideias políticas que marcaram os dramas de Williams. Conclui com um apelo à necessidade de explorar mais as peças de Williams, especialmente aquelas ofuscadas pela ideologia dos críticos.

Palavras-chave: Dramaturgia estadunidense; Louvor; Legado; Política.

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Introduction

The legacy of Tennessee Williams to many areas is incalculable. Dramatists, poets, (screen)writers, artists, sociologists, historians, philosophers and many others find in Williams's dramas an amazing source of inspiration and analysis. Such legacy is both transgeographical and transhistorical, being present on stages, cinemas, festivals, schools, and universities worldwide. From Broadway to Hollywood, from high-end venues to slums, Williams' voice resounds powerfully and strongly as one whose contribution implodes borders and restraints, and penetrates the social fabric with a great potential for change wherever it lands.

One such figure that openly acknowledges Williams's immeasurable contribution is Arthur Miller. He overtly praised Williams's art in some of his essays, even stating that he felt encouraged and inspired by Williams to write some of his works, and especially one of his most iconic protagonists, Willy Loman, from *Death of a salesman* (1949).

The rapport between Miller and Williams was strong and they had a kinship and a mutual admiration. Having dominated the American stages in the late 1940s and 1950s, both made history on Broadway with such plays as *The glass menagerie* (1944), *A streetcar named Desire* (1947), *All my sons* (1947), *Death of a salesman* (1949), *The crucible* (1953), *Cat on a hot tin roof* (1953/55), and *A view from the bridge* (1956).

They actually met in 1940, when both were participating in the Playwrights' Dramatic Workshop at New York's New School for Social Research. Williams's *Battle of angels* (1940) was the main focus of the workshop because both John Gassner and Theresa Helburn (who ran it at the time), had recommended the play for production by the Theatre Guild. That same year, the workshop play did not succeed, but with *The glass menagerie*, four years later, in 1944, Williams would establish himself as one of the most important voices in America with a unique Southern gist. Similarly, Miller's production of *The man who had all the luck* in 1944 had failed, but he managed to carve his identity as a playwright three years after with *All my sons* in 1947 (the year of *A streetcar*), and adding the cherry on top with *Death of a salesman* in 1949 – which granted him the Pulitzer Prize. This very period gave both playwrights projection and reputation internationally, bestowing upon American drama a high-quality status.

Two different styles and a common token

Both frequently congratulated each other on their successes and had a good relation. A very remarkable moment took place when in 1954, under the crushing shadow of McCarthyism, the government refused to renew Miller's passport when he wanted to attend the Belgian premiere of *The crucible*. Williams, who kept himself somewhat more private during the McCarthy years, ran to Miller's defense and wrote an *amicus curiae* on Miller's behalf to the State Department to complain that "Mr. Miller and his work occupy the very highest critical and popular position in the esteem of Western Europe" (Abbotson, 2007, p. 475). Feeling sympathetic to Miller, Williams had also experienced rejection/injustice in his own country. Both had their works unfairly discarded/disregarded in later life, however they kept writing and thus going against the grain of the critics' dictates. Miller was a bit luckier because he lived long enough to see his work begin to come back into favor, while Williams passed away before critics began to reevaluate his work.

A strong bond between Miller and Williams was Elia Kazan. The landmark director of *A streetcar named Desire* carved a partnership with both playwrights working closely with them in productions that became a reference engraved in the pages of the theater and cinema historiographies. Although Miller and Williams had many connections throughout life and the people who crossed their paths, both playwrights are, in many ways, very different with Williams placing a higher emphasis on the private life of his protagonists while Miller focuses on their more public identity.

Savran (1992, p. 11), a renowned scholar of both playwrights, defines Miller as a "Cold War Liberal" and Williams as a "Skittish Radical", both having different styles, but the common token of a strong political tenor. Even though stylistically different, their dramas are united around the power that money has in shaping the lives and subjectivities of people carved in each one of their characters. The implacable authority of money (and therefore power) put on stages and the pages of their plays the very processes and results of living at the heart of a capitalist country.

One of Williams's major strengths, his lyricism, sharply contrasts with Miller's apparent crustiness and lack of mellowness. Arthur Oberg (Murphy, 2011, p. 303) points out that, "In the established image, Miller's art is masculine and craggy; Williams', poetic

and delicate,” both being groundbreakingly thought-provoking and cornucopia of theatrical, sociological, historical, political and philosophical analyses. Also, while Williams is widely studied through the comparative lens of his art and that of Anton Chekhov, Miller is frequently compared to Henrik Ibsen (having even adapted *An enemy of the people* at the eye of the McCarthyite storm in 1951).

Eulogizing Williams, undoing the so-called sealed-off aesthete

In spite of their different styles, a significant part of Miller’s production is inspired not only by Williams’s ideas and themes, but also by his very style, including his lyricism. In his autobiography *Timebends*, Miller (1987, p. 244) comments on the powerful language deployed by Williams, exulting its revolutionary innovation:

The revolutionary newness of *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, was in its poetic lift, but an underlying hard dramatic structure was what earned the play its right to sing poetically. Poetry in the theatre is not, or at least ought not be, a cause but a consequence, and that structure of storytelling and character made this very private play available to anyone capable of feeling it all.

Still mesmerized by Williams’s achievement, in an essay titled “Tennessee Williams’ legacy: an eloquence and amplitude of feeling,” Miller (2016, p. 150) goes on praising *The glass menagerie*, by highlighting its powerful structure and analyzing its form:

What was new in Tennessee Williams was his rhapsodic insistence that form serve his utterance rather than dominating and cramping it. In him the American theater found, perhaps for the first time, an eloquence and an amplitude of feeling. And driving on this newly discovered lyrical line was a kind of emotional heroism; he wanted not to approve or disapprove but to touch the germ of life and to celebrate it with verbal beauty.

Taken to see *A streetcar* by Elia Kazan, as Williams had himself seen *All my sons* back in 1947, Miller (1987, p. 227) was particularly enthralled by the play and expressed how strongly inspired and encouraged he felt to write one of his most (perhaps the most) canonical of his works, *Salesman*:

With *Streetcar*, Tennessee had printed a license to speak at full throat, and it helped strengthen me as I turned to Willy Loman, a salesman full of words, and better yet, a man who could never cease trying.

Miller was stunned by the way the play successfully blended realistic and nonrealistic elements and credits the vitality and the lyricism of *Streetcar* as liberating him

to experiment more freely in his own work. His admiration of Williams's lyricism hinted at his own experience with a poetic language, even though he is indeed closer to Ibsen's prose than Chekhov's poetics. When he worked with the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in 1938, he wrote a verse play named *The golden years*. Christopher Bigsby (2005, p. 155) chronicles that in a letter to Professor Kenneth Rowe, Miller surprisingly said that he found writing verse more interesting and more intense than writing prose: "I made the discovery that in verse you are forced to be brief and to the point. Verse squeezes out fat and you're left with the real meaning of the language."

Curiously few people know that two of the most iconic works by Miller, *Death of a salesman* and *The crucible* were originally written in verse. Likewise, the one-act version of *A view from the bridge* (1955), was written mixing verse and prose. It is worth mentioning that Miller also wrote one-act plays that structurally encompass condensation and conciseness of language with a wide use of symbolisms and poetic language, detectable in the modern lyricism, the short story and the so-called *theater of the absurd*.²

However, Miller found an American theater hostile to the poetic form and decided to embark on a different style, mainly with full-length plays. Even though Williams and Miller had been on the spotlight, both playwrights would be bound to negligence and disregard at the end of their careers inside the United States. Miller (2016, p. 151) was extremely critical of this and writing about Williams he beautifully eulogized him:

Despite great fame, Williams never settled into a comfortable corner of the literary kitchen. It could only have been the pride born of courage that kept him at playwriting after the professional theater to which he had loaned so much dignity, so much aspiration, could find no place for his plays. But he never lost his humor and a phenomenal generosity toward other artists. A few months before his death, I had a letter from him about a play of mine that had had some of the most uncomprehending reviews of my career. I had not seen Tennessee in years, but out of darkness came this clasp of a hand, this sadly laughing voice telling me that he had seen and understood and loved my play, and in effect, that we had both lived to witness a chaos of spirit, a deafness of ear and a blindness of eye, and that one carried on anyway.

Surely Miller understood the injustice Williams had to go through in his own country for he also went through it. But it was also Miller's humanistic and political position - essentially against the overwhelming commercialism of Broadway - that

² For further approach on *one-act plays* refer to: BETTI, Maria Sílvia. **Dramaturgia Comparada Estados Unidos/Brasil: Três Estudos**. São Bernardo do Campo: Cia. Fagulha, 2017 (published in Portuguese).

allowed him to stay sober throughout his career. Miller (2016, p. 226) was one of the few who detected in Williams a drama with a powerful political wingspan, tearing him away from the image of the sealed-off aesthete he was often associated to: "Certainly I never regarded him as the sealed-off aesthete he was thought to be. There is a radical politics of the soul as well as of the ballot box and the picket line."

Conclusion

Williams and Miller, two playwrights at the heart of capitalism and the promises of the American Dream. Two playwrights at the core of success, fame, money and prestige. Two playwrights overshadowed by the commercial demands of the theater enterprise, and pushed to the fringes. However, the respect these two giants of the U.S. theater had for one another and for their works is not only a fact that testifies the grandiosity of their dramaturgical works, but it shows the solidarity and understanding of how hard it is to be understood and respected at the heart of a system that discards people recklessly. Fortunately, there are still scholars, teachers, students, actors, directors etc. that help keep the works and the legacy of Williams alive, and that still have to explore and (un)cover much of what has been ignored and discarded by the ideology of the critics. In this paper Williams was caringly and deservedly honored by Arthur Miller. If this was a letter, it certainly would be signed: "*From a Cold War Liberal to a Skittish Radical, with love.*"

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