



A New Stage for Arthur Miller's Most Private Drama of Fathers and Sons

By JASON ZINOMAN
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It had been something of an open secret for years, but most people did not learn the story of Daniel Miller until last week, when Vanity Fair published an article called "[Arthur Miller's Missing Act](#)."



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Arthur Miller, author of "Death of a Salesman" and "All My Sons," with his wife Inge Morath. They had a son, Daniel, whose existence Miller kept secret.

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As described in Suzanna Andrews's 5,000-word article, Arthur Miller, who died in February 2005, and his third wife, the photographer Inge Morath, had a son born with Down syndrome in 1966. Soon after, they made the painful decision to put the child, Miller's youngest, in an institution for the mentally retarded before Miller essentially cut him out of his life.

Ms. Andrews describes in detail how Miller rarely, if ever, accompanied his wife on weekly visits to see Daniel, almost never mentioned him to shocked friends and didn't mention him in his memoir, "Timebends."

The picture that emerges is of a father in denial and a son who has moved on to live a happy life without him. "Miller excised a central character who didn't fit the plot of his life as he wanted it," Ms. Andrews writes.

Reactions to this article, among those working in theater and on a flood of message boards and blogs, have been emotional, and they have raised questions about what effect, if any, this will have on this playwright's legacy.

"Arthur Miller will be remembered for 'Death of a Salesman,' 'The Crucible' and 'All My Sons,'" the veteran Broadway producer Emanuel Azenberg said. "All the rest is talk."

It's a subject that most people who knew Miller would rather not discuss. [Edward Albee](#), who spoke movingly at his memorial, declined to comment. And David Richenthal, who produced three Miller revivals, did the same after saying, "I make no judgment."

Other observers have been less forgiving. In a scathing post last week on the blog for the neoconservative Commentary magazine, James Kirchick suggests that this story "ought to damage permanently Miller's reputation, if not as a writer, then as a humanitarian."

What makes the revelation of Daniel so upsetting is how it juxtaposes Miller's private decision with his public image, as one of the greatest American playwrights and the man who refused to name names before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and eloquently and loudly opposed the Vietnam War.

For many of those who came of age in the middle of the last century a saintly glow hovers around Miller, whose plays have often examined questions of guilt and morality through the prism of family. He was a hero of the left and a champion of the downtrodden. "Lincoln in horn rims" is what the critic Kenneth Tynan called him.

"Miller had been built up as a moral conscience," said Martin Gottfried, whose 2004 biography, "Arthur Miller: His Life and Work," is one of the only publications to mention

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Daniel. "But by the time of 'After the Fall' " — in 1964 — "he was laboring under the weight of this godliness."

It might be this reputation (and, of course, his celebrity) that makes Miller about the only playwright you can imagine being the subject of this kind of article in a national publication.

Writers like Miller and [Gunter Grass](#), "who set themselves up as moralists and public scolds, are more vulnerable to criticism based on their own behavior," wrote Morris Dickstein, who teaches English at the [City University of New York](#) Graduate Center, in an e-mail message this week. "But the truth is that very few great artists were admirable people. At heart they're killers who'll do anything to get the work done."

Professor Dickstein cautions, however, against judging Miller too quickly. "How do we know what we would have done?" he asked. "The birth of a child with Down syndrome can be a tremendous trauma, to say nothing of a strain on a marriage." And it was more common in the '60s to institutionalize a child with Down syndrome than it is today.

One of the more controversial parts of the Vanity Fair article is its speculation on how Miller's relationship with Daniel affected his writing. His most famous plays, including "Death of a Salesman" and "The Crucible," were written at the beginning of his career in the late '40s and '50s, but his output slowed by the end of the next decade.

Ms. Andrews gently weighs in on this issue, saying that Miller never wrote anything "approaching greatness" after Daniel was born. "One wonders if, in his relationship with Daniel, Miller was sitting on his greatest unwritten play."

But making conclusions about an artist's career based on his personal life can be very tricky. Playwrights often do their greatest work early in their career, and you could say that one "Death of a Salesman" should be considered plenty for a lifetime.

Arthur Miller's relationship with his family is a fascinating subject. (Daniel reportedly inherited, in a trust, a quarter of the estate.) But without Miller to help us, we can only understand so much. Profiles of artists can be a valuable, if crude, tool to understand a creative mind's output. But even the best profiles only tell part of the story.

As for how this will affect our view of Miller, it may be somewhat academic. Younger audiences don't necessarily think immediately of [Marilyn Monroe](#) when they see "After the Fall," a play widely viewed as a thinly veiled portrait of Miller's relationship with her, his second wife. And the next generation of theatergoers will almost certainly see "The Crucible" as something other than a metaphor for the anti-Communist blacklist.

The public life of this towering figure will increasingly fade from memory, but his plays — at least some of them — will not. "It may be an irony that Arthur Miller did this," Mr. Gottfried said. "But it's only a small part of who he is. There's more to [Tennessee Williams](#) than being a dope addict, and there's much more to Arthur Miller than this."

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