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On Politics and the Art of Acting

BY ARTHUR MILLER

DRAMA

The Golden Years · The Man Who Had All the Luck
All My Sons · Death of a Salesman
An Enemy of the People (*adaptation of the play by Ibsen*)
The Crucible · A View from the Bridge · After the Fall
Incident at Vichy · The Price · The American Clock
The Creation of the World and Other Business
The Archbishop's Ceiling · The Ride Down Mt. Morgan
Broken Glass · Mr. Peters' Connections

ONE-ACT PLAYS

A View from the Bridge, *one-act version, with* A Memory of Two Mondays
Elegy for a Lady (*in* Two-Way Mirror)
Some Kind of Love Story (*in* Two-Way Mirror)
I Can't Remember Anything (*in* Danger: Memory!)
Clara (*in* Danger: Memory!) · The Last Yankee

OTHER WORKS

Situation Normal · The Misfits (*a cinema novel*)
Focus (*a novel*) · I Don't Need You Anymore (*short stories*)
In the Country (*reportage with Inge Morath photographs*)
Chinese Encounters (*reportage with Inge Morath photographs*)
In Russia (*reportage with Inge Morath photographs*)
Salesman in Beijing (*a memoir*) · Timebends (*autobiography*)
Homely Girl, A Life (*novella*)

COLLECTIONS

Arthur Miller's Collected Plays (Volumes I and II)
The Portable Arthur Miller
The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller (*Robert Martin, editor*)
Echoes Down the Corridor: Collected Essays, 1944–2000
(*Stephen R. Centola, editor*)

TELEVISION WORKS

Playing for Time

SCREENPLAYS

The Misfits · Everybody Wins · The Crucible

Here are some observations about politicians as actors. Since some of my best friends are actors, I don't dare say anything bad about the art itself. The fact is that acting is inevitable as soon as we walk out our front doors and into society. I am acting now; certainly I am not speaking in the same tone as I would in my living room. It is not news that we are moved more by our glandular reactions to a leader's personality, his acting, than by his proposals or by his moral character. To their millions of followers, after all, many of them highly intelligent university intellectuals, Hitler and Stalin were profoundly moral men, revealers of new truths. It is true that dictators arise out of collapsing societies, so that the license to dominate is handed to them and it is not

merely their talent as performers that gives them power. But something similar can be said about actors lucky enough to appear in plays or films whose time has come, rather than in old worn-out stories or those too novel for the public to grasp. Aristotle thought man was by nature a social animal, and in fact we are ruled more by the arts of performance—by acting, in other words—than anybody wants to think about for very long.

The mystery of the leader-as-performer is as ancient as civilization but in our time television has created a quantitative change in its nature; one of the oddest things about millions of lives now is that ordinary individuals, as never before in human history, are so surrounded—one might say, besieged—by acting. Twenty-four hours a day everything seen on the tube is either acted or conducted by actors in the shape of news anchormen and -women, including their hairdos. It may be that the most impressionable

form of experience now for many if not most people consists of their emotional transactions with actors, which happen far more of the time than with real people. For years now commentators have had lots of fun with Reagan's inability to distinguish movies he had seen from actual events in which he had participated, but in this as in so much else he was representative of a common perplexity when a person's experience so often comes at him through the acting art. In other periods, a person might have confronted the arts of performance once a year in a church ceremony or in a rare appearance by a costumed prince or king and his ritualistic gestures; it would have seemed very strange that ordinary folk would be so subjected every day to the persuasions of professionals whose studied technique, after all, was to assume the character of someone who was not them.

Is this persistent experience of any importance? I can't imagine how to prove this, but it seems to me

that when one is surrounded by such a roiling mass of consciously contrived performances it gets harder and harder for a lot of people to locate reality anymore. Admittedly, we live in an age of entertainment, but is it a good thing that our political life, for one, be so profoundly governed by the modes of theater, from tragedy to vaudeville to farce? I find myself speculating whether the relentless daily diet of crafted, acted emotions and canned ideas is not subtly pressing our brains not only to mistake fantasy for what is real but also to absorb this process into our personal sensory mechanism. This last election is an example. Obviously we must get on with life, but apparently we are now called upon to act as though nothing very unusual happened and as though nothing in our democratic ways has deteriorated, as for instance our claim to the right to instruct lesser countries on how to conduct fair elections. So, in a subtle way, we are induced to become actors, too. The show, after all,

Thumbs

must go on, even if the audience is now obliged to join in the acting. Needless to add that we shall continue instructing others on how they ought to count votes, but is our monitory voice not thinned somewhat as others hear it, and a cynicism reinforced as to our claims to being the model democracy? Or perhaps not. Perhaps very little can be expected to be retained in memory before the battering of our minds by the flotsam flowing at us on the information river.

Political leaders everywhere have come to understand that to govern they must learn how to act. No differently than any actor, Al Gore apparently rummaged through several changes of costume before finding the right mix to express the personality he thought it profitable to project. Up to the campaign he seemed an essentially serious man with no great claim to merry humor, but the presidential-type character he felt he had to play was apparently happy, upbeat, with a kind of Bing Crosby mellowness. I

daresay that if he seemed so awkward it was partly because the adopted image was not really his, he had cast himself in a role that was wrong for him, as not infrequently happens to unlucky actors cast in films and theater. The original production of *Death of a Salesman,* for example, veered very close to disaster because the director and I were trying to be too faithful to a stage direction I had written into the script describing Willy as a small man. We proceeded to audition every small actor we could find, some very good ones among them, but the role in their hands seemed to be diminished into a kind of complaint, far from what was intended. In fact, there was a heroic aspect to the part which a Lee Cobb—over six feet tall and weighing nearly two hundred pounds—could effortlessly bring out, at least in rehearsal. Of course once an audience takes its seats these effects are extremely difficult to predict. I think this is so because, fundamentally, a play is trying to create an

individual out of a mob, a single unified reaction out of a thousand individual ones whose interactions are mysterious. The political leader faces the same task and uncertainty, neither more nor less. Whether calculatedly or instinctively, he has to find the magnetic core that will draw together a fragmented public, and is thus obliged to try to avoid sending signals that might alienate significant sectors of his audience. Inevitably, this kind of management of an audience requires acting.

The difficult question of sincerity, therefore, arises from the very nature of persuasion itself, and with it, inevitably, the question of lying or shaving the edges of inconvenient truths. Hence, the resort to acting, to performing a role. I would like to believe—and often do—that most American congressmen and senators most of the time are probably saying in public what they also say in private, if only because consistency costs them little when they have

few listeners anyway and little to lose. But the burning white light focused on the American presidential candidate is of a very different order when his election may mean a new direction for the country and a threat or reassurance to business and government in many other parts of the world. Thus the television lens becomes a microscope with the world at the eyepiece. Now the candidate's self-control, his steadiness under fire, is dangerously magnified and becomes as crucial to his success as it is to the actor facing a thousand critics as he stands alone in a spotlight surrounded by darkness on a stage.

Power, of course, changes how people act, and George W. Bush, now that he is president, seems to have learned not to sneer quite so much, and to cease furtively glancing left and right when leading up to a punch line, followed by a sharp nod to flash that he has successfully delivered it. This is bad acting, because all this dire overemphasis casts doubt on the

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