

ARTHUR MILLER - DEATH OF A PLAYWRIGHT

Strand renamed Novello

2005: It has had many names since it was built in 1905. Originally one of a pair of theatres built either side of the Waldorf Hotel (the other was the Aldwych Theatre), it was named after the hotel. Four years later it changed its name to the Strand Theatre, and then had another brief name change between 1911 and 1913, when it was called the Whitney Theatre. It reverted to the name Strand thereafter, but has recently come under the control of the Delfont Mackintosh Group and has undergone considerable renovation. Cameron Mackintosh, the new owner, has decided to rename it the "Novello Theatre" in honour of the Welsh actor-composer, Ivor Novello, who lived in an apartment within the theatre building until his death in 1951. Cameron Mackintosh has also announced that another theatre in his group, the Albery, will shortly be renamed the Noel Coward

Censorship Row

2005: The year started with a major row over censorship. In December 2004 Birmingham Rep announced it was cancelling a production of a play called "Bezhti" following violent protests by some of the Sikh community in the city. This was viewed as the theatre allowing itself to be censored by the religious right. Soon afterwards the row reached new heights with Christian fundamentalists demanding the cancellation of the BBC2 broadcast of "Jerry Springer the Opera" and threats of violence against theatres which intended to host the touring version.

One extremist group even forced a Scottish charity to refuse a large donation from the cast of the London production. The arguments still continue, with some shops refusing to sell the CD of the show. The row escalated when Nicholas Hytner, echoing the thoughts of many theatre people, claimed "unequivocally the right to be as offensive as I choose... and, on behalf of my colleagues, to tell any story we choose."

2005 : Arthur Miller was the surviving one of America's two greatest post-War playwrights. (Only Tennessee Williams could be mentioned in the same breath). Williams was the Romantic, heart-on-sleeve champion of the lost and rejected; Miller's works were intricate musings on the darkness at the heart of the American Dream. His plays struck a chord with a whole generation of theatre-goers throughout the world. His best-known character, Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman", was the ordinary little man destroyed by the pressures of modern life. Audiences wept and then cheered at its premiere in 1949, and the 34 year old Arthur Miller became famous overnight, and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and many other awards.

His first play, "All My Sons", showed the impact on a family of American participation in World War II. He was attacked as unpatriotic, and despite his success with "Salesman" his liberal views caused him to be called up before the McCarthy anti-communist witch-hunt. He refused to name friends and colleagues who might have been communists and for a while was held in contempt. He found a parallel for the McCarthy activities in the Salem witch trials in New England in 1692 and wrote "The Crucible", a devastating study of mass hysteria and denunciation.

In 1956 he shocked the USA when he married Marilyn Monroe - the deeply intellectual playwright and the Hollywood screen goddess seemed a most unlikely pairing. In later years Arthur Miller went out of fashion in America. He complained that writers there were treated as entertainers, not moralists, and railed against what he regarded the hollow commercialism of Broadway. However, his work continued to be admired in the UK and in 1995 his "Broken Glass" won the Olivier Award for Best Play.

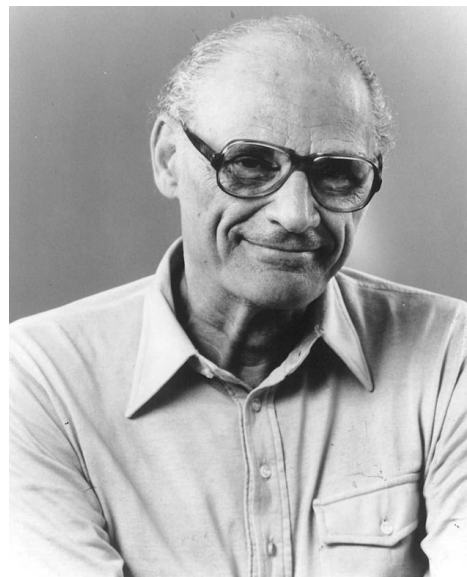
His legacy is such that, on any one day, his work is being performed somewhere in the world. He was a man of the highest integrity, both in his work and in his personal life, an old-fashioned liberal, who never accepted the American dream at face value. He continually sought to provoke his audience into questioning society and authority. He died of heart failure, aged 89 at his Connecticut home. All Broadway's theatres darkened their canopy lights in tribute to a great man of theatre.

Derek Jacobi acclaimed in Don Carlos

One of the most astonishing productions to hit the West End in years has seen ecstatic praise for Sir Derek Jacobi and the entire cast of "Don Carlos" by the German poet, Schiller. Schiller's seven-hour epic of life at the court of Philip II of Spain has been adapted into three hours of tense, thundering melodrama played at an almost unbearable level of intensity. It started life at the Sheffield Crucible, where the outgoing associate director, Michael Grandage, has managed to persuade leading theatre performers to work in a provincial theatre, providing opportunities to perform in works that would be considered totally uncommercial in the West End.

"Don Carlos" is a study of dictatorship and its relationship with the church - a theme as relevant today as it ever was. However, it is also a gripping drama about the dysfunctional family of a king, unable to relate to his idealistic son, cold to his dutiful wife and completely divorced from any sense of humanity. As Philip II, Derek Jacobi gives the most extraordinary performance, cold and cruel but brought to thrilling life by flashes of grim, wicked humour and sudden explosive moments of intense passion. It is a tour de force, and quite the most superb performance seen on the West End stage in many years.

In a year that has seen successful productions of serious plays like "Death of a Salesman", "Hedda Gabler" and "Mary Stuart", the West End is truly experiencing a "golden season" of dramatic glory, with many performances of startling power - none more powerful than Derek Jacobi's great achievement.



Broadway World



Sheffield Theatres