

CHAPTER VI

AFTER THE FALL

The original performance of the play *After the Fall* opened in New York City on January 23, 1964, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Barbara Loden and Jason Robards Jr., with a cameo appearance by Faye Dunaway. Kazan also collaborated with Miller on the script. It is one of Miller's most personal plays, a thinly veiled personal critique centered on Miller's recently failed marriage to Marilyn Monroe. Actually written two years before Monroe's death, the focus of the play has shifted to Quentin, the protagonist, where it rightly belonged all along. Miller keeps tight rein on this particular play which has not been done in Los Angeles for 24 years. It is in excellent hands in a lean, taut, superb production at the laudable Fountain Theatre under the direction of Stephen Sachs.

Quentin is a lawyer whose life is dominated by two great themes: betrayal and the concept of a universal bond. Betrayal is first experienced when his beloved mother sends him for a walk with the maid and decamps with the rest of the family to the seashore. The bond is foreshadowed in an early scene when Quentin and his new young love Holga visit the site of a Nazi concentration camp. "My brothers died here and my brothers built this place" (163), Quentin declares in the play's last speech.

Arthur Miller's honesty, depth and the very compassionate feelings he has given to portray the character of Maggie. The semi-autobiographical play, *After the Fall* was first

produced in 1964, shortly after the death of his ex-wife, Marilyn Monroe in 1962. However, this play seems largely an attempt to come with the author's life and his marriage failures which occurred throughout his career. The story focuses on Quentin, a middle aged lawyer who addresses the audience with a series of reminisces about his life. The play is a memory play and Quentin leads the audience throughout his past by jumping backwards and forwards through the different events which shaped his life. Like most of Miller's plays, the action focuses on a man and the women in his life. By telling us about his mother and how she abused her husband and lied to her son, the beginning of his life does not hold well for its future. He speaks of his first wife's burgeoning independence which he cannot help and his second wife (obviously Marilyn Monroe), the actress' vulnerable personality and addiction to drugs and alcohol. However there is hope with his new fiancé, a German archeologist who is haunted by her experience during the Second World War; as each of them attempt to get over their past experiences, perhaps they can have a future together. Quentin also delves into his experience during the McCarthy trials and his family and friends' indictment for supposed communist activities during that turbulent time. Quentin's life is one which is consumed by guilt; he feels guilty of not being able to fulfill his previous wives' needs and especially guilty of his wife Maggie, the actress' suicide. Maggie depended upon Quentin to an extreme extent and Quentin could not handle the burden of her emotional needs. As Maggie decided to end her life, Quentin remains torn by his responsibility but hopes that Holga, his new fiancé, and he can perhaps heal each other and find life beyond their past and the tumultuous events of American and European history which also haunt them.

The play, *After the Fall* begins with Quentin sitting center stage on a chair in a dim light. In the background is a three-level, colorless stone tower, symbolic of the Nazi concentration camps, on which the people of his past walk in and out of his mind as he talks to himself. Quentin is, as it were, on trial, and he addresses the jury, “the Listener” or audience, in order to justify himself to himself. His monologue then becomes a dialogue with the people of his past as he seeks to alleviate his guilt over destructive relationships with two former wives.

After the Fall demonstrates one man’s struggle to survive in a fallen world. The fall from Eden is a recurrent theme in American literature—America, after all, was established as a kind of New World Garden, a bountiful paradise that would yield endless riches. It would bring forth an ideal community in which all individuals could live together in harmony and prosperity. The possibility of a fallen Eden, however, always lurked in the Puritan commitment to the individual’s natural propensity for evil.

The protagonist, the lawyer Quentin is shown suffering in life with his first wife Louise who is angry, jealous and cuts him no slack. He does however offer a clue to the problem with his first wife. Quentin exists in a daze, showing little emotion for anyone and little interest in anything but himself. He seems to stand outside most of what is happening. Quentin says to his wife: “You have turned your back on me in bed.” (56) It indicates that he does not pay any attention to his wife. Quentin again says to Louise “I’m not very

demonstrative.” (56) Louise replies in her own way: “I’m not your mother; I’m a separate person.” (57) and it is clearly found that there is a problem between them.

Second wife Maggie who radiates energy and sensuality is a neurotic flake, totally wrapped up in herself (as opposed to Quentin, of course). The shy, although innocently hot and bubbly Maggie, rises from switchboard operator to famous singer. She becomes self-involved, cloying, vicious, and irrational. She drinks and takes barbiturates; there is no indication why Quentin accuses her of hating all who do not grovel at her feet. And she is another hysterical screamer. A scene where she strips to her underwear is especially dreadful and exploitive. It seems she is never known a decent woman.

His mother, a talky, manipulative lady with a pretentious accent assails her doting husband when his business collapses and leaves them bereft of cash. Quentin, on the other hand, is good and decent. He heroically puts his own career at risk when he agrees to represent Lou, a law professor who has been called up by a congressional witch-hunting committee. Lou, out of loyalty to the Communist Party, wrote a book that ignored some flaws in Soviet law, and it turns out that his wife, Elsie made him write the lies. She, by the way, is cheating on him.

Miller acknowledges that Quentin has flaws. In one occasion he discusses with his first wife about their married life. It is clearly found that the wife is not at all happy with her husband:

Quentin: You have turned your back on me in bed, Louise, I am not insane!

Quentin, *fallen*: Well, I—I'm not very demonstrative...I worry about you all day.

Louise:...there are never any issues, and you'll fly around in a constant bath of praise—

Quentin: Well, I wouldn't mind a little praise, what's wrong with praise?

Louise: I am not a praise machine! I am not a blur and I am not your mother! I am a separate person! (57)

Finally, in Austria, he meets the wonderful archeologist, Holga, a stand-in for Miller's late third wife, the photographer Inge Morath. Holga is not only sexy while being reasonable, soft-spoken, and undemanding, but she represents political morality, the opposite of everything he's seen in the U.S. She takes him to a concentration camp, but he does not want to see it. Here is a woman who is more political and moral than he is. And it gives him a chance to subtly compare the moral behavior of those who supported or protested the McCarthy era with those who supported or fought the Nazis.

Arthur Miller is a social dramatist. He is always important, tackling big issues that echo in the mind long after the performance. His high moral standards offer a tonic in these times, when morality seems no longer a criterion for judging behavior. Not to suggest that the play, *After the Fall*, works on the audience like a dose of corrective salts. In Miller's plays, typically, an individual consciousness pits itself against a norm or group-think or shared attitude to his ultimate benefit, a recognition of his inadequacy and the acquisition of humility. Arthur Ganz, the critic, has written in his book, *Realms of the Self: Variations on a Theme in Modern Drama*:

“But beyond the personal guilt that Quentin finds in his life and in the lives of those about him, there exists, Miller wishes us to understand, a larger universal guilt of which these are only examples. (139)

The protagonist of *After the Fall*, a lawyer, Quentin, examines his failed relationships with women and the ghosts of his past amid larger political and social failures like the aftermath of the Holocaust and the McCarthy Communist witch hunt. The ugly reality after the fall of belief in a communist good proves again, for Miller, that the individual is always implicated in the state: there is no such thing as a private act.

More immediately, the play may have intended to exorcise Marilyn Monroe in 1964 two years after her death. Being taken into Miller's mind on the subject so widely celebrated in a sad way, generates several complex feelings. The Marilyn character, the adorable child in the sexy woman's body, Maggie, is so self indulgent, so infantile, so emotionally demanding and humiliating, we gladly would help throttle her. At no time do we suspect

Miller of making her more monstrous than she was, if anything the reverse. He forgives her for draining him of vital energy, of soul, of life—her needs were insatiable. No amount of attention was enough for the unformed girl who never grew up to independence. At one point, he warns her that her carefully controlled Hollywood image will be “blown” by news of her acting out and her drug addiction.

After the Fall is a memory play, set in 1962 at Idlewild airport, a marvelous metaphor for the protagonist’s transient consciousness. His mind ranges over scenes of his two marriages, his half expressed desires, his deep sense of loss hinging on Marilyn’s death about a year earlier, and his mistakes at a moment when he is about to marry for the third time. A sobering occasion, Women fill his past and cluster round him from time to time on stage as he talks to someone just this side of the footlights.

The play deals with Quentin’s inner feelings on thing that he had to deal with in his life. The certain aspects that he touched in this play are his marriage with Marilyn Monroe, who was a great actress in her time. Marilyn is portrayed though the character Maggie who is a very innocent girl who, like Marilyn, was looked at mainly as a sex symbol. *After the Fall* also deals with Millers brush with authorities over communism in the 50s. To describe this concept Miller describes himself as a lawyer who is defending an old friend who is being threaded as being a communist or portraying communistic ideas in his book. Robert Hogan has written on the play *After the Fall*.

“Technically [*After the Fall*] is a brilliant accomplishment. In it Miler solves his perennial problem of how to retain sufficient real psychology and a full fee of the real world and at the same time to attain a free flow of time and to probe more deeply into a man’s mind than conventional realism allows.” (CLC 1 p.217)

After the Fall dramatizes the story of Quentin, a lawyer who has been living ‘merely in the service of his success. Quentin relives and examines some of the important attachments in his life. He analyzes his relationships with his father, mother, and brother. He recalls his two marriages, the first to Louise, which floundered and broke on the shoals of disinterest and non-communion. The second to Maggie, which began with high hopes and the quest for love, and ended in hatred, guilt, recrimination, and death. He remembers an involvement with Felice, a young woman whose idolization of him makes him realize with concurrent pangs of selfishness and shame his power over another person’s life.

Quentin also reviews two important friendships: with Lou, a gentle, sensitive professor who committed suicide after being harassed by a congressional investigating committee, and with Mickey, a fellow attorney who did testify and knuckled under to the committee’s demands that he informs. And throughout his contemplation of these harrowing relationships, Quentin attempts to discover what bond, if any, exists between himself and concentration camp whose blasted stone tower remains a focal image in his

mind throughout the play. After reviewing the wreckage of his life and the lives he has helped to smash, he arrives at the simple but profound realization that love and compassion are not enough, that life—as Holga has tried to tell him earlier. And then, wondering if ‘the knowing is all,’ he attempts to move beyond despair, fearfully but hopefully reaching out to the woman who waits for him.

Because the action takes place ‘in the mind, thought and memory of the protagonist,’ the form of *After the Fall* is loose and free-flowing, encompassing psychological rather than chronological time. The play does not uphold in a linear arc but in a series of recollections and associations as Quentin’s thoughts glide back and forth in time and space. Everything the audience sees is viewed through the reflector of his memory, and consequently the viewer never gets an objective picture of any people in Quentin’s life. They are ghosts, phantoms flaring fitfully in the recesses of ‘a mind questing over its own surfaces and into its depths’. As the drama develops, its movement becomes increasingly centrifugal. With every collection, Quentin is clarifying the blurred past, adjusting the lens of his perception, and bringing his life slowly and torturously into sharper focus. The process is familiar. Like the thematic development of all Miller’s dramas, the movement of *After the Fall* is toward deepening awareness and significance.

After the Fall also resembles the majority of Miller’s plays in another respect. It is structured as a trial. Quentin speaks to an amorphous listener who might represent a number of things. He might possibly be friend of Quentin’s, or may be his analyst, since

a nervous breakdown is implied in the initial exposition. He might even be God. However, since the drama unravels within the mind of its protagonist, the listener can be most reasonably and meaningfully interpreted as Quentin himself, and the conversation as an inner dialogue. The technique of the play is thus psycho-analytical, but as Critic William Packard has astutely observed, the psychoanalysis is set ‘within a metaphor of law’. (Packard 12) Quentin’s initial remarks quickly and clearly establish the relevance of this metaphor.

You know, more and more I think that for many years I looked at life like a case at law, a series of proofs. When you’re young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then what a good lover; then, a good father; finally how wise, or powerful or what-the-hell-ever. But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That I was moving on an upward path toward some elevation, where— God knows what— I would be justified, or even condemned— a verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day— and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself— this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. (3)

The drama begins characteristically with a lawyer’s opening statement before the bench, albeit an empty one. Quentin has lost the glib optimism of the younger lawyer who prepares a brief with an observable and probable resolution in sight. He can no longer view his existence as a series of proofs leading upward to some kind of surety. But even

though he is wryly embarrassed at his smugly legalistic approach of former days he still observes his life through an attorney's eye. He analyzes himself, but in the process turns his examination into a trial in which he is not only both defendant and prosecutor, but judge and jury as well. Actually, investigation would be a better term than trial, since the procedure is not meant to culminate in either absolution or condemnation, but in comprehension. Harold Clurman in introduction to his book, *The Portable Arthur Miller* says:

“A moralist stops at nothing in his pursuit of virtue. If he is honest he is driven to sit in judgment upon himself. Pressed by this self-induced compulsion, he can hardly forbear from self-accusation and self-condemnation. To recover from what must surely prove a debilitating or destructive sense of guilt, he gropes toward self-rehabilitation. This process is most vividly traced in *After the Fall*.” (xvii)

Quentin suffers and reasons, and if this process renders him unemotional it is because the audience is measuring emotion. But it extends beyond sentiment and is integrally linked to discovery and self-awareness. Quentin will never elicit the reaction that Willy Loman does because he is too cognizant of his anguish to give himself wholly to it, too perceptive to suffer unthinkingly. It is just about impossible to have a good cry over him because he asks for more than a purging of the tear ducts. He asks us not just to feel, but to know why we feel. He demands more of us than love or sympathy; he calls for comprehension. Quentin is aiming not only at the heart, but at the mind.

Quentin is a man who has fallen from the illusion of grace, the comfortable certainty of purpose. Leafing through the once tightly and handsomely bound casebook of his life, he discovers the loss of faith, the loss of love, the loss of innocence, and, finally, the loss of identity.