

Arthur Miller

(1915–)

by Robert Anderson

Arthur Miller, considered by many to be the pre-eminent American playwright of the second half of the twentieth century, was born in New York City. His father manufactured women's coats, and his mother was a schoolteacher. In high school, Arthur was more involved with sports than with literature. "Until the age of seventeen," Miller said, "I can safely say that I never read a book weightier than *Tom Swift* and *The Rover Boys*, and only verged on literature with some Dickens."

On graduation from high school, Miller applied to the University of Michigan, but his grades were not good enough for a scholarship, and the Depression left his father unable to finance his tuition. To earn money for college, Miller worked for two years in an automobile parts plant, where, incidentally, he read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The experience in the parts plant later supplied him with the material for his 1955 play *A Memory of Two Mondays*.

Miller eventually enrolled in the University of Michigan. To help finance his education, he took on various jobs. First, he was a mouse tender in the university science laboratory. Later, he moved on (and up) to become the night editor of the *Michigan Daily*. More important, he started to write plays.

After graduation, Miller returned to New York and, like many of us "playwrights-in-waiting," earned a living by writing radio scripts for such programs as *Cavalcade of America*, the *Columbia Workshop*, and *The Theatre Guild of the Air*.

Miller's first Broadway success, *All My Sons*, was produced in 1947 and won The New York Drama Critic's award for Best Play. That play struck a note that was to become familiar in Miller's work: the need for moral responsibility in families and society.

In 1949, with the production of his masterpiece, *Death of a Salesman* (written in a small studio he built with his own hands on his prop-



erty in northwestern Connecticut), all promises were fulfilled. Miller instantly joined the pantheon of the great American playwrights.

It was totally in character that Miller's next play, produced in 1953, should be *The Crucible*—about a witch hunt that took place in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts. In that witch-hunt, Miller found parallels to the "Red hunt" being conducted in the 1950s in Washington, D.C., by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Writers, actors, politicians—and all kinds of other people—were summoned to appear before McCarthy to answer the question: "Are you now or were you ever a Communist?" Those summoned were required to inform on neighbors and friends or be sent to jail.

Three years after the production of *The Crucible* in New York, Miller was summoned before a congressional committee. He spoke freely about himself and his occasional attendance, years before, as a guest at Communist meetings; but he refused to name names of other people in attendance. Miller was found in contempt of Congress, but his conviction was later overturned by the Supreme Court.

The Crucible was not successful in its first production. Some critics questioned the comparison between the old witch-hunts and the contemporary hunt for Communists in government. In a later production, supervised by Miller himself, the play ran for over six hundred performances. It is now Miller's most produced play.