

Miller in Focus: New Perspectives in Hungarian Miller Studies

Mária Kurdi, ed. *Arthur Miller öröksége: Centenáriumi írások műveiről* [The Legacy of Arthur Miller: Centennial Writings about His Works]. AMERICANA eBOOKS, University of Szeged, 2015. ISBN: 978-615-5423-18-5 (.mobi); 978-615-5423-19-2 (.epub); 978-615-5423-20-8 (PoD)

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October 17, 2015, marked the centenary of Arthur Miller's birth. Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is considered to be one of the greatest American playwrights, whose work served to define the moral, social and political realities of the contemporary U.S. (Bigsby 1). His plays continue to be popular among readers and audiences across the world, and he remains a defining voice in American literature. Miller dramatized his social conscience into political action by bringing together the public and the personal in his writings. Among the central points of his plays are issues of personal responsibility, the human psyche in the complexity of family relationships, class and race relations, the failure of the American Dream, and the burden of the past disclosed in the present. Miller believed that one of the purposes of contemporary theatre was to face the past and to manifest repressed memories (Bollobás 556). Besides his writings, his legacy also includes his public activities. He always believed in civil liberties, the rights of artists, the freedom of speech, and expression of one's views. Moreover, he was committed to progressive causes and democratic rights. His oeuvre was shaped by the major events of his lifetime—the Depression, World War II, McCarthyism and the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and the Cold War anxieties of the Reagan era (Dreier). Miller valued his public responsibility as an active citizen and an advocate of human rights, therefore he set an example with his ardent resistance to the House Un-American Activities Committee of the 1950s and his open rejection of the Vietnam War (Dreier). Moreover, he took the position of president of PEN International¹ (1965-69), an organization representing writers,

¹ As the PEN International website states, the organization PEN International was founded in London, UK, in 1921. The association was one of the world's first NGOs and amongst the first international organizations supporting human rights. It was the first worldwide international body of authors, and the first organization to specify that freedom of expression and literature are integral (PEN International).

and, he was dedicated to its principles by leading the organization into what he called “the conscience of the world writing community” (Dreier).

Miller’s centenary legacy had been honored with productions, articles, events, and festivals by reaching diverse audiences worldwide. *Arthur Miller öröksége: centenáriumi írások műveiről* [The Legacy of Arthur Miller: Centennial Writings about His Works] is a pivotal contribution to the Hungarian field of Miller studies, advancing his oeuvre by attention to new theoretical approaches. It focuses on writings, including Miller’s novel *Focus* (1945), and plays such as *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *After the Fall* (1964), and *Resurrection Blues* (2002), which had not been in the limelight before. Moreover, no similar volume on Miller has been published in Hungary in the last decades.

Mária Kurdi, professor emerita, the editor of the present volume, specializes in modern Irish literature and English-speaking drama. Among others, she has guest-edited issues of the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* on Brian Friel and Arthur Miller respectively, as well as guest-edited a themed block on Caryl Churchill in the same journal. The Miller issue of *HJEAS* comprising a collection of essays under the title *Representations of the Family in Modern English-Language Drama in Memory of Arthur Miller* came out in the fall of 2005, not long after Miller’s death in the same year. As Kurdi says in the “Preface” to this collection, the “contributors are from Hungary, the United States, Great Britain, Greece, India and Ireland, whose interest in and interrogation of Miller and the genre [the family play] he excelled in are informed by a variety of cultural as well as critical traditions” (5). Recently, Kurdi’s new book *Approaches to Irish Theatre through a Hungarian’s Lens: Essays and Review Articles* was published by the Institute of English Studies at the University of Pécs (2018), in which some of the pieces discuss the interface between Irish and American drama, including references to Miller.

The present volume includes six critical essays focusing on Miller’s oeuvre, bracing new critical perspectives. Meanwhile, the essays rethink many of the persistent themes of Miller criticism such as the issues of anti-Semitism, the family play paradigm, the memory play, the narrative techniques of the absurd drama and the intercultural relationships of the American and Irish theatres; they do so in an ingenious manner, challenging and transgressing former assumptions, calling attention to current, potential areas of research. The collection is not and cannot be a complete analysis of Miller’s multi-faceted oeuvre. However, as Kurdi argues in the “Preface,” it does not endeavor to act as such (2).

The strength of the volume lies not only in the content of the book but its modern format, reflecting the increasing importance and changing trend of digitalized academic publications. Kurdi’s free-access e-book—issued in .prc and .epub format to make it available not only to PCs but also to other technological gadgets—was published by *AMERICANA eBooks*, which is related to *AMERICANA - E-Journal of American Studies* in Hungary, published by the Department of American Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary. The general editors, Réka M. Cristian and Zoltán Dragon, as their publishing information implies, are strongly committed to open access publication and dedicated to providing a quality forum for young scholars and researchers who aspire to contribute inventive and new methodologies and approaches to the field of American Studies (*AMERICANA eBOOKS*). Kurdi’s digital-born edition, published

in Hungarian, pertinently contributes to the novelty of the book by its very mode of publication, addressing an expanded audience, something which was also decisive to Miller who, as Elysa Gardner quotes him, “hated the idea of theater being an elitist art form for wealthy people.”

The essays of Tamás Kisantal and Mária Kurdi provide a solid and cohesive theoretical framework for the collection. Tamás Kisantal, in his thought-provoking essay “Tükör által homályosan ... Az antiszemitizmus ábrázolása Arthur Miller *Gyűjtőpont* című regényében” [Through the Distorted View of a Mirror... The Representation of Anti-Semitism in Arthur Miller’s Novel *Focus*], traces how anti-Semitism became intensified in the postwar United States. Kisantal, an expert on Holocaust literature and film studies, primarily places the issue of anti-Semitism in the historical and cultural context of the US by showing parallels with two film adaptations: *Gentleman’s Agreement* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1947) and *Crossfire* (dir. Edward Dmytryk, 1947). Secondly, he scrutinizes the symbols of sight and perspective with a close reading of the novel and challenges the contemporary critical reception of Miller’s *Focus* by arguing that its classification as a “thesis novel” is controversial since the work is more complex; it is rather a grotesque and ironic story. Therefore, the protagonist, Newman is not becoming a “new man;” rather he consciously chooses only one role, an ideological viewpoint from the many to face racism.

The studies of Ákos Attila Seress and Lenke Németh attempt to (re)define the paradigm changes in Miller’s family plays. Seress in his study “A család szerepe Arthur Miller drámáiban” [The Family and the Bunker: the Role of the Family in Arthur Miller’s Dramas] reveals that there is a striking difference between Miller’s essay about the role of the family [“The Family in Modern Drama”] and what is depicted in his dramas. In his analysis of Miller’s early plays from the 1940s, such as *The Man Who Had All The Luck* (1944), *All My Sons* (1947), and *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Seress claims that the family is not a protective bunker of the subject anymore, rather a medium which focuses and reinforces social expectations upon the subject (50). Németh in her essay “Az amerikai családregény megújul: Arthur Miller *Lefelé a hegyről*” [The Renewal of American Family Drama: Arthur Miller’s *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*] concentrates on a later play by Miller, *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), and argues that this play is a detour from the American family play conventions as it depicts the identity crisis of the middle-class American man in the 1980s and thus renews the American family play model by injecting it with current themes and changing its dynamism (Németh 55).

Another dimension is added to the complexity of Miller’s drama techniques with two studies by young scholars. Zsófia Balassa in her essay “Narratív (tudat) határok. Arthur Miller: *A bűnbeesés után*” [Transgressing the Narrative Borders of Consciousness. Arthur Miller: *After the Fall*] highlights the genre of the memory play and compares it to the conventions of the monodrama. In her innovative study, she reveals the traces of a modernist narrative technique, the stream of consciousness in the play through the medium of the *mise-en-scène* by revealing the delicate border of drama and prose (Balassa 75). Meanwhile, Márta Ótött in her study “Az elzavart Messiás: Rituálé és abszurd problematikája Arthur Miller *Feltámadás blues* című drámájában” [The Rejected Messiah: the Problematic Relations of the Ritual and

the Absurd in Arthur Miller's *Resurrection Blues*] focuses on elements of the absurd drama in the play and highlights its relations with ironic rituals presented in the play as a political satire. According to Ótót, Miller compares the TV constructed reality of the new millennium with the one formulated by ideology. As a closure of her essay, she points to the ironic twist in the drama when the ritual of redemption is transforming into the ritual of expedience by the free choice of people to reject the Messiah Ralph/Charles and redefining their roles in the constructed reality of the dominant ideology (Ótót 106).

In the final essay of the collection, Mária Kurdi focuses on the intercultural relations between the American and Irish theatres. In her essay "Arthur Miller és az ír színház" [Arthur Miller and Irish Theatre], Kurdi provides a well-documented background for the mutual relationships of the American and Irish theatres by presenting cultural historical details such as the story of the "Boys," namely, Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards, the founders of the Gate Theatre in Dublin, or the 2015 centenary performance of *A View from the Bridge* (1965) in that renowned theatre (Kurdi 125).

Noémi Albert's work "Bibliográfia Magyar szerzők Arthur Millerről szóló írásaiból 2005-2015" [Bibliography of Hungarian Authors' Writings on Arthur Miller] is the closing chapter of the volume and a skillful indicator for further research on the topic. This bibliography continues Lehel Vadon's earlier work, who compiled a large-scale bibliography about Miller's reception in Hungary up to 2004 inclusive for the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* in 2005 (Kurdi, "Preface" 4).

The novelty and relevance of Kurdi's edited book lie in the careful and focused selection of essays in a way that the whole highlights the development of Miller's drama techniques, his constant revitalizing and rethinking of ideas. The volume is assuredly a stimulating and invaluable re/source for students and scholars interested in current trends of Miller studies. Furthermore, the book is undoubtedly a noteworthy contribution to Arthur Miller's centenary celebrations.

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