**Arthur Miller's *The Price*: Families, the Depression, and Clifford Odets**
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Like many authors, Arthur Miller wrote from what he knew, beginning with his first play, *No Villain*, during spring break as a sophomore at the University of Michigan in 1936. Drawing directly from his own family's life, it is the story of a once-successful immigrant family that, like the Franz's in *The Price*, became financially devastated after the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Miller wrote other plays that related to his own experiences as well as the moral and social climate of his time. Those specifically influenced by the Depression were *They Too Arise* (1937) a revised version of *No Villain, The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955), *The Price*, and *American Clock* (1979), which was based on Studs Terkel's *Hard Times*, an oral history of the Great Depression.

In these plays, the Depression provided the catalyst for personal and political tensions between two brothers and their father. Father-son conflict is found in other Miller plays without a Depression-related focus. These include *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949). More examples will be discussed later in the paper.

According to Susan C. W. Abbotson in her *Critical Companion to Arthur Miller: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, Miller had formulated some of his ideas for *The Price* in the early 1950s, but it took two decades and the encouragement of director Ulu Grosbard to bring it to fruition. Miller wrote it mainly in 1967; its completion was catalyzed by his father's death the previous year. The inspiration for Victor was Miller's childhood friend, Sidney Franks, who joined the police force to earn the income to support his impoverished father.

*The Price* is rife with even more parallels to Miller's life. His mother, Augusta, a pianist (the senior Mrs. Franz was a harpist) was born in New York to Austrian Jewish parents. She favored him in the way Victor's mother adores him (per Walter, page 53 of the script). His father, Isidore, was an Austrian Jewish immigrant who built a women's clothing manufacturing business that grew to employ 400 people. The family was wealthy, maintaining a summer "bungalow", as described by Miller in his autobiography, *Timebends*, in Far Rockaway, Queens and employing a chauffeur. (In *The Price*, Victor mentions on page 22 that Far Rockaway is where he is mostly stationed as a cop, and tells Solomon on page 32 that his family had a chauffeur.) A week after Arthur's fourteenth birthday the market crashed, and the Miller family, whose fortune had been heavily invested in stocks, lost almost everything. They moved from a large and lavish Central Park North apartment to cramped quarters in Gravesend, Brooklyn. While in high school, Arthur delivered bread at four o'clock every morning to contribute to the family finances. Though a mediocre student, he was determined to go to college, and worked several menial jobs after graduation to save towards tuition. He tried attending night classes in New York City College for a few weeks, but dropped out when he was unable to keep

up with both school and work. After two years, Miller finally scraped up enough money, and started college in 1934.
In *The Price*, Victor attends but doesn't finish college: on page 22, Solomon asks him "You went to college?" and he answers, "For a while, ya". Both Miller and Victor had odd jobs as young men. Besides his bread delivery route and stint in an auto parts store (the basis for *A Memory of Two Mondays*), Miller was a ship fitter's helper in the Brooklyn Navy Yard at 26. Then a newlywed, he worked the night shift to free his days for writing. On page 29, Victor tells Solomon "I used to sell encyclopedias door-to-door … I was the top man in the southern part of Westchester County."

In *Timebends*, Miller describes his older brother, Kermit, as "intent on rebuilding the family fortunes" after the Crash. Kermit dropped out of New York University in 1932 to assist Isidore in "another of his soon-to-fail coat businesses". Kermit believed in his father as Victor believed in his: according to Miller, he was busy "mobilizing himself to save our father, whom he had romanticized into a fallen giant". This dynamic is paralleled in *The Price*. Victor explains on page 74 that he continued to help his father, even after he knew he had enough money to sustain himself, because "you can't help trying to keep it going … I thought if I stuck with him, if he could see that somebody was still … on his side … I wanted to stop it from falling apart". Page 16, Victor says: "What was he?–a busted businessman like thousands of others, and I acted like some kind of mountain crashed." But the elder Mr. Franz, like his counterpart Isidore Miller, was unable to make a comeback. "Some men just don't bounce", Victor tells Solomon on page 32, explaining that his father was demoralized because "He believed in it. The system, the whole thing.–He thought it [the Crash] was his fault. Paralyzed, he did nothing, "Just sat here. Listened to the radio".

Mr. Franz's rationale and resulting state of mind were not uncommon during the Depression, as Miller writes in *Timebends*:

> It has often been said that what kept the United States from revolution in the depths of the Great Depression was the readiness of Americans to blame themselves rather than the system for their downfall. A fine dusting of guilt fell upon the shoulders of the failed fathers, and for some unknown number of them there would never be a recovery of dignity and self-assurance, only an endless death-in-life down to the end. Already in the early thirties, within a year or two of the collapse, the papers were reporting that in New York City alone there were nearly a hundred thousand people who had been psychologically traumatized to the point where they would probably never be able to work again. Nor was it only a question of insufficient food; it was hope that had gone out of them, the life illusion and the capacity to believe again. America, as Archibald MacLeish would write, was promises, and for some the Crash was in the deepest sense a broken promise.

Miller watched this hopelessness engulf his own father and many in his community. He writes in *Timebends*, "By the fall of 1932 it was no longer possible in our house to disguise our fears. Producing even the fifty-dollar-a-month mortgage payment was

becoming a strain … There was an aching absence in the house of any ruling idea or leadership, my father by now having fallen into the habit of endlessly napping in his time at home or occasionally looking at me and asking, "What do you think you're going to do?" With my life, that is."

He goes on to describe how it would alter his relationship with Isidore:

> I had never raised my voice against my father, nor did he against me, then or ever. As I knew perfectly well, it was not he who angered me, only his failure to cope with his fortune's collapse. Thus I had two fathers, the real one and the metaphoric, and the latter I resented because he did not know how to win out over the general collapse. Along with a desire to help, I was filling with pity for him as first the chauffeur was let go and then the seven-passenger National went and the summer bungalow was discarded—as the waiting began for the past to return and the unreality of the present wound itself around us all like some dusty vine that had taken root in the living room carpet and could not be kept down for more than a day before it grew again. Never complaining or even talking about his business problems, my father simply went more deeply silent, and his naps grew longer, and his mouth seemed to dry up.

He also observed how his mother's attitude towards her husband changed.  "When he needed her, she vomited," Walter says of his mother on page 74. His own mother, Miller describes in *Timebends*, was angry at his father, "at this waning of his powers; when a system fails, people will seek out each other's weaknesses to account for their troubles, just as ancient kings slew the messenger who brought evil news. It was my father who was our link to the outside world, and his news was bad every night. I must have adopted my mother's early attitudes toward his failure, her impatience at the beginning of the calamity and her alarm as it got worse, and finally a certain sneering contempt for him that filtered through her voice."

Yet, Arthur and his mother felt compassion towards Isidore.  "Had I been able to side with her [Augusta] wholeheartedly in her disappointment with my father, my course would have been straightforward and probably fairly painless", he wrote, "But I couldn't help blushing for him when she made him her target, since I admired his warm and gentle nature as much as I despaired of his illiterate mind. And her way was never straight and simple; she could veer suddenly and see with a blast of clarity and remorse that what had happened to him had happened to a man of a certain honor and uncomplaining strength. For love of me and all of us she divided us against ourselves, unknowingly, innocently, because she believed—as I was beginning to believe myself—that with sufficient intelligence a person could outwit the situation. Why couldn't he do that? … There was no contradiction, in this or anything else, that fazed her; she could be moved to tears by her husband's endurance and dignified refusal to complain, and within an hour make a remark about his blockheadedness."

Walter seems to lack any compassion for his father, not even the sporadic variety of Augusta's and Arthur's. In fact, he regards him with contempt. Miller concedes in *Timebends* "the Depression was as much an occasion as a cause of such father-son collisions". Walter admits that his disdain for his father was the flip side of fear "of it ever happening to me … as it happened to him. Overnight for no reason, to find yourself degraded and thrown-down". He pursued wealth, not allowing his family's plight to derail him, urging Victor to do the same. Driven by ambition and greed, which he ascribes in hindsight to "terror … the slow, daily fear you call ambition, and cautiousness, and piling up the money …", he thrived during the Depression. The price he pays, however, is one Miller describes as a familiar "Depression story with its obsessive terror of failure and its guilt for success." The outcome of Walter's success is his consuming guilt and its ensuing anguish.

In an interview with Ronald Hayman in 1970, Miller said, "In *The Price*, a man is faced with the fact that he participated in his own alienation from himself and in so doing discovers himself in what he did. In short, a far higher consciousness of our own powers over life still awaits us as a breed. Victor Franz refuses to merely rediscover the love he put into the house and finally persists in seeing it as a value, whatever others made of it. " The brothers, though many decades distanced from the impact of the 1930's, were still infected by its fallout.

Conflict between brothers is a recurring theme with Miller – it's found in *No Villain* with Arnold and Ben Simon; in *Honors at Dawn* (1936) with Max and Harry Zabrinsky, in *The Man Who Had All the Luck* with David and Amos Beeves, in *All My Sons* (1947) with Chris and Harry Keller, in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) with Biff and Happy Loman, and in *After the Fall* (1964) with Quentin and Dan. Though Arthur and Kermit's relationship seems tangential to that of Victor and Walter in *The Price*, Miller spoke to his preeminent biographer, Christopher Bigsby, about his – and his readers' – connection to what the brothers represent. Here's a excerpt from that interview in *The Paris Review*, Fall 1999, which coincided with the Broadway revival of *The Price*:

> Bigsby: *The Price*, which was your most successful play since *Death of a Salesman*, premiered in 1968. It doesn't feel like a 1968 play. It's about two brothers who come together to dispose of their father's estate, symbolized by a room full of furniture, so they spend a lot of their time looking back to the past, and this in a decade, the sixties, when the past tended to be dismissed as an irrelevance. Did you feel that that?
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> Miller: That's why I wrote about it. I wanted to tell them that the past counted, that they were creatures of the past just as we all were. They had affected to negate the past, cut themselves off from it, and throw it in a wastebasket. As it turned out, they were as much effected by their fathers and grandfathers. There was no way to escape it, anymore than you could escape the beat of your own heart. I was on vacation in the Caribbean just before we produced *The Price* and ran into Mel Brooks. I'd never known him before. He said, 'Well, what are you

> doing now?' I said, 'Well, I just wrote this play that we're about to put on. It's called *The Price*'. He said, 'What's it about?' I said, 'Well, there are these two brothers …' He said, 'Stop, I'm crying!'

Mel Brooks, like Solomon, has a talent for bringing a particular levity to a charged situation.

Miller wrote about the Depression, its impact and its aftermath, not just personally, but also to satisfy his conviction that "art ought to be of use in changing society". "I knew," he writes in *Timebends*, "that the Depression was only incidentally a matter of money. Rather, it was a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the facade of American society". A newly minted Marxist at 16, Miller tried to a radicalize his father to an understanding of how the current economic and social system was responsible for his demise, but Isidore would have none of it. He'd concede that his failure was entirely his fault, with what Miller called "measly and ungainly facts, that simply angered me more at his stupidity". However, Miller ultimately saw Marxism as "a way of forgiving my father, for it showed him as a kind of digit in a nearly cosmic catastrophe that was beyond his powers to avoid."

In "The Shadows of the Gods", an article he wrote for *Harper's Magazine* in August 1958, Arthur Miller writes that he learned from the Depression "the power of economic crisis and political imperatives which has twisted, torn, eroded and marked everything and everyone I laid eyes on," and "Practically everything that had been said and done up to 1929 turned out to be a fake." Like Walter does, he casts doubt on the success dream, the ideal of the twenties: " ... should one admire success?- for there were successful people even then? Or should one always see through it as an illusion which only existed to be blown up, and its owner destroyed and humiliated. Was success immoral? – when everybody else in the neighborhood not only had no Buick but no breakfast?" Miller's questions about the ethics of success provide a continuous through-line in so many of his plays.

Clifford Odets explores the same questions with a similar continuity in his plays. Miller credits Odets with stirring his desire to write for the stage in his essay "The American Writer: The American Theater" in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. "Whatever triggered my imagination toward the play form is lost to me now", he writes, "but it may well have been a production of an early Odets play by the Group Theater. Oddly enough, I cannot recall which play … I was hooked … I know it was not only the acting or the crazy poetry of Odets's lines. It was also what he was saying and what this whole way of acting was saying. It is a convenience to call their message Marxist or revolutionary; but for me it was more like being provided with an emotion, an emotion appropriate to the frustrations of living in the early thirties, specifically, the verb, if you will, for protesting the cursed irrationality of our lives. For people were starving then in America, while food was being burned up on the farms for want of a price. Odets seemed to provide a license for outrage, which has to be the first step towards a moral view. To me, as to most of the critics and the media of the time, he was overwhelmingly the clarion playwright."

In the same collection, another Miller essay, “About Theater Language: Afterword to ‘The Last Yankee,’” also recognizes Odets’ influence: “For younger writers such as myself, Odets for a couple of years was the trailblazer; he was bringing the suffering of the Great Depression onto the Broadway stage and making audiences listen”.

If Odets was the trailblazer, Miller was the torchbearer following the path he marked. They each approached the subject of success and the impact of the Depression through their respective, and similar, social positions. They were both from middle class Jewish families. In 1929, when the Depression occurred, Odets was an unknown, struggling actor of twenty-three. Miller was fourteen years old, still supported by his father, but soon to experience an immediate and massive lifestyle change that the loss of the family fortune would precipitate.

The Odets play Miller cites as having such a profound effect on him could well have been *Awake and Sing!* It is identified as such by Koichro Doi in “Clifford Odets and Arthur Miller on American Success”, though the author doesn’t name a source for his information.

Like *The Price*, *Awake and Sing!* dramatizes the conflict between two ideals represented by two family members in the face of the dire economic conditions brought about by the Depression. In *Awake and Sing!*, the character of Bessie Berger parallels that of Walter, while her father, Jacob, is the Victor of the play (though his speech patterns resemble those of Solomon in *The Price*.) Bessie defines success in materialistic terms and Jacob, a Marxist, clings to his ideals of a world economy shaped by justice and cooperation. Just as Walter’s father idolized him for his financial achievement and its accompanying status, Bessie worships her brother Monty, as the only materially successful member of the family. Jacob, on the other hand, cautions his grandson Ralph against a success that’s "printed on dollar bills" pointing out that the price his uncle has paid is a personal life. Monty is unmarried and “will die unmarried”, admitting that “Business don't stop for personal life”.

Harold Clurman, in *The Divine Pastime*, sees Odets’ examination of success as a response to his inner demons. “His was a rebellion against our materialism, our subservience to the idol of success as the supreme good,” he writes in his essay “Will They Awake and Sing in 1970?”. “Odets' denunciation of this blight was not that of a sociological preacher. He knew its corrosive properties because they dwelt within him.”

Odets culled from his personal experiences, and explored personal questions and his own ethics and beliefs as Miller did. Writing in *Life Printed on Dollar Bills: The Idea of the Marketplace in the Work of Clifford Odets*, Christopher John Herr points out that “Odets' career really began when he recognized that his personal experience as a first-generation Russian-Jewish American could be transmuted into art.” Odets’ journal, archived in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York City Public Library at Lincoln Center, contains this entry from July 8, 1932: "Here I am writing

the Beethoven play–when it's finished it may not be about Beethoven. What I should do is write a play about the Greenberg family, something I know better and is closer to me." This advice to himself would eventually produce *Awake and Sing!*, which Herr calls "a play almost uncanny in its feeling for the struggles of the Depression, rooted in a Jewish milieu, and yet deeply poetic."

After describing how Odets first helped him find his voice as a playwright in "The American Writer: The American Theater," Miller would come full circle, concluding in the same essay after seeing *Look Back in Anger* by John Osbourne in London in 1956: "I had a strange *déjà vu* sensation when I realized that it was doing for the English rather precisely what Odets had done in the early thirties for New Yorkers – letting loose a cleansing invective, an unbridled anguish and fury at the hapless decrepitude." It was a voice he supported. In fact, he urged Laurence Olivier to give the play a second chance. Olivier had seen it and dismissed it, Miller wrote, "as an ugly travesty on English society". They went together, and this time, Olivier had a more open view. After the play, he asked Osbourne to write something for him, which he promptly did – *The Entertainer*. It made Osbourne's career.

Miller calls that night "a moment of historical change … whether the author had ever read an Odets play was beside the point; the quite similar style, a certain apt wedding of lyricism and social outrage, had flashed out of the English sky a quarter of a century after it had done the same thing in New York, and doubtless for similar social reasons – namely, because a deadly, formalized, polite and rather bloodless commercial play had dominated in both countries for several decades earlier."

In "Clifford Odets in Hollywood", his essay for *Dissolve*, Nathan Rabin called Odets "a writer of trembling earnestness and ambition who genuinely set out to transform theater and uplift the spirit of the workingman with his groundbreaking early plays." Miller could have dismissed Odets for naming names for the House Committee On Un-American Activities – something Miller, risking blacklisting, refused to do – but instead he chose to honor him by upholding the best of his legacy.