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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Attention Must Be Paid

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Los Angeles

DUSTIN HOFFMAN was playing Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman." I met Arthur Miller backstage after a performance. "Arthur," I said, "it's the oddest thing, but in the scene between Biff and Willy, it was as if I was listening to a play about my own relationship with my father."

I went on a bit, and looked over to see a small, distracted smile on his face. Of course, I thought. He's not only heard this comment thousands of times, he has probably heard it from every man who ever saw the play.

It is the great American Domestic Tragedy.

And "The Crucible" is the American Political Tragedy.

He wrote it to protest the horror of the McCarthy era. The plays are tragedies as each reasoned step brings the protagonists closer to their inevitable doom. We pity them as they are powerless to escape their fate. We feel fear because we recognize, in them, our own dilemmas. This is the purpose of drama, and particularly of tragedy: to allow us to participate in the repressed.

We are freed, at the end of these two dramas, not because the playwright has arrived at a solution, but because he has reconciled us to the notion that there is no solution - that it is the human lot to try and fail, and that no one is immune from self-deception. We have, through following the course of the drama, laid aside, for two hours, the delusion that we are powerful and wise, and we leave the theater better for the rest.

Bad drama reinforces our prejudices. It informs us of what we knew when we came into the theater - the infirm have rights, homosexuals are people, too, it's difficult to die. It appeals to our sense of self-worth, and, as such, is but old-fashioned melodrama come again in modern clothes (the villain here not black-mustachioed, but opposed to women, gays, racial harmony, etc.).

The good drama survives because it appeals not to the fashion of the moment, but to the problems both universal and eternal, as they are insoluble.

To find beauty in the sad, hope in the midst of loss, and dignity in failure is great poetic art.

Arthur Miller's wonder at his country and his time will redound to America's credit when the supposed accomplishments of the enthusiastic are long forgotten. His work and the example of a life lived with quiet dignity

are each an inspiration. I spoke at his 80th birthday celebration, my speech a prayer from Kipling that I will, again, offer here:

One service more we dare to ask -
Pray for us, heroes, pray,
That when Fate lays on us our task
We do not shame the day.

David Mamet, a playwright and screenwriter, is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Glengarry Glen Ross."

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