Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Arthur Miller, Minimalist and Regular

David Sheward · Saturday, November 26th, 2016

2015 marks the centennial of Arthur Miller's birth and two of his dramas are receiving strikingly different productions on and Off-Broadway. *A View from the Bridge*, one of his more popular works, is being given a radical reinterpretation by Dutch director Ivo van Hove in a production transferred from London's Young Vic to the Lyceum. The less frequently produced *Incident at Vichy* receives a more traditional staging from Michael Wilson at the Signature Theatre Company.

This is the fourth Broadway revival of *View* since its 1955 debut as a one-act. Van Hove returns to the work's origins by presenting it without an intermission and emphasizing its roots in Greek tragedy. As he has with his New York Theatre Workshop productions of other American classics such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Little Foxes*, the innovative director has stripped the play of any extraneous elements such as props, representative scenery, or detailed costumes, leaving only Miller's raw themes of primeval passions and notions of justice predating modern society.

Phoebe Fox, Russell Tovey, Nicola Walker, and Mark Strong in *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller.
Credit: Jan Versweyveld

Rather than a kitchen-sink recreation of the play's Red Hook, Brooklyn setting, designer Jan Versweyveld has created a bare space resembling a boxing ring with a huge cube hanging over it—a pit for a battle between alpha males over sex and respect. Longshoreman Eddie Carbone's repressed incestuous longing for his niece Catherine sets off an explosion when she falls in love with an illegal Italian immigrant hiding in the Carbone apartment. In van Hove's intimate staging there is nothing between the combatants apart from a single chair which is briefly used as a symbol of power. The result of this minimalist interpretation is a gut-churning journey into the darkest heart of humanity, exploring the lengths the protagonist will go to in order to follow his hidden passion and protect his wounded pride. Like John Proctor, the farmer wrongfully labelled a witch in Miller's *The Crucible*, Eddie values his honor above all else and when it's tarnished he will sacrifice everything—his family, his life—to get it back. "Give me back my name," he screams when he is accused of betraying the illegals in his house.

As Eddie, Mark Strong makes this moment particularly harrowing. Even though we know Eddie has done wrong, Strong infuses him with such an unshakable power that we accept his collision with tragedy. He wants to do good, but his buried attraction for Catherine warps his sensibilities and he goes outside all codes of morality but his own. Strong does not make Eddie sympathetic,

but he does make him understandable. Like Strong, Nicola Walker, Phoebe Fox, Russell Tovey, Michael Zegen, and especially Michael Gould as the agonized attorney Alfieri who acts as a Greek chorus, are all marvelously and simultaneously restrained and intense.

Van Hove does go somewhat over the top in his startlingly-staged climax (no spoilers, let's just say that the actors need lots of towels backstage when they're finished), but he has created a primal theater experience. You can imagine the emotions it evokes are similar to those felt by audiences in amphitheaters in Greece thousands of years ago.

Richard Thomas and Johnny Orsini in *Incident at Vichy* by Arthur Miller.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Though its themes are just as visceral of *View*'s, *Incident at Vichy* is more cerebral. The 1964 one-act is set in an abandoned warehouse in the titular French city during World War II (Jeff Cowie's grubby set is appropriately disheveled). As the play begins, a group of men representing a cross-section of society from socialist electrician to wealthy businessman silently wait. It's gradually revealed they have all been picked up by the German occupying forces and they suspect their offense is being Jewish. The first whispers of death camps have begun to circulate and the terror grows as each one is called into an offstage office for "racial examination."

With another refugee crisis brewing, *Incident* is especially relevant today, and though Michael Wilson's traditional production is dramatically sound, it does not quite overcome Miller's tendency to pontificate. The characters are just a tad too much like representatives of political and social points of view rather than people caught in a frightening historical moment. They debate each other in complete sentences which all often descend into melodrama ("Your heart is conquered territory, mister!")

Yet the large company does make the waiting game unbearably real as the number of detainees slowly diminishes. Richard Thomas' conscious-stricken nobleman, Darren Pettie's vigorous psychiatrist, James Carpinello's conflicted Nazi major, and Derek Smith's self-deluding actor are just a few of the indelible portraits in this grim gallery.

We'll be getting one more Miller drama next spring when van Hove directs a new production of *The Crucible* on Broadway. It should be fascinating to see what he does with it.

A View from the Bridge: Nov. 12—Feb. 21. The Young Vic at the Lyceum Theatre, 149 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: one hour, 55 minutes with no intermission; $39—$135; (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Incident at Vichy: Nov. 15—Dec. 20. Signature Theatre Company, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Schedule varies; Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; $25; (212) 244-7529 or www.signaturetheatre.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

This entry was posted on Saturday, November 26th, 2016 at 9:36 am and is filed under Theatre, Literature

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