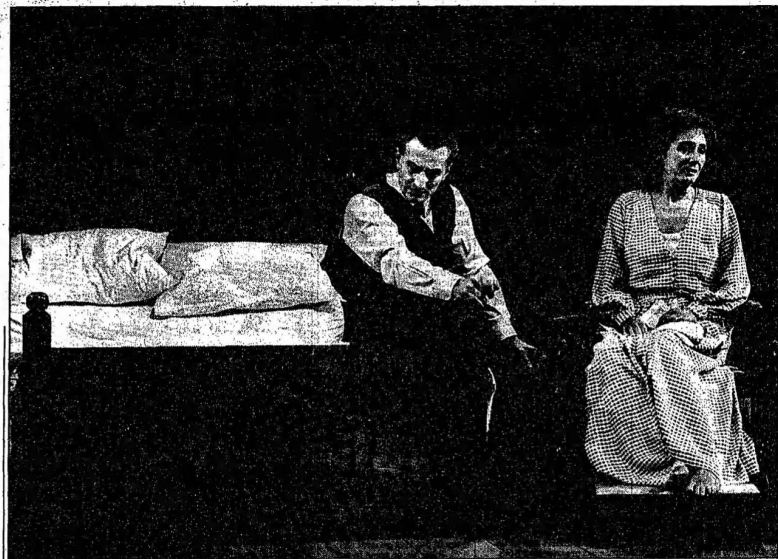


At 78, Arthur Miller has written a fine period play with resonances for contemporary Americans, argues MICHAEL BILLINGTON

Putting the pieces together

PLAYWRITING, for all the tenacity of Goethe, Ibsen and Shaw, tends to be a young man's game. But Arthur Miller at 78 not only keeps going. In *Broken Glass*, getting its British premiere at the Lyttelton, he has written a wise, humane and moving play that is a perfect companion piece to *The Last Yankee*: where that attacked the shoddiness of American materialism this is about the need to combine self-understanding with an awareness of the wider world. As in the previous play, it is women who suffer most. The setting is Brooklyn 1938. The heroine, Sylvia Gelburg, is afflicted by a mysterious paralysis of the legs. Her husband, Philip, entrusts a sympathetic local doctor, Harry Hyman, to investigate the cause. Is it, as Philip suspects, connected with his wife's obsession with the current horrors of Berlin's Kristallnacht? Or is it, as he is made to realise, involved with his ambivalent attitude to his own Jewishness? Or is it perhaps the mysterious combination of Nazi evil and her husband's self-loathing that has turned the middle-aged Sylvia into a paralysed wreck? Miller structures the play

like a psychological detective story: a mode that has always worked well from *Godunov* to *Equus*. But what gives the play weight and resonance is that the characters exist naturally on both the domestic and symbolic level. Sylvia, for instance, is a woman tormented by a sense of emotional and professional unfulfilment looking back at her life she says, in a typical Miller phrase full of humdrum poetry, "I took better care of my shoes." On another level, she represents an intuitive concern with distant horrors far more remarkable in 1938 — with its exclusive reliance on newspapers and radio — than in our own image-saturated age. But all Miller's main characters are individual and representative. Sylvia's husband, Philip, is an upright go-getter who devotes the firm over the family and who rages with the violence of the impatient: at the same time, he stands for the identity-plagued Jew who craves acceptance by the goyim. Most intriguing of all, even if the audience is sometimes ahead of the game in picking up the psychological clues, what moves one is the generosity of spirit behind the play. Miller doesn't pound us



Insecure liberals . . . Henry Goodman and Margot Leicester in Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass*

PHOTOGRAPH: HENRIETTA BUTLER

possibly last" is his constant rallying cry to his patient. Miller's characters are neither wholly good nor bad: even Sylvia's implacable disappointment with her life has, you feel, goyim. Most intriguing of all, even if the audience is sometimes ahead of the game in picking up the psychological clues, what moves one is the generosity of spirit behind the play. Miller doesn't pound us

with messages. What I deduce from the play is the need to combine self-acceptance — as Sylvia's sister says "you do your best with the hand you got" — with social and political concern. But also the need for Americans, now as much as then, to affirm their common humanity over their victim status. Philosophically, Miller is not that far from the Tony Kushner of *Angels In America*.

He is also blessed in his interpreters. The play could easily fall into deadly literalism. But David Trucker — whose best production to date this is — and designer Shelagh Kegan suspend the action half-way between fact and dream: minimal furniture, a few wintry branches, an angled archway in whose mirrored panels we see the characters reflected. Margot Leicester as Sylvia

also sharply reminds us that the woman is both a victim of her own acute antennae and someone with an insistent capacity for suffering. Henry Goodman is equally extraordinary as Philip: he starts out as what the doc's wife dubs "a miserable little pissor" but gradually takes you inside the character's soul to reveal his wounds and insecurities. And Ken Stott as the doctor exudes

the easy charm of the good liberal guy while dropping sly hints of the man's sexual vanity and political naivete. In short, a first-rate production of a complex humanist play; and, at the end, it was moving to see Miller rising from his stall to acknowledge the audience's own spontaneous affirmation.

In rep at the Lyttelton (071-928-2252).

Billington On Broken Glass

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