

**THEATRE: Arthur Miller**

# Blockbuster

**BRANDISHED** like some bizarre road-sign, *Danger: Memory!* is the collective title for two one-act Arthur Miller plays first produced in America last year and now directed by Jack Gold at the Hampstead Theatre. In both pieces characters with a compulsion to forget are brought up against unpleasant truths by a friendly accuser: from this simple Freudian premise Miller constructs two complex realist dramas which show his creative powers, at 73, still in full spate.

In the first and slighter piece, *I Can't Remember Anything*, the jumpy, arthritic Leo (Paul Rogers) sits grumpily at his kitchen table while the visiting Leonora (Betsy Blair) fails to recall if she ever played the piano or went to Russia and when it was exactly that life started getting so goddam vile. Leonora is deft at being an amnesiac of the present, too, at not hearing what she doesn't want to — notably that Leo no longer wants her to come round. It's a play about age and mutual dependency, of laughter as well as forgetting (in the face of death, Leo's most consoling thought is that all we are, anyway, is a lot of talking nitrogen) with Paul Rogers excellent as the blue-jeaned old Commie whose only concern is where to donate his organs.

Rogers re-appears to even greater effect after the interval, in the more substantial *Clara*, as a father slowly coming to terms with (and helping solve the mystery of) his daughter's death. Interrogated by the worldly, tough-talking, Hobbesian Lieutenant Pine (John Bennett), Albert Kroll receives a grilling that's as much psychoanalysis as police-work: in order to recall the name of the chief suspect



Miller, in full spate.

(which will come, literally, in a flashback: lighting by Mick Hughes). Kroll must first acknowledge his own complicity.

For Clara (Sarah Keller, as her ghost) had been rehabilitating a convicted murderer, and the do-gooding motives which led to her death — the belief that races can mix, that the disprivileged can be helped, and that people have the capacity to change — were instilled in her in childhood by her father, who like the bourgeois householder in Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* has for years been blinding himself to the truth about the society he inhabits.

It's a brave and brutal conclusion for the last great American liberal playwright to have to reach. But these two chamber pieces from a death-chamber, acted and directed at Hampstead with a conviction which makes you see why Miller likes the English productions of his work, are less plays about remembering than urgent essays in political pessimism: Leo and Leonora are old Lefties at odds with an America that seems to them 'ruined by greed'; and Kroll, for his part, is forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of his humanist ideals to cope with the homicidal realities of New York. As so often with Miller, looking into the past turns out to be a way of examining the present — which is why 'memory' carries a danger warning.

**BLAKE MORRISON**

## Blake Morrison on *Danger: Memory!*

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