Lucky Man

THE DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Director Scott Ellis took time out of rehearsing The Man Who Had All the Luck to answer some questions for UPSTAGE.

UPSTAGE: What was your personal interest in the play The Man Who Had All the Luck?

Scott Ellis: Well, the fact that this is Arthur Miller’s first play automatically sparked an interest for me. He wrote it when he was only 25 years-old and I was interested in looking at the beginning of what he went on to become -- America’s greatest living playwright. Even in this first play, he is starting to explore relationships with fathers and sons and brothers. In fact the whole cannon of Arthur Miller’s plays is first touched on in this piece. It is an important piece of the puzzle in understanding the full scope of his work.

What questions do you think Arthur Miller is asking with this play?

Do we have control of our own destiny? If not, what does control our lives? Why are some people’s lives luckier than others? Can we do anything about that? I think the play tells us that you just have to work hard. If you go out and you work everyday, put your life into it, put your passion into it, it usually pays off. But you can’t control if it doesn’t. You can just be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Things happen. That’s just life. With David, the main character of the play, things do work out, but he doesn’t feel like deserves it. It’s just what happens to him.

Do you think that different responses to the question of destiny will resonate with different members of the audience?

Sure. Some people will identify with David, but others will connect with the brother who works very hard for his dream, but doesn’t get what he wants or feels he deserves. I don’t think any of us have as charmed a life as David, but we can imagine it. I know if I were to be that lucky, I would feel that sooner of later something bad would have to happen. Too many people around me don’t get what they deserve, so why would I escape unscathed?

Arthur Miller in the title calls this play a fable. What do you think makes it so?

The actions of this play make it a fable, because of the lessons to be learned from what happens to the characters. I mean, all of a sudden out of nowhere comes Gus, who suddenly saves David. That’s a fable quality. Arthur Miller has said that he thinks the play hovers around three feet above the ground somewhere in the Midwest. It would have to be taking place not quite on the ground in order for us to go along.
How did this fable quality influence your work on the play with the designers and the actors?
Actors have to face the play as reality. They have to stay focused on what their character wants and what he is willing to do to get it. The design can be a little more abstract, however. When we are in the barn, it’s a realistic barn, yet there is light that comes through the walls all the time. The colors we chose to use also give it a sense that something is not quite real about this world. You believe there’s grass outside the house, but the color is very different, and the sky is bluer that what you would really see. It’s just those types of touches that say what is this play is about.

How did you learn to find the right balance between reality and unreality?
It really comes from how the characters look at life. Hester is always looking at life in a positive way, things are good, things are always going to work out. David starts that way, but then doubt starts to creep in. So you’ve got to find the truth in the moment and then push to where the characters see it.

As you worked on the production at Williamstown and are preparing for the production at Roundabout were there any real surprises?
We purposely decided not to make any changes to the original text. At first I thought it was unfair to ask Arthur Miller, who is now 86 years-old, to re-look at a play he wrote at 25. But, more than that, I thought we should be true to the piece so that people could see his first play as it was. The surprise for me was seeing how well a play that was last seen in 1944, could hold up today, almost 60 years later. It’s not a piece that’s being written today for today’s sensibility, but is just as relevant.

I heard there is a fun story about how you got the car.
Yes, well that was a challenge. The play calls for a specific car, a Marmon, which was rare even then. So the props department went on the internet and found a Marmon Association. They got in touch with the people and found out that there was a restored Marmon we could use literally five miles from the theatre. Talk about luck!

History’s Fables
THE WRITER’S PERSPECTIVE

by Arthur Miller

The Man Who Had All the Luck came out of the years leading up to World War II, between 1938, my college graduation year, and 1944 when the fighting was raging. For me [The Man Who Had All the Luck and The Golden Years, another early play] are a kind of unadulterated evidence of my reactions to that time and it strikes me oddly that, as up to my neck as I was in the feverish anti-Fascism that swept my generation, the plays I chose to write were so metaphorical. This is especially strange when the only tradition in American theatre of which I was aware was realism. I can’t imagine what I thought I was doing.

The Man Who Had All the Luck was given a regular Broadway production in 1944 and lasted less than a full week after the critics, with one or two interested but puzzled exceptions, could make absolutely nothing of it. I recall at the time being unable to find the slightest connection between the production and the play I imagined I had written, and after watching one bewildering performance fled back to my desk and began a novel, resolved never to write for the theatre again. It was 45 years later, in 1988, that I began to understand the reason for my alienation from my own play, as well, very possibly, for the total incomprenhension of the critics.

A staged reading of the play under the direction of Ralph Bell, an old friend who had always had a soft spot in his heart for this play, quickly revealed that it is, indeed, a fable with no relation to realistic theatre. A fable, of course, is based on the obsessive grip of a single idea bordering on the supernatural and it is the idea that stands in the forefront, rather than the characters and the verisimilitudes of the tale. The coincidences are arrantly unapologetic in this play and so they should be.

Continued on page 3.
played, rather than attempts made to rationalize them and dim them down.

I recall the original production lit in reassuring pink and rose, a small-town genre comedy. Given the threatening elements in the story, this atmosphere must indeed have been puzzling. The play is after all attacking the evaluation of people by their success or failure and worse yet, denying the efficacy of property as a shield against psychological catastrophe.

From a distance of half a century, I am struck by a certain optimistic undercurrent. I must say that, at the time, life at best seemed headed for a bloody showdown with Fascism, or at worst a hapless surrender to it, but while there is plenty of worry in the play, there is no real despair or defeat of the spirit. This will strike some as perhaps a reflection of a callow Leftism, but in truth it was the way most Americans felt even after a very long decade of Depression. By the late thirties and early forties we had, of course, known much social violence and all kinds of vilenes, but not yet a Holocaust, not yet the bursting of the banks of evil. I can still recall my incredulity at the daylight bombing of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War. As bombings go, it wasn’t a very big one. The big ones were still on the way. But I simply could not believe that a European flying low in an airplane on a sunny day over an undefended town, could, whatever his politics, drop live bombs on women out shopping with their baby carriages, on old men sitting before their doorways, on young lovers strolling across the ancient square! It was hard to sleep for weeks afterwards. It was still possible to be shocked. At least within one’s mind the lines of some sort of order of permissible human behavior still held.

Since the War of 1914-1918 every period has known its main menace, some single force threatening life on the planet. From the mid-thirties to the outbreak of war with the Axis powers it was the Fascist threat--and for some its promise--that pervaded every discussion. An important source of the energy in these plays was my fear that in one form or another Fascism, with its intensely organized energies, might well overwhelm the wayward and self-fixated Democracies.

The telltale mark of this preoccupation, as I now see quite clearly, is much the same in both plays, even if The Golden Years is a tragedy about the Cortés invasion of Montezuma’s Mexico in 1522 and The Man Who Had All the Luck a tale of a very successful young man in a pastoral Ohio village. They are both struggling against passive acceptance of fate or even of defeat in life, and urge action to control one’s future; both see evil as irrational and aggressive, the good as rational and benign. Plainly, I was hounded at the time by what seemed the debility of Americans’ grasp of democratic values or their awareness of them. And I must recall—to fill out this picture—that these plays were written after a decade of Depression, which had by no means lifted with any certainty as yet, and that the Depression had humbled us, shown us up as helpless before the persistent, ineradicable plague of mass unemployment. Reason had lost a lot of her credentials between 1930 and 1940.

If, as the decade ended, the devaluation of the individual—the main lesson of the Depression—was still spiked to the common consciousness, these plays are somewhat surprising testimony to me that I had not lost the belief in the centrality of the individual and the importance of what he thought and did. The Man Who Had All the Luck tells me that in the midst of the collectivist thirties I believed it decisive what an individual thinks and does about his life, regardless of overwhelming social forces. There is no force so powerful, politically as well as personally, as a man’s self-conceptions...

As for the ending of the play—which I am sure I have rewritten twenty times over the past half century—it is as satisfactory as it is possible to be, as complete, let’s say, as Job’s, which also doesn’t quite come down on both feet. The simple fact is that, as moving and imperative as our questioning of our fates may be, there is no possibility of answering the main question—why am I as I am and my life as it is? The more answers one supplies the more new questions arise. David Beeves in this play arrives as close as he can at a workable, conditional faith in the neutrality of the world’s intentions toward him. ■

Excerpted from The Collected Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller, published by Viking Penguin. All rights reserved.
Hearing David Beeves as a Solo Trumpet

THE COMPOSER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Tom Kochan

When I write music for a play, the most important thing for me is to see a performance. It's like film scoring: the words are only part of the picture, so it's not enough to read it. I like to write the music as late in the rehearsal process as possible, because when I see the actors in costume and the set on-stage, I have a stronger sense of what the play is about. I've been so lucky to work with great theatre directors like Scott Ellis. They crave your input, they crave your creativity. They ask, "What does this evoke for you? What will you do with this play?"

When I begin composing, I go toward a specific sound—either a mood that the instruments might evoke, or a style of music. The key thing for me is to get a "hook," in this instance, a trumpet. Another play I worked on had some violence in the play, and I went with a percussive score. Somehow I key into a main character and/or a theme and that evokes a sound for me. Once I have that initial sound, it forms a fountain for everything to come out of.

For plays, the music is usually pre-recorded with live musicians. First, I'll do a synthesizer mock-up, by creating musical sketches on my keyboards and computers, which I'll present to the director for feedback. Then I'll record it live and do some finishing touches, and create some sound files on a CD, which I'll give to the sound designer.

The score for this play began in a meeting with Scott Ellis. By the time we finished speaking, I already had a musical theme in my head. I went home and jotted it down, and it became the main theme for The Man Who Had All the Luck. I keyed into Scott's description of the main character and the fact that he's dealing with big issues like fate. For me, big issues relate to the trumpet. A viola or a recorder would not evoke someone standing at the edge of his life, and questioning "What does life hold for me?" A solo trumpet represents David Beeves, since he's grappling with this question by himself, even though he's surrounded by family and friends.

In a play, unlike in a musical, you usually don't score under dialogue, since the actors aren't wearing body microphones. The composer scores around dialogue, filling in scene changes, beginnings and ends of the acts. Since there's not a huge amount of music, I like to keep a theme or flow to it. I don't want the first scene to use a solo trumpet, and the next scene to be a bunch of strings, because too much time has past between the opening of the play and the first scene change. I want to keep a through-line for the audience, so I will keep a similar orchestration.

I also try to keep the melodic theme similar, but because of what's happening at that moment, I change what I do with the music. For example, at the top of Act Two in The Man Who Had All the Luck, the characters are in the farmhouse. It's a beautiful setting, on a summer day and a happy moment. I did a treatment of the theme that was more happy: up tempo, in a major key, keeping the brass for continuity. The top of Act Three is darker. It's winter, and some things have gone on that are not as happy. I made some changes, like a minor version of the theme. In Act One, an important car is brought on-stage, and because it's almost like another character, I did a grand variation of the theme for its entrance. Basically it's like the costume designer, who has light colored, linen clothes for Act Two; for Act Three, they're darker, for winter. I try to take a fairly minimal amount of ideas, and by coloring them, I can use them throughout the play.

Tom Kochan, has won an Emmy Award for his work on "As the World Turns." His current theatrical projects include Mike Leigh's Smelling a Rat for the New Group and his musical Normal at the Lark Theatre.
What Makes a Play an Arthur Miller Play?

A DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Nina Steiger

As a playwright, Arthur Miller's career has spanned over fifty years, garnering him a Pulitzer prize and numerous Tony awards. Over the course of his career, Miller has been concerned with several key themes that first appeared in The Man Who Had All the Luck. This play sets the stage for future works by vigorously exploring the following ideas: the American Dream; paternal responsibility; the individual within society; fate; and experimental, highly theatrical forms.

The American Dream
Miller has characterized the American Dream as "the unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out." He creates tragic heroes in his central characters and uses them to question the nationally held assumption that hard work is rewarded and that life doles out these rewards in just ways. The Man Who Had All the Luck, like many of Miller's plays, features a central character, David Brees, who is striving, through hard work and good-heartedness to succeed.

Miller's peripheral characters tend also to be engaged in well-rounded struggles of the same thematic nature. David's brother, Amos, with his aspirations for a career in baseball (the national past-time), represents another aspect of the quest for the American dream. In David's father, Pat, we are presented with an idealist who ultimately pays dearly for his huge ambition and his uncompromising striving. Another Miller play, Death of a Salesman, also provides a symbolic examination of the pursuit of the American dream. Both plays depict man's overreaching ambition, his illusions about himself and his subsequent downfall.

Paternal Responsibility
Miller's work has also focused heavily on examining the obligations that bind father to son and brother to brother. In The Man Who Had All the Luck, we see this theme embodied by each of the four fathers in the play. The character of J.D. cannot embrace his responsibilities to his unborn children and is devastated by the consequences of his own drinking. As a foil to this, we see Pat, who has blindly sacrificed everything to safeguard Amos's future but has made a crucial mistake in doing so. We also see Hester's father bombastically struggling to protect his daughter. In these characters, Miller presents several pictures of paternal responsibility, which is frequently at the expense of the child.

The Individual within Society
In The Man Who Had All the Luck, we see David struggling to live in an upright and morally sound way. For example, he refuses to elope with Hester, though confronting her father presents a major obstacle. Later in the play, as things begin to go wrong for David's family, he continues to struggle for morality in the face of desperation. "I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity," Miller writes. In many of his plays, the tragedy of Miller's central character doubles as a symbol of a larger societal flaw.

The Role of Fate
According to Scott Ellis, director of The Man Who Had All the Luck, the play asks, "Do we have control of our own destiny? If not, what does control our lives?" David Brees espouses a humble belief in himself and his abilities, which is put into question when he wonders whether it is luck or effort that accounts for his success while so many around him fail to achieve their goals. The character of Sholly suggests that, like a jellyfish, he is pushed around by the tides, claiming "about what happens to him, a man has very little say." But David cannot accept this vision of the world. He tells Gus, "if one way or another a man don't receive according to what he deserves inside... well, it's a madhouse." He refuses to view the world as capricious or unjust and assumes that like his family, he too must have some inevitable fall or misfortune in his life. His obsession over this possibility ultimately threatens his sanity.

Miller manages to question fate through his characters, but avoids the kind of nihilism associated with discounting a higher, universal scheme to the world by creating characters like David Brees, who find that the answer includes a combination of hopefulness, hard work and luck.

Experimental Forms
One of Miller's greatest strengths as a playwright is his flair for drawing on theatrical forms to highlight his themes. He characterizes The Man Who Had All the Luck as a "fable with no relation to realistic theatre." As such, the play takes on a heightened reality, with characters that seem larger than life in a story that reads like a parable. In addition to his use of metaphorical realism in The Man Who Had All the Luck, Miller establishes a Greek Chorus in A View From the Bridge to underscore the play's tragic proportions. He structures Death of a Salesman as a memory play, affording the piece great fluidity and subjectivity. These highly theatrical forms help to strengthen his tragic heroes and raise the stakes of each play to the level of epic tragedy.

The themes that Arthur Miller addressed in The Man Who Had All the Luck are vital elements of his later plays. By exploring and confronting such themes as fate, the individual's role in society, paternal responsibility, Miller engages his audiences in a universal search for meaning. His thoughtful and provocative approach to these themes has produced some of the American theatre's most beloved plays, and secured his position as one of the country's greatest dramatists.

Nina Steiger has worked for New York Stage & Film and Hartford Stage, where she was dramaturg on Theresa Rebeck's adaptation of Ibsen's A Doll's House.
Activities
DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

Before you go

Consider the power of destiny in your life.

• Think of a time when you worked hard for something—like writing a school paper— but you didn’t get the result you hoped for.
  • How did you feel about yourself?
  • How did you feel about the other people involved, like the teacher who gave you the grade or another student who received a better mark?
• Think of a time when you found or were given something valuable purely by chance.
  • How did you feel? Lucky? Guilty?
  • How did you feel about the people around you, who didn’t have the precious item that you had?

At the theatre

Watch and Listen to the characters as they try to make sense of their lives. Here are some questions to keep in mind:

• What are the characters working toward?
• What specific actions do they take to get what they want?
• Are they successful? Why or why not?
• How do the characters feel about their own success (or lack of success)?
• How do the different characters feel about each other’s level of success?

After the show

Write a letter to one of the characters in The Man Who Had All the Luck who personally moved you. In your letter…

• Describe how you felt while watching that character’s efforts to achieve success and understand destiny.
• Share any specific experiences from your own life that relate to what happened to that character.
• Explain what you’ve learned about destiny and how your feelings about luck and success have changed.

Send your work to Roundabout, and we’ll share it with the people who created The Man Who Had All the Luck.

Mail it to:
Education Department
Roundabout Theatre Co.
231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200
New York, NY 10018

Or email to:
Phila@roundabouttheatre.org

Arthur Miller, 1953.
When you get to the Theatre:

Ticket Policy
As a student participant in Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discount ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Programs
All theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors’ roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

Audience Etiquette
As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theater and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can easily be distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theater, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

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