

“Arthur Miller, Writer”

*(Frank Gagliano’s symposium comments on Rebecca Miller’s
HBO documentary: AMJ, vol13,#2)*



Father Arthur Miller,
Rebecca and husband Daniel Day-Lewis

The portrait of playwright Arthur Miller that emerges from daughter/director Rebecca Miller’s moving HBO film documentary about her father—*“Arthur Miller, Writer”*—solidifies for me how Miller’s enormous stylistic range *could* range from his tragic, *“Death Of A Salesman,”* to his Beckettian, *“Mr. Peters Connections,”* and to his last play —the often hilarious satire, *“Resurrection Blues.”* Throughout the 140 minute film documentary, this range is shown by Miller’s own off-the-cuff, plus voice-over words from his memoir, *“Timebends”* — and by laughter-variations, gesture, and by camera-revealing, in-your-face, close ups. And by Rebecca’s expert film editing.

Starting before credits, a young Arthur Miller, talking to someone off camera, says that a playwright has *“to say to the audience, in effect”* (and here young Miller fans out his fingers, palm out, to the camera) *“this is what you think you are seeing —life every day. Then, turn it around and say”* (here, Miller turns his hand around and shows the back-of-his-splayed-hand to the camera) *“this is what it really is. Imagine if you knew the truth!”* Suddenly, Miller’s nostrils flare a bit, a smile begins around the mouth, then he breaks out into a full-out laugh — then instantaneously breaks from that laugh and resumes the serious discussion of the craft of playwriting.

I freeze-framed my way through the DVR recording many times, numbering varieties of laughter-variations in various events — live and in stills — and I counted 51 of them: Lightning smiles, full-out guffaws, slight smirks, benevolent laughs, grins, bitter laughs—compassionate laugh in the midst of describing his fathers despair at losing his business during the great depression—and the goofy moments: Miller listening to and conducting and humming along with a recording of a baroque, perhaps Bach, piece; and, in another short scene, clowning through a

rendition of, and singing full out and on pitch, “*I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter, and Make Believe It Came From You,*” complete with a Fats Waller flourish finish. When I personally met Arthur Miller and dealt with him, for a bit, on a project (see my essay in this edition of AMJ) I was surprised and delighted at his Brooklyn, regular, funny-guy voice and persona, but I never saw *the goofy Arthur Miller* and his *love-of-schtick* that one confronts, on occasion, in this film.

Of course, one expects to see in this documentary Miller’s *center of pain*, from the painful events in his private and public life; pains that were to inform his plays. Here, they come in close ups of Miller, while he riffs on those moments. But in one, Miller doesn’t say a word. For 21 seconds (a long time in film) — while voice-over daughter Rebecca talks of her brother who had to be institutionalized—Miller just stares front, at the camera, glaze-eyed. It is not a freeze frame, because Miller’s eyes blink and his mouth twitches. 21 seconds! And one wants to look away. Devastating. And a great moment of editing.

The film’s journey, from its opening . . . a young Arthur Miller enthusiastically talking of his craft . . . to the last image . . . an old, alone, somewhat stooped over Arthur Miller, walking from the camera up a path he had cleared, into the Connecticut woods, with his own voice-over reading from the moving last paragraph of his *Timebends* . . . the film is beautifully bookended.

As I think back on that closing image, I tend to *dissolve-in* two valises in Miller’s hands as he walks, and I fill them — not with Willy Loman’s merchandise — but with volumes of Miller’s great works. Daughter/director Rebecca’s ending, of course, is the better one: Miller, unencumbered now, disappearing, in a long shot, into the trees.

Frank Gagliano, Pittsburgh, May 28, 2018