



ACADEMIA DE STUDII ECONOMICE BUCUREȘTI
Sesiunea Internațională de Comunicări Științifice
*Youth on the move. Teaching languages for
international study and career-building*
București, 13-14 mai 2011

***ARTHUR MILLER'S "FINISHING THE PICTURE": ART AS
BUSINESS***

Elena CIORTESCU

FEAA, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi

Abstract

"Finishing the Picture" is about Marilyn Monroe as much as about the creation of art, a story about filming "The Misfits" as much as a story about American dreams. Besides a return to the past, to the time when "The Misfits" was filmed, the play "questions the artistic pretension of the movie industry and satirizes a business which the playwright views as determined to turn everything and everyone into a product" (Abbotson, Critical Companion). Although the set is back in the sixties, the play appeals to contemporary issues and points to the inextricable dependence relationship of art and money.

Key-words: Movie industry, art, business.

In 2004, Arthur Miller's *Finishing the Picture* premiered at the Goodman Theater, Chicago. Ironically enough, the latter would be Miller's last play although not his last piece of writing. One year later, on February 10, the playwright died of heart failure at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut.

Arthur Miller denied any connection between the character in *Picture*, Kitty, and Marilyn Monroe. Nevertheless, her figure is present in so many of his female characters that we can only assume that the playwright simply refused to recognize the powerful impact she had on his life and work. *Finishing the Picture* is a story about Monroe as much as a story about the creation of art, a story about filming *The Misfits* as much as a story about American dreams.

Besides a return to the past, to the time when *The Misfits* was filmed, the play “questions the artistic pretension of the movie industry and satirizes a business which the playwright views as determined to turn everything and everyone into a product” (Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 164). This perspective is hardly surprising given Miller’s concern in *Resurrection Blues*.

Although the set is back in the sixties, the play appeals to contemporary issues and points to the inextricable dependence relationship of art and money: all the characters in the play are concerned with making the movie on time due to the financial conditions imposed by the producers; all their efforts are focused on convincing Kitty, the leading actress, to act despite her psychological breakdown. Miller argued that the play is about “the power relationship between Kitty and those who are both dependent on her and in conflict with her.” (cf. Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 165) Therefore, despite her inability to get out of bed, Kitty is in control of the others’ nerves and money. Her paralysis is reminiscent of the one Sylvia Gellburg in *Broken Glass* as well as the two women in *The Last Yankee* suffered from and which depicts the general malaise of the country which has not healed throughout a century. Abbotson supports the idea that, while the play depicts an episode in Miller’s youth, it may as well be an expression of his rather surprising relationship with Alice Barley, the woman he intended to marry in 2005 – apparently, the romance between Ochsner and Edna opens the perspective of a bright, hopeful future (Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 165), a future that the Miller-Barley couple hoped for.

The play was generally well received but Miller wrote a few weeks later that “as usual with a new play of mine, the critics managed to misunderstand what it’s about”, insisting that it was not a documentary. However, Enoch Brater argues that the play “offers us one more backward glance at the mythic Monroe”, this time “with much greater detachment and ease than he had previously shown (...) in *After the Fall*” (*Introduction to Finishing the Picture* XIX-XX).

The play is set in the West, in a luxurious hotel where a crew, struggling to finish filming a movie, is accommodated. Their major problem is Kitty's inability to stay lucid long enough to finish the movie. All the characters' efforts are directed at convincing her to fight her illness and their main motivation is money. Phillip Ochsner, of Bedlam Pictures, has come to the set in order to make a decision as far as the completion of the project is concerned. In the meantime, he is having an affair with Edna Meyers, Kitty's assistant. Most critics agree to the fact that their relationship represents, beyond a parallel to Miller's engagement to Alice Barley, the image of a balanced couple in a nonsensical Hollywood.

Ochsner's life is far from uncomplicated: he is a former Marxist who turned into a millionaire, a widower and father of a suicidal son. Despite all the difficulties in his life he has not turned into the "stereotypical power hungry philistine but a sensitive, level-headed decision maker" (Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 167); his admiration for Kitty is genuine and he makes every possible effort to contribute to her salvation as well as to that of the production: "(...) this woman bewilders me. Kitty to me is the most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on...there's a miracle in her face. I look at her and for some reason I feel glad inside." (214)

It is Derek Clemson, the director in the play, who points to the similarity between Kitty as a person and the United States; while Ochsner wonders what could possibly depress Kitty who, to him, is the image of perfection and thus, "the envy of ninety percent of the world", Derek bitterly answers that: "So is the United States – why are so many of us unhappy?" (214), thus echoing the voices of other characters in Miller's previous plays: Henri in *Resurrection Blues*, Harry Peters in *Mr. Peters' Connections*, Sylvia Gellburg in *Broken Glass*, Patricia Hamilton in *The Last Yankee*, Leonora in *I Can't Remember Anything*.

Although accused by Flora of lack of sensitivity and harsh behavior towards Kitty, Derek is a good-natured man, though far from perfect; he is an artist but a businessman as well, able to make money from smuggling artifacts and playing poker. Despite all his imperfections, Derek cares about Kitty and seems to understand her: "She's had a frightful life ...she's been stepping on broken glass since she could walk. She is pure survival." (214) He tries to describe the connection and somehow motivate the coexistence of money and art in the movie-making business: "It's not a business, Phillip. It's an art pretending to be a business. But it's never been any different; the artist dies in his work, the businessman carries

his work into the world. Like ants carrying off the rotting twigs of a fallen branch to feed the other ants” (257).

Unlike him, Terry Case, an experienced cameraman, reduces Kitty to her attractive looks: “This has nothing to do with brains, goodwill, or anything but animalism. (...) Kitty has the skin and the ass.” (218) Case is a Hollywood man to whom art has nothing to do with his job: “The European bullshit took over. We made the pictures the whole world wanted, and they couldn’t make them, so they talked about art. The Germans send me treatises that long about my camera work, my philosophy. I can’t understand word-one. They invited me to Sweden someplace; I said I’d be finished in five minutes. What’s there to say? – Get close so you can see the faces, get low so you get the ass” (227). To him, “psychoanalysis is the world’s most expensive fertilizer” (227), and the only explanation for his embittered perception of life is: “because I’m in the movie business” (227).

Terry Case delivers Miller’s message as to what Hollywood’s “values” are. The playwright never truly acknowledged Hollywood as a promoter of art and his perception is due to the financial motivation which is at the basis of every attempt to make a movie. Although Paul, Kitty’s husband, is “not particularly likeable or sympathetic” (Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 167), he is similar to Miller’s stance as a husband to Monroe in his desperate attempt to understand what went wrong in their relationship. Just like Miller, Paul is aware that Kitty/Monroe’s trauma comes from the ignorance and lack of affection of the people around her: “Everyone wants something from her (...); we want a beautiful film, so we insist she wake up bright and fluffy even when she feels like dying” (229).

Therefore, Kitty shares the same need for unconditional love as America itself and Bigsby believes that “its power (as well as Kitty’s), recklessly used, can also destroy its own legitimacy, and (...) it is worth mentioning the fact that Miller went back to this play, which he had first worked on twenty-five years earlier, as America launched a war on Iraq which he believed illegitimate. It was a time, too, when the question sparked by the events of 9:11 was, <Why don’t people love us?> It is not only Willy Loman who needs to be <well-liked>” (Bigsby, *Critical Study* 440).

After all, what finally destroyed Monroe was her intense need for love, which went beyond the limits of normalcy, doubled by her self-destructive nature. Soon after her death, she was turned into a national icon and her natural assimilation among the representative

figures of the country came as a consequence of the fact that people perfectly understood what had happened to her. Monroe was just a version of America's ambitions and fears.

The characters which brought most amusement to the audience were the Fasingers. They clearly represent Lee Strasberg, the famous co-founder of the Group Theater, director of Actors Studio, New York (known as the nation's most prestigious acting school), the initiator of the Method Acting, actor, director and teacher of acting to: Marlon Brandon, Paul Newman, James Dean, Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Robert de Niro, Elia Kazan, Marilyn Monroe and others, and his wife at the time, Paula Strasberg, a former actress, acting coach and confidante to Monroe. This time they look ridiculous due to the rampant self-interest they constantly exert. Paula is a combination of stupidity and snobbery, always laying unjustified claims; the only person she seems to appreciate and worship is her husband who shows up on the set as a final attempt of the crew to determine Kitty to act. His outfit is ridiculous: he is wearing extremely uncomfortable cowboy boots and his continuous concern for his looks tells a lot about the efforts he makes to build an artificial image of himself.

Jerome's main worry is that people might consider Kitty his responsibility, a fact which he vehemently denies. His refusal to take responsibility tells a lot about Miller's concern with the lack of responsibility which has become the trend of the century. The two are interested, just like most of the crew, in the material gains that Kitty's behavior could guarantee.

Actually, as many critics have argued, the play is not about Kitty but rather about the way the others respond to and are controlled by her decision to act or not. Money is at stake and Jerome concludes that she is "not surrounded by culture or by love but exploitation, by people digging out pieces of your flesh" (252). Kitty reacts to Jerome's half sincere argumentation and decides to try and get out of bed. She is not successful though and, by the end of the play, the film is not finished.

The tone of the last play that Arthur Miller wrote is rather optimistic despite the fact that the picture fails to be finished. One of the proofs lies in the quotation we used in the beginning of this subchapter – life is not perfect and our main purpose is not to struggle to make it so but accept it the way it is. Enoch Brater describes it as a play "displaying acceptance" (*Introduction to Finishing the Picture* XX) and the fact that the fire which in the beginning seemed to threaten the set of the movie is close to extinction, and all it can do now

is “make the seeds germinate” because “the heat opens up the seeds” (Miller, *Picture* 263), clearly contributes to this perception. Bigsby rightfully concludes that “at the heart of the play is both the specific dilemma generated by the seemingly inescapable relationship between art and commerce, a contest for power, a clash between two interpretations of reality, and also the ironic gap between desire and fulfillment”, a characteristic which goes beyond the group of people that the play focuses on (Bigsby, *Critical Study* 443).

Scanlan argues that Miller’s plays represent “parables of the state of the nation” and emphasizes the fact that it is the playwright’s merit to have rooted “each parable in deep and believable personal psychology”. Therefore America is somehow explained by means of personal experience (Scanlan, *Late Plays* 181), an achievement which is in fact characteristic to all of Arthur Miller’s works.

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