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***ARTHUR MILLER'S "RESURRECTION BLUES": MEDIA AND
CONTEMPORARY VALUES***

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Abstract

America, as well as the rest of the world, welcomed the new millennium in a high-tech atmosphere: everything can be recorded and watched on TV; people eat, drink, cry, laugh, go shopping, and kill on TV. It was the essence of this particular state of affairs which formed the point of departure for Arthur Miller's "Resurrection Blues" (2002). Jeffrey Mason considered the play a political satire targeted at the exaggerated power and cultural values of media and at the "palpable force of wealth in a global economy, (...) as a means of shaping or determining people's actions, values and thoughts."

Key-words: Media, Arthur Miller, values, violence, dictatorship.

According to Christopher Bigsby, in 1992, Miller wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which he clearly expressed his concern with Americans' enthusiasm about the death penalty. He sarcastically proposed that executions be televised and predicted that some people might go as far as committing crimes with the single purpose to become stars; not too many appeared offended by his article and America remained among the few countries which persisted in practicing the death penalty next to China, Saudi Arabia and Libya (Bigsby, *Critical Study* 422).

America, as well as the rest of the world welcomed the new millennium in a high-tech atmosphere: everything can be recorded and watched on TV; people eat, drink, cry, laugh, go shopping, and kill on TV – we live under the careful surveillance of millions of other people who, most of the times, care very little about us. Bigsby argues that television seeks to present “the presumed reality of private anguish by bringing together those in psychological pain, exhibitionists, betrayed wives (...) to provide entertainment for the masses. (...) Life exists as raw material for the media (...) and it begins to seem that events lacked reality until processed by the camera, which has become the ultimate proof of reality” (Bigsby, *Critical Study* 423). It was the essence of this particular state of affairs which formed the point of departure for a play like *Resurrection Blues*.

In September 2001, the destruction of the twin towers in New York could be seen live on every TV channel in the whole world; the experience was hardly a shock since the audience were already used to watching death on TV due to the Gulf and Yugoslavia wars. This attitude can only point to the lack of “subject” that everyone seems to face and that Mr. Peters so ardently looks for. Miller witnessed a society “entertaining itself with a jumble of disconnected images” (Bigsby, *Critical Study* 424) which left him with no alternative but turn towards writing a play which would denounce contemporary lack of values.

Perhaps the best definition of Miller’s attempt with *Blues* was the one offered by Jeffrey D. Mason who considered the play a political satire targeted at the exaggerated power and cultural values of media, “the deceitful rhetoric and compromise of military dictatorship, (...) the wary and unbalanced relationship between the United States and Latin America, and the virtually palpable force of wealth in a global economy, especially as deployed by corporations and governments (...) as a means of shaping or determining people’s actions, values and very thoughts” (Mason, *Political Theater* 267).

The play is set in an imaginary state in South America, perhaps as a consequence of Miller’s experiences in Venezuela and Colombia. The political regime is an authoritarian one with General Felix Barriaux as the Chief of State. The play opens with Jeanine’s monologue, Felix’s niece, who is in a wheelchair due to her failed suicide attempt. We soon learn that the reason why she tried to kill herself resides in the need to manifest her support to the revolutionaries who rebelled against Felix Barriaux’s political regime. Her paralysis reminds us of the one that Sylvia Gellburg suffered from as a consequence of the extreme violence that Jews in Germany had to suffer during the Holocaust.

This time, Jeanine openly declares that she wishes her physical paralysis to contaminate her mind as well - “He (Henri) says the Russians have always had more ideas

than any other people in history and ended in the pit. The Americans have no ideas and they have one success after another. I am trying to have no ideas” (130), this being her only possibility to confront the guilt of the survivor which echoes the one evoked by Holga in *After the Fall*: “Survival can be hard to live with. None of my people was over nineteen” (130). The readers/audience are therefore introduced to a context of violence similar to the one witnessed nearly sixty years before, a clear sign that humanity has not managed to make notable progress in terms of self-destructive instinct. The bitter irony that surrounds the atmosphere of *Blues* becomes obvious in Felix’s guiding principle: “Maybe you read too many books – life is complicated, but underneath the principle has never changed since the Romans – fuck them before they can fuck you” (133).

Nevertheless, this time “the play depicts social and political power as rooted in exploitation and managed through presentation” (Mason, *Political Theater* 269) and this particular context is possible due to the introduction of a representative twentieth century tool: the television, which Felix has summoned to televise the crucifixion of Ralph, a rebel who pretends to be the son of God and who is actually acknowledged by the people as such. Felix made a deal with a U.S. television station which agreed to pay 75 million dollars in exchange for exclusivity on such a subject which they hope will nevertheless fascinate the public. He believes the sum will be useful for the country but his true intentions are soon to be exposed: the money provided by the televised crucifixion deal will go to the army’s equipment and prostitutes’ dental treatment.

It is Henri Schultz, Jeanine’s father and Felix’s cousin who insists that the dictator should give up his televised crucifixion plan. In his attempt to prevent the “worldwide suicide”, he tells his cousin that he will be remembered as a tyrant but his threat has little effect on Felix: “Look at it calmly – fifteen or twenty years after they kicked Nixon out of the White House he had one of the biggest funerals since Abraham Lincoln. (...) Believe me, Henri, in politics there is only one sacred rule – nobody clearly remembers anything” (143). Miller’s reference to the United States thus becomes clear especially when Felix insists that his models are Roosevelt, Truman and Lincoln: “(...) those three killed more people than any other Presidents. Johnson did pretty well in Vietnam but no comparison with Roosevelt and Lincoln. Greatness lives on murder. Imagine if Roosevelt had refused to fight, or Truman refused to drop the bomb! They’d have gone down in history as ridiculous clowns.” (146) Bigsby suspects that Miller might as well have thought of President Bush and the Gulf War and of Vladimir Putin who had destroyed Chechnya in 2000 (*Critical Study* 429).

Unlike his cousin, Henri seems aware of the fact that things need to change. Once a Marxist and paradoxically among the richest in the country, he has now turned towards philosophy and has established in Munich where he teaches at the University. He believes that Ralph is the product of collective imagination, summoned by the people's needs – to the poor peasants, he is the liberator; to Felix, he is the tool used to restore order, to Jeanine he is the one who provided her the will to live, and finally he is an important source of money for the American journalists. We tend to believe that Henri for Ralph remains unseen and unheard to the end of the play. Henri's philosophy is that "apart from getting fed, most human activity – sports, opera, TV, movies, dressing up, dressing down – or just going for a walk – has no other purpose than to deliver us into the realm of the imagination (...) where death, for example, turns into a painting, and a scream of pain becomes a song" (175).

And indeed Ralph remains a mysterious presence whose main purpose is to bring change to people's lives. Abbotson argues that he "represents pure spiritual love as opposed to the earthly one that Felix pursues" and "his ambiguity is further heightened by his constant change of name": he is the product of the collective imagination, he is hope and, for these reasons, his name changes according to the ones who invoke him. This aspect mirrors the fact that "this entity (...) is concerned with other people rather than himself, and he displays no ego" (Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 298).

Besides being his mouthpiece, Stanley is among the few who have actually seen Ralph/ Charley; he is disoriented and incapable of any certainty: "I've ruined my life believing in things; I spent two and a half years in India in an ashram; I've been into everything from dope to alcohol to alfalfa therapy to Rolphing to Buddhism to total vegetarianism, which I'm into now. So you ask me do I believe he's the son of God, I have to be honest – yes, I believe he is ... kind of" (165). Ironically enough, Stanley is the one who points to the economic advantages of the location of the crucifixion: "Well, face it, once it's televised they'll be jamming in from the entire world to see where it happened. Tour buses bumper to bumper across the Andes to get to see his bloody drawers? Buy a souvenir fingernail, T-shirts, or one of his balls? It's a whole tax-base thing (...) Like maybe a new school, roads, swimming pool, maybe even a casino and theme park (...)" (190). His perception seems to be distorted by the abuses in his life before Ralph; to him, Ralph is a tri-sexual for beyond men and women, he loves vegetation. Ambiguity is the only certainty that Ralph's figure displays and this characteristic is obvious in his disciples' attitude towards him.

The organization with which Felix made the crucifixion filming deal is represented by Skip Cheeseboro and Emily Shapiro, accompanied by Phil, the cameraman, and Sarah, the sound woman. Skip is the producer of the TV show and his aim is to go along with the crucifixion, irrespective of whether the man is guilty or not – to him, money is the main issue and since he has invested a consistent sum in this, he expects to enjoy the profit of the show regardless of the victims involved. Although he denies any desire on his part to contaminate a “dignified foreign people” with what he calls “American mores”, Skip does nothing but the opposite by turning a crucifixion into a media event.

Emily is an enigma: she appears horrified at the idea of a crucifixion and goes as far as sleeping with Felix in order to convince him to give up the idea. We fail to ever be sure whether she does this out of solidarity or purely for the fact that she feels attracted to him. Despite her disgust, the prospect of the huge amount of money she would get for the job makes her stay. She hates her job but keeps doing it and although she resents Felix’s world she appears willing to continue their relationship; at times she voices horror at the human race – “(...) wouldn’t you gladly resign from the human race if only there was another one to belong to?” (163) but that does not prevent her from doing her job as professionally as possible; she is a media person, fully aware of the power that TV can exert on the public and the slightest awareness that she is the hand manipulating that power makes her proudly acknowledge that: “My genius is to make everything comfortably fake (...)> No agency wants real. You want a fake-looking crucifixion? - call me.” (152) Her ability is an important asset in a commercial culture which has gone well beyond the boundaries of American space. Miller is “targeting the crass, mercenary opportunism of the media, which is fed by the increasing materialism of the people who are caught in a capitalist culture” (Abbotson, *Critical Companion* 295).

Ralph/ Charley is not crucified for he ultimately refuses to turn himself in. Despite Felix’s plea that his televised death would bring a lot of benefits to the community: “You come down, you hear me? I’m talking syndication, this is one big pot of money! I’m talking new construction, I’m talking investment. You care about people? Come down and get crucified!” (196), the play ends with everybody saying goodbye to a collective projection of their own needs – Ralph disappears.

The play is a mordant satire addressing the remaining American values at the beginning of the new millenium; as Cristopher Bigsby argues, “in *Resurrection Blues*”, written at a time of capitalist triumph, “lifestyle has replaced life. (...) Money, drugs, ambition, pragmatism prevail. Religion is either compromised or appropriated to serve other

causes than the spirit.” (Biggsby, *Critical Study* 435) Ten years later, the same lack of values has not only extended beyond the boundaries of the United States but managed to become a world-wide trend.

2003 would find Miller’s figure in a photo next to that of a young rapper, Mos Def, in a *New York Times* issue. Surprisingly enough, the two artists, who apparently had nothing in common in terms of age, race, ethnic and religious background, form of art, stood next to each other and united in their protest against the War in Iraq and Laura Bush’s act of cancelling a poetry reading at the White House for fear of anti-war manifestations (Centola, *Guardian* 1). Miller’s fight against violence in its various forms did not end with *Resurrection Blues*.

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