

***A View from the Bridge* at the Michigan Opera Theatre**
By Patricia Lawlis

The two act opera, *A View from the Bridge*, after Arthur Miller's play by the same name, first premiered at the Chicago Lyric Opera in 1999. The story follows protagonist Eddie Carbone as his taboo attraction for his niece leads him to the role of informer and eventually results in his death. Sung in English, Arnold Weinstein and Arthur Miller wrote the libretto, while William Bolcom composed the music.

The idea for Arthur Miller's original one-act play (later to be rewritten in two acts), came from the real life events of a longshoreman reporting two brothers to Immigration. After hearing this story in 1947 and the subsequent events in Arthur Miller's own life relating to the period of McCarthyism, he eventually captured the story in his play in 1955.¹ *A View from the Bridge* is, in part, a culmination of the McCarthy era and Arthur Miller's own experience with informers. In the early 1950s, Arthur Miller was a member of a group of writers, journalists, and publishers who came together to write articles attacking McCarthy. Although no one would publish these articles, the group drew notice and was eventually infiltrated and broken up by the FBI.² Miller would later be called before the HUAC in 1956, after the opening of *A View from the Bridge*, and his subsequent refusal to inform on the members of his anti-McCarthy group landed him in prison in contempt of Congress, although this sentence was later thrown out on appeal.³

This play works in the operatic form both as a result of the social commentary, and because of the classical Greek style format of the original 1955 work. The social commentary in *A View from the Bridge* is centered around Miller's exploration into the lives of those who, like Eddie Carbone, jeopardize the cohesive nature of their communities as a result of fear, selfishness, or an unwillingness to accept responsibility for their actions.⁴ It was during Miller's studies at the University of Michigan that he first turned to social commentary through theatre because "it was the cockpit of literary activity and you could talk directly to an audience and radicalize the people."⁵ Unlike the more impersonal audience/performer relationship found in films, Miller's works are best realized through a medium of live performance on the stage.⁶ This is because Miller works to speak directly to his audience, he relies on the flexible nature of live theatre to capture the social issues of the moment and bring them to the attention of the audience, unlike in film where the recording is a stagnate production. The idea that live performance is the best medium for his works comes from his theory that the ability for a work to survive depends on "an ability to read the shifting text of society... [along with] a desire to reach back beyond some

¹ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 104.

² Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 3.

³ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 3.

⁴ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 4.

⁵ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 2.

⁶ Enoch Brater, ed., *Arthur Miller's America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 237.

temporal divide and acknowledge continuity.”⁷ Miller advocates for live performance, as offered in theatre or opera, even as his views on a constantly evolving society allow for his works to transition to new mediums to reach new audiences, while still keeping ties to the past and his original work.

Along with the transitional benefits of a live audience, Miller’s 1955 play was an ideal piece for the operatic medium because, unlike the later revision, it was written in verse with a chorus following the influence of classical Greek dramatists.⁸ Rather than needing to completely rework the text of the play for opera, therefore, large amounts of the script were already ‘singable’ and able to transition to a libretto.⁹ Additionally, the nature of the chorus also played a major role in the ease of operatic transition. In classical Greek drama as well as in operatic works, the chorus has the ability to bring subtext to the forefront as a driving element to the action.¹⁰ The result was that the 1955 play was already designed to speak to the audience and progress through the action with the same approach as in opera. The influence of the Greek drama can also be seen in the role of Eddie as he follows in the wake of the classical Greek protagonist. His tragedy plays out as one that is both easily predictable, and yet impossible, under the personality restrictions of his character, to avoid.¹¹

The final supporting feature of this work as an opera comes from the fact that Miller was completely cooperative and supportive of the endeavor to turn the work into an opera, and even played a major role in the shift from theatrical verse to libretto.¹² Working with Arnold Weinstein, the two writers approached William Bolcom with the first general sketch in 1994, and while much of the libretto came from the original work, Miller also provided complete cooperation and new text at Bolcom’s request.¹³

The operatic rendition of *A View from the Bridge* will run at the Michigan Opera Theatre from Saturday April 5th until Sunday April 13th, and a special free event on March 25th will feature composer William Bolcom as he talks about his collaboration with the two librettists and the creation of the work. For more information about the production or the young adult, Access Opera program, go to <http://www.michiganopera.org/>.

⁷ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 6.

⁸ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 13.

⁹ Enoch Brater, ed., *Arthur Miller’s America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 238.

¹⁰ Enoch Brater, ed., *Arthur Miller’s America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 240.

¹¹ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 17.

¹² Enoch Brater, ed., *Arthur Miller’s America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 237.

¹³ Enoch Brater, ed., *Arthur Miller’s America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 236, 241.

Bibliography

Bigsby, Christopher, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller: Second Edition*.
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Brater, Enoch, ed. *Arthur Miller's America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change*.
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.