

1968: A Global Perspective

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1968: A Theatre of Revolt?

With the benefit of political hindsight, it is tempting to understand “Theatre in 1968” as a monolithic entity representing the convergence of radical politics and revolutionary change mirroring those seismic shifts which rocked American society at the time. In this new kind of theatre, audiences were pushed (often literally!) into questioning their core beliefs in plays less reliant on language than they were on angry spectacle or communal ritual. In the work of The Living Theatre, Café La Mama, or the Black Arts Movement, audiences were provoked, intimidated and challenged. At the same time, a generation of young writers was emerging who not only questioned the traditional, realistic forms of drama but the importance of theatre itself at a time when everything in society was being questioned as well.

But while a new generation of theatrical voices discovered the possibilities of using the stage to effect revolutionary social change or create a new kind of spiritual community with its audience, experimentation represents only one aspect of the American drama of the time. Indeed, if one looks at the work of playwrights whom many would consider the most popular or successful—Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Neil Simon and Edward Albee—a different picture emerges. A writer like Miller, whose previous works were typically concerned with social change (*Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*), was treated with particular harshness. In particular, his 1968 play *The Price* was singled out for criticism. A family drama examining the past of its two principal characters, *The Price* appeared to critics as a trivial throwback to an old-fashioned, outmoded dramaturgy that was not only out of passé—it was irrelevant, at a time when irrelevance was *the* cardinal sin. It was 1968, and the critical establishment was concerned with activism, change, breaking down taboos or eradicating the boundaries between actor and audience; it was unconcerned with a realistic play about two brothers dividing a parent’s used furniture in an attic room. While this paper considers the implications of the critical failure of Arthur Miller’s play, it also raises questions about the responsibility of the artist at a time of social crisis, and the responsibility of the critic to judge works of art fairly and without prejudice. Every work of art is, of course, a product of its own time; but what happens when the time itself is so “out of joint” that critical standards are lost, and it is nearly impossible to judge a work of art on its own particular merits? By asking these and other hard questions about *The Price*, we not only ask important questions about 1968, we ask them about our own time and of ourselves.