

Arthur Miller in Erzurum

David Espey

Abstract

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* has been performed in many countries, but Turkish audiences seem to have a special attachment to the play, especially in Erzurum, where it has been performed many times at Atatürk University. I attended one memorable performance there some years ago, and on a recent visit to Erzurum, I learned that a staging of Miller's *The Crucible* was being planned. It will be interesting to see how *The Crucible*, about conflicts between justice and religious vision in Puritan America centuries ago, will be received by a contemporary Turkish audience.

Keywords

Arthur Miller, Puritanism, cross-cultural, Turkey, theater

Arthur Miller once wrote a fascinating book, *Salesman in Beijing* (1984) about his visit to China to collaborate with the Chinese in staging productions of his play, *Death of a Salesman*. It is a story of capitalism and communism, of cultural difference and the challenges of translation, of how the Chinese strongly identified with the struggles of Willy Loman despite (or because of) the great differences between Chinese and American culture.

The book came vividly to mind when I first journeyed to the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum back in 1998; the highlight of my trip was watching a production of *Death of a Salesman* at Atatürk University. I arrived in early June, but there was still snow on the mountains. Kamil Aydın, Fikret Arargüç and Ahmet Beşe met me at the airport. We had hung out together at a conference in İzmir in May, and they had invited me to Erzurum.

I had been to eastern Turkey once before, in the summer of 1991, at the end of my Fulbright year at Hacettepe University, Department of

American Literature and Culture. My family and I had explored Van, then traveled by bus to Doğubeyazit, Kars, and Trabzon. The landscape reminded us of the American West – dry, rocky, frontier-like, with high plains and dramatic canyons. The first Gulf War had just ended, and there were few travelers. Along the border with the recently disbanded Soviet Union, empty watchtowers stood as silent testimonials to the vanished Cold War.

But we had missed Erzurum. We knew the city only by the Turkish weather reports from our year of residence in Ankara. Whatever the weather elsewhere in Turkey, in Erzurum, snow was often in the broadcast.

When I arrived there in the summer of 1998, Erzurum seemed a world away from İzmir. Despite the sunny skies, there was a chilly wind and the weather was changing. By evening, storm clouds were threatening.

By chance, I happened to have chosen the week that students at Atatürk University were presenting a performance of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It is a play well-known to American students and is often read in high school. Public schools the world over generally present a favorable view of their own country's history to their students, and this is especially true in the US – "the land of the free and the home of the brave," as our national anthem proclaims.

But *Death of a Salesman* undermines that sunny, patriotic view of America. Willy Loman, a bottom-feeder in the capitalist food chain, represents failure in a competitive society, the darker side of the American dream. I remember my high school English teacher asking our class: "Can Willy, an obscure and unsuccessful salesperson, be a tragic hero?"

Students and faculty at Atatürk University, it turned out, were probably even more familiar with *Death of a Salesman* than I was. The play has a long history of performance in Erzurum, and throughout Turkey as well (Raw). Ahmet Beşe, one of my trio of hosts at the university, was directing the performance I was to see that evening. And he confided to me that he himself had played the part of Willy Loman during his student years at that university.

That evening, I had a front row seat for the student production (in Turkish) of *Death of a Salesman*. My limited Turkish would have posed a problem, but Ahmet gave me a copy of the text in English, so that I could follow the play easily.

And thus I watched with great interest as *Saticının Ölümü* unfolded before me, transformed into a Turkish play about Turks. The story came

Arthur Miller in Erzurum

quickly back to me. Willy, beset by problems and disappointments with his career, his marriage, his sons. Willy defending the system while crumbling under it. Willy, trying to instill his fading optimism into his sons and concealing his own eroding belief in his country's ideals.

As the play progressed, I followed the familiar text in English. And then, suddenly – Erzurum's famous weather added a new dramatic flourish to this tense, dark play. A fierce electrical storm was raging outside – there were occasional flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder. All at once the stage went completely dark. The audience gasped collectively, then fumbled for flashlights and matches. After a long moment of rustling and scurrying on the stage, someone appeared and announced that the building had lost power. He asked the audience to be calm and patient while the management worked to restore electricity.

So we waited, murmuring in the darkness for about ten minutes while the storm provided the drama – hailstones rattled on the roof, lightning and thunder competed outside in a fierce ballet of *son et lumière*. And then technology triumphed – and electricity returned. Without missing a beat, the actors took up from where they had left off, and Willy's sad saga rolled on to its somber ending.

The curtain fell, cast appeared and bowed before the footlights, to loud and enthusiastic applause. Then, the audience began to collect their coats and umbrellas. A Turkish professor came up to me, with tears in his eyes. "In Turkey, we live *Death of a Salesman* every day of our lives," he said. He shook his head, overcome with emotion, and walked slowly away, leaving me to ponder his cryptic statement.

The rest of my stay passed pleasantly, with *Death of a Salesman* reverberating in my head. Kamil gave me a tour of the city center and then we drove up to the ski slopes and looked down at Erzurum spread on the plain below. On the morning I left, another hailstorm developed, and the trio of Ahmet, Kamil, and Fikret watched with concern as I boarded the bus.

They need not have worried. The hail disappeared as soon as the trip got underway, and before long the sun was shining. Eastern Turkey is full of microclimates: the weather changed quickly to blue sky and sun, and in a couple of hours, I was walking through the village of Yusufeli and getting a sunburn. I took a *dolmuş* far up into the Kaçkar mountains to the village of Barhal and hiked around the Çoruh river, visited several old Georgian

churches, and even met up with a group of Australians who were trekking in the Black Sea mountains.

All these memories came vividly back when I came to Erzurum for the American Studies of Turkey (ASAT) conference in May 2014. Kamil, Fikret and Ahmet – looking much the same as I remembered them from years ago – got together and reminisced with me about the dramatic and stormy performance of *Death of a Salesman* 16 years earlier.

Erzurum, like all Turkish cities, has changed dramatically in the intervening years of growth and prosperity. The city center has been restored, the old mosques and *hans* refurbished, the city squares repaved, the parks landscaped. Commerce was bustling, and attractive new apartment blocks marched out from the edges of the city and up the surrounding hillsides. I hardly recognized Atatürk University. The campus had expanded, with more trees and gardens; the number of students had multiplied. There were many new classrooms, dormitories, and administrative buildings.

The theme of the conference was “American Fantasies and Dreams,” a topic well suited to the world of Arthur Miller. Ahmet told me that the English Department was planning a future production of Miller’s *The Crucible*, that dark tale of Puritan imagination gone awry – the devil, witchcraft, hallucinations, trials, torments, confessions and executions.

By chance, I saw an excellent production of *The Crucible* a month later in England, when I went to teach in the Penn-in-London summer program. When I was a student in the 1950s and 1960s during the Cold War, the play was seen as a parable for the excesses of Cold War ideology in America – the rabid anti-communism, the witch-hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy and House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), the blacklisting of artists and writers accused of having been Communist Party members. Arthur Miller had refused to testify before the Committee and give evidence against friends who had been party members. He was convicted of contempt of court and sentenced to prison. Seeing *The Crucible* again brought back memories of that period in American history.

Miller’s plays, despite their association with specific historical periods, seem timeless. Changes in economic conditions, national political regimes, and international conflicts bring out new relevance in his dramas. The financial meltdown of 2008, the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor in the US and in other countries, the manipulation of financial markets, and the inequities of capitalism – all give added meaning to the plight of the Willy Lomans of the world.

Arthur Miller in Erzurum

I wish I could see the coming production of *The Crucible* in Erzurum. I'm sure it will be as moving and thought-provoking as *Death of a Salesman* was in 1998. Miller's plays expand beyond events and themes in American culture to the world at large. China in the 1980s brought out new meanings in *Death of a Salesman*. One wonders how eastern Turkish audiences will receive *The Crucible*. Contemporary Turkey is a rather different country than the one I first experienced a quarter of a century ago. Will recent political events – both domestic as well as in the neighboring areas – elicit new meanings from Arthur Miller's play about religious and political events that occurred in the Puritan colony of Massachusetts more than three centuries ago?

Works Cited

- Miller, Arthur. *Salesman in Beijing*. New York: Viking, 1984. Print.
- Raw, Laurence. "Evolving Attitudes to the American Dream: Death of a Salesman in the Turkish Context." *European Journal of American Studies* 3.1 (2008). Web. 16 Oct. 2014.