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Somewhat Informed; “A View from the Bridge,” and the Melodrama of Shame.

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

Arthur Miller’s “A View from the Bridge” is an underappreciated classic worth revisiting.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many theater fans have found themselves brushing up on the staples of American drama. However, visiting past classics is sometimes impeded by the lack of recorded material. Usually, musical theater fans can just visit a music or video streaming service to find cast recordings of productions of their favorite shows. For those who lean toward plays rather than musicals, it may be more difficult to find quality content.

Thank God for Los Angeles Theatre Works (LATW). A personal favorite performing arts organization of mine, LATW speaks for itself in terms of the volume of quality plays they have produced for the public, most of which are available free online. This week, I listened to LATW’s 1998 production of “A View from the Bridge,” by Arthur Miller.

When learning about Miller’s works, students mainly focus on “The Crucible” and “Death of a Salesman.” There is good reason for focusing on these two plays; they are influential in theater history, they reflect real world 20th century American issues and they are widely regarded as Miller’s best. I do not disagree with these assessments, but “A View from the Bridge” should not be overlooked.

The play is structured like the traditional Greek tragedy, in which the protagonist becomes the villain of their own story. Eddie Carbone, an Italian longshoreman living in 1950s New York, welcomes two distant cousins from Sicily, who have entered the country without proper documentation. For nearly 20 years, Carbone has lived with his wife Beatrice and niece Catherine, and has worked hard to keep both comfortable and healthy in the humble tenement house in which they live.

Like many great 20th century works, the play explores the deepest and most shameful corners of the mind of man: the need to control others intellectually, financially and sexually. It quickly becomes apparent to Eddie that one of the men he is hosting, Rodolpho, is becoming romantically involved with his niece Catherine. Eddie’s wife Beatrice is happy with the match, as Rodolpho is a handsome, talented young man who could gain citizenship and create a comfortable life if he were to marry Catherine. Eddie realizes that he is not ready to let his niece go, and is having terrifying thoughts about why that might be.

In an effort to conceal the sickening reasoning behind his need to keep Catherine within the apartment, Eddie alleges that Rodolpho is only wooing Catherine to gain citizenship, and implies that he is gay. It becomes increasingly clear that the patriarch of the family has now been twisted in a web of shame in which he projects his own moral failings by childishly alleging the sexual perversion of another (to be clear, the play does not take a homophobic position toward Rodolpho, but Eddie certainly does).



As the weeks drag on, Eddie becomes enraged with the match and consults a lawyer to attempt to end the pairing. The lawyer warns him to back off and tells him that he needs to let Catherine branch out on her own. Instead, Eddie thrusts himself onto Rodolpho in a fit of rage and kisses him in an attempt to expose Rodolpho's alleged sexual identity. This move backfires, showing just how twisted Eddie's mind has become in the need to dominate his niece and thwart Rodolpho's love for Catherine. As the play progresses, the themes become more potent and heart-wrenching.

While I won't spoil the ending, it is fair to say that the conclusion is firmly in line with the Greek tragedies that the play so clearly echoes. It is not a perfect play, the female characters are frustratingly submissive and the dialogue sometimes gives off the sense that Miller could not help in showing off his writing skills, which feels a tad self-indulgent. However, it is clear that the playwright pulls from his own immigrant roots to produce a play that spotlights the complicated and difficult life of surviving in an unrelenting and often hostile America. "A View from the Bridge" portrays the fall of a man and the moral failings of the American immigration system in a compelling manner that merits attention.

The LATW production is a quality way to experience the show. While seeing a play live in a theater is always the definitive way to experience it, reading the script while listening to the radio play is a close second. Ed O'Neill plays Eddie with the proper grit and vulnerability, and confidently walks the line between vocal expression and avoiding overacting. Jamie Hanes plays a decent—if slightly caricatured—Italian immigrant in search of a better life. Catherine, played by Amy Pietz, anchors the play and makes the conflict between Eddie and Rodolpho more potent. Put plainly, LATW seldom fails to impress and has mastered the art of translating the stage into a contained audio experience.

If you find yourself struggling with the lack of theater content available currently, give "A View from the Bridge" a listen. Surprisingly, you may find a visit to the tenements of New York in 1950 to be the breath of fresh air you need.