



## A BRIDGE TOO FAR

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*Bill Byrne*

*My connection to an Arthur Miller play has haunted me for half a century.*

When I asked my senior English class at Roselle Catholic High School if they had been to “the city,” I quickly discovered that their idea of the “city” was Elizabeth, New Jersey and not the New York where I grew up. As the fourth largest city in Union County and with a population of a quarter million people, Elizabeth is certainly a respectable if “blue collar” city, but it is not “the city!”

I then took it upon myself to broaden their horizons a little, and as we had been covering *The Death of a Salesman*, the great Arthur Miller play, I saw a perfect tie-in with the Sheridan Square 1965 production of *A View from the Bridge*, another Miller take on the idea of an “everyman” tragedy. The cast included some future Hollywood legends, to wit Robert Duval and Jon Voight. Besides, the subject matter had resonances in my own upbringing. My father had spent his life as a lighter captain for the Erie Railroad on the New York Harbor, and my godfather, Mike Hudson, was a hiring boss on the waterfront, part of the Irish group that held sway there. A story from my youth has it that when my two older brothers came back from WWII and were looking for work, Uncle Mike refused to hire

them as longshoremen, telling them in his gravelly Irish brogue “it was not a place for them.”

I contacted the group sales for the Sheridan Square Playhouse and arranged to get a block of about half the house total of 150 seats. The play was performed “in the round,” a small platform with several pieces of furniture was surrounded by seats on three sides, allowing for an intimate theatre experience. As an added bonus for the group, a Q&A session with the actors after the play was to cap the experience. The “intimacy factor” turned out to figure prominently in my not seeing the performance.

Shortly before the performance was to begin, a student approached me in the theatre lobby and asked if he could quickly get something to eat, as he was starved. I agreed with the admonition that he not be late for the start of the show. When he returned, he stumbled past me, and as fate or the god Dionysius would have it, he sat in the first row, no more than three feet from the platformed stage.

Everyone had just settled into watching the play, had just heard lawyer Alfieri’s opening monologue, and had tracked with the first few lines of the opening scene, when I observed my hungry last-arriver head-back sleeping. He then righted himself and started throwing up at the feet of the performers. I rushed from my seat, gathered him up, still retching but this time mostly on me. In the Sheridan lobby’s bathroom, I cleaned him and myself up as well as I could and discovered that he was pretty well tanked.

In the next act of this unfolding drama, I was verbally attacked by two individuals who described themselves as the play director and his assistant. There would be no after-the-drama Q&A. Further, the chief Russian theatre critic was attending the play that evening, and I had insulted the American theatre community before the Soviet bloc, I was told. As if that was not enough, the assistant stage director would be calling around and blackballing me from every theatre in New York, as well as writing a letter to my principal asking for my head.

I took my inebriated ingrate in tow and headed back to Roselle with him. I didn't get to see the play.

That whole episode sat heavily on my psyche. I applied for and was awarded a National Defense Education Act (NDEA) grant the next year for a summer workshop on theatre production. Determined as I was to right what went wrong at the Sheridan Playhouse, I set myself to learn as much as I could about directing and producing a play. Helped by the professional staff of Saint Theresa's College in Winona, Minnesota. I spent long days on blocking, set design, movement, and all the elements I thought I needed to learn. My plan was to direct *A View from the Bridge* when I got back for the fall semester at Roselle.

I did just that. Maybe it's good thing I didn't see the professional version of the play in New York. I would have to mount the play on a traditional proscenium arch stage and that called for some concessions that were easier "in the round."

The production proved to be well received. What sat sweetly with me was the review of a gentleman who came up to me after the play and offered that "it was the finest high school play he had ever witnessed." Faint praise maybe, but I'll take that.

I learned a great deal from the experience. I was naïve about the drinking laws then vis-à-vis New York and New Jersey, 18 versus 21, and at least one student took advantage of the free pass. I don't know if the Russian critic ever wrote a review highlighting the bourgeois behavior of the audience. If he or she did, I couldn't find it on the internet. In my search for my compromised student the next morning, I discovered he didn't even attend RCHS, depriving me of the opportunity to land him in detention for a year. If I was prevented from attending any Broadway offerings, I never experienced it. To my knowledge, that letter asking for my termination never was sent. I like to think that the assistant director, charged with those tasks, thought better of them, and in the interim had just received his first big film role. For that I have to thank that assistant director, Dustin Hoffman!