Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

THE PRICE

David E. Scharff MD

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David E. Scharff, M. D.

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Doctor in the House Seat: Psychoanalysis at the Theater* by Jill Savege Scharff and David E. Scharff

Created in the United States of America

The Price

Arthur Miller (1915-2005)

Premiere: Morosco Theatre,

New York, 1968

Theatre J, Washington DC, 2008

David E. Scharff

Victor Frantz, a 50-year-old policeman, has mounted the stairs to the attic where he stores furniture that his parents brought with them when his father was ruined in the Depression. He looks around at these items, which he has not touched since his father's death 16 years earlier. He silently picks up relics of his past, and puts two records on the ancient phonograph, one an old duet of men singing, and the second a laughing record, at which he is overtaken with laughter. His wife, Esther comes in. Caught up in the infectious

gaiety of the moment, we are then sobered to learn that the building is to be torn down. Esther and Victor are waiting for a used furniture dealer to arrive and take the father's untouched belongings away. Then they will go off to the movies to enjoy a rare night out. As they wait, we learn about Victor's loyalty to his father. Keeping his safe salary as a police officer and working within a predictable schedule, Victor was able to care for his father until his death. But filial duty has been an excuse. Victor has been unable to bring himself to retire from the police force and start a more satisfying, new life.

The used furniture dealer arrives, a 90 year-old man more antique than the pieces he has come to view. Gregory Solomon engages in wandering reveries and humorous exchanges to form a relationship with Victor before offering him a price for the furniture. The prime piece of the lot is Victor's mother's harp, a relic of the musical career she sacrificed to be a homemaker. As Gregory draws Victor out, we learn that Victor has a brother, Walter to whom he has not spoken in 16 years, and who has not responded to Victor's calls this week about the disposition of the furniture.

Solomon tells Victor parts of his own sad life. He had retired from business some years ago, living above his store, selling a few items, waiting for death. Failing to die, he has felt recalled to life by Victor's phone call. After much conversation, they arrive on a price for the goods, but just as Solomon is ceremoniously counting out the money, Walter unexpectedly enters, ending

the first act.

The second act focuses on the failed relationship between Walter and Victor. First we hear of Walter's life, successful in medicine, a failure in his family life, estranged not only from Victor and Esther and their successful college-age son but divorced and effectively estranged from his own children. As Solomon wanders on and off stage, trying to keep the deal from falling through, Walter tells Victor about the failures in his own life. Victor blames Walter for turning his back on Victor and their father and for failing to help Victor with a loan for school many years ago when caring for their father. Walter reveals that he had initially refused because their father had enough money hidden away to help Victor, but when it became clear their father would not pay, Walter had called the father to offer help to Victor – a message the father never relayed to Victor.

Walter now offers Victor a job at his hospital, a new start, but Victor is too proud and angry to forgive Walter for his years of neglect in the past and accept his generosity in the present. As the argument mounts, Walter stalks out, the estrangement between them further set in stone. Esther and Victor go off to the movies, leaving Solomon alone on stage. The play ends as Solomon puts the laughing record on the phonograph again and, laughing helplessly, collapses into the father's armchair.

Discussion

In his production notes, Arthur Miller wrote,

> "A fine balance of sympathy should be maintained in the playing of the roles of Victor and Walter. The actor playing Walter must not regard his attempts to win back Victor's friendship as mere manipulation . . . . Walter is attempting to put into action what he has learned about himself, and sympathy will be evoked for him in proportion to the openness, the depth of need, and the intimations of suffering with which the role is played . . . . As the world now operates, the qualities of both brothers are necessary to it; surely their respective psychologies and moral values conflict at the heart of the social dilemma. The production must therefore withhold judgment in favor of presenting both men in all their humanity and from their own viewpoints. Actually each has merely proved to the other what the other has known but dared not face."

Through the metaphor of bargaining with a used furniture salesman, *The Price* tells the story of two brothers, Victor and Walter, whose decisions have exacted a price on their lives. The play is enriched by the Greek chorus-like comments of Victor's wife Esther. Solomon, the used furniture dealer, a facsimile for the wily old father, comments both from inside his own experience and from outside the family's experience, bringing into this isolated family the social issues that set the stage for the agonies we will hear. Solomon has an intuitive way of sensing and judging character, of wooing each member of the Franz family, and at the same time he has an agenda of his own. Cast at the center of the play, in this inside and outside role, he brings the theme of resilience to the play. Almost 90, he's been broken and rebounded many times. He is proverbially "older than Methuselah," and

therefore gives the sense of endless, repeating generations, of financial and emotional boom and bust through which he has come back. “I can tell you bounces,” he says. “I went busted 1932; then 1923 they also knocked me out; the Panic of 1904, 1898 . . . But to lay down like *that . . .”* He gets a laugh. Even in 1968 when the play was written, Solomon’s first bust would have been before most people in the audience were born. With his call for help, Victor has brought Solomon back from his death vigil, and he can’t see how someone would just give up as Victor’s father had.

Solomon is surely a stereotypical old Jewish European businessman, charming, and perhaps (and it is never settled in the play) a bit of a fast act, maybe even a con man. He also represents King Solomon the Wise, understanding the family and the costs of their internal struggle better than any of the family members themselves. That he is the only character in the play with humor emphasizes the deadly seriousness of the others. For although Arthur Miller’s drama is serious stuff about the agonies of choices and the pitfalls of family love, there are many dreary dramas written without the leavening Solomon provides.

We get a great deal of Victor’s history before he says a word. He is in police uniform. Taking off his jacket, he’s at leisure, reminiscing. In mime, he goes through the parts of his life, the phonograph, the furniture, his fencing gear. We detect the sadness in the difference between his youthful fencing

and his aging body that is no longer comfortable trying to assume “en garde” position. By the time Esther enters, we know a lot about him. As the two of them reminisce, we get a portrait of their marriage. Their intimate bickering shows us the personality of their marriage and reveals their hopes, nostalgia and regrets, and the admiring way they see each other when they are dressed up. With their son recently gone to college, they are alone for the first time. They have an opportunity for something new. But what? Esther pushes for something new, for Victor to retire on his police pension, but Victor demurs. What is their life? What are these old parental relics worth? Is it enough to fuel their future when Victor has not so far been able to fashion the future for himself?

Enter Solomon. Enter humor, vitality that cuts through the nostalgia, loss and paralysis about the future. So many pithy lines: “I like her, she’s suspicious . . .a girl who believes everything, how you gonna trust her?” “I was also very good. Now not so good.” “Time, you know, is a terrible thing.” “I don’t need water, a little blood maybe.” “I was good, now not so good.” There is something compellingly genuine about this relic of a man at the same time that we can’t help being suspicious. It’s part of Miller’s genius that we never know whether we can quite trust Solomon, but we can’t help liking him, and that came through brilliantly in the April 6, 2008 production I saw at Theater J in Washington DC when Robert Prosky played Solomon.

The play is mainly choreographed in duets, framed by Victor's opening and Solomon's closing, both done as mime soliloquy. Frequently a third character intrudes and comments on the duets. I've commented on the marital portrait in Esther and Victor's opening sequence. The next pairing is Victor and Solomon, given a tweak by Solomon's appreciation of Esther, as he also sweet-talks Victor. When Victor and Solomon talk, they discuss the price for whatever remains of his father's goods – the harp, the radio, the gown, the armoire. The chair where Victor's father sat out his spent years as an old man is never mentioned in the dickering. I see the radio and its tubes, reaching out to the orient, as a hope for moving beyond the limited boundaries of Victor's life looking after an aged father and working police shifts. The armoire gives hope that things that went out of fashion may come back in. Victor's mother's lap robe and silk gown that Walter might like for his daughter are signs of by-gone luxury. I see the harp as a reminder of the meaning of Victor's mother's music, and later a measure of her bitterness. The mother's harp is the soul of the deal, although Solomon points out more than once that the sounding board is cracked – a metaphor for the cracks in her past life. Victor wants to salvage as much as possible from a past he has been unable to take stock of for the 16 years since his father's death. What is valuable, what is not? How much is an old life worth?

Solomon plays a double role in the duet: He is the outside voice, the voice of the "factual man" that Victor cannot hear. Solomon gives things a

reality. He deals with the furniture of their life. Its value in the outside world has nothing to do with its emotional value to Victor and Walter. And he is the voice of a father who has also lost. His line, "I had a wife; I had a daughter" invokes, with Shakespearean simplicity and depth, the longing of the distant, unspeakable past, the lost and found love of women, and connects us with the losses that pervade the play emotionally and poetically. He makes judgments about value, many very funny. The harp is the heart of the deal, as it was the heart of the family when the mother played. The oar and fencing equipment have only sentimental value, no value to him, and he uses their sentimental value to leave them with the brothers if he can. He likes the bed – who knows what value the bed had in the family? There is some innuendo of sexuality, but mainly the bed is a place for faulty connection. It is where Solomon waits while Victor and Walter try to find each other and fail. Solomon offers love and laughter to leaven the atmosphere when the brothers cannot understand each other and cannot reconcile. Part of his authority comes from his extreme old age. He has been waiting for a death that has not come, but in the course of this play he opts for life again. If not death, why not life?

Solomon offers a potential space in which life is created. The potential for love and understanding has collapsed for Victor and Walter, and with that failure has come the loss of meaning in life for each of them. In the heart of the play, we see this tragedy played out in the clash of their personalities as the climax of the second act. Victor had potential, but when his mother died

and his father collapsed economically and emotionally, he opted to stay with the father, sacrificing his own future to support him – selflessly, but also helplessly as a victim. Victor derived self-respect from his sacrifice, but at a tremendous cost. He has never had a future, and he still lacks the capacity to develop one.

Here a word of theory: We all carry the past as a crucial internal psychic organization. We live it and are organized by it through our memories and regrets. The memories we carry are often not facts about the past as they would have been accurately recorded on video, but are rather the way we carry our pasts. We eventually learn that Victor has known things he could not bear, and lived out the consequences of that inability to face what he knew and knows. He knew his father had more resources than he let on, and he chose to think of his father as helpless rather than manipulative and exploitative. If he decided that his father had exploited and lied to him, that new view would invalidate his entire life. He maintains an ideal of himself as loving, caring for his father who loved and needed him, and he fends off the idea that his father sacrificed Victor and Victor's family to his own selfish needs. He argues that Walter simply chose to leave the two of them selfishly, and that his was the noble course from which Walter could have saved him. He maintains that he is Walter's victim, not his father's. When Walter faces him with the "facts" that their father sacrificed him and never even told him of Walter's offer of financial support, he refuses to take in Walter's explanation.

Psychologically, Victor embodies the virtues of loyalty and fealty, the plain self-sacrificing and loving son. He has regrets, but he cannot move from the course he plotted. In the fine balance maintained by the play, his motives are wholly laudable. But also in this complex balance, we have to see that he has lived by splitting the image of his father. To maintain the image of his father as loving and needy, he puts any hint of resentment underground. But it does not stay just underground. It re-emerges as hatred of Walter for betraying him. Even when he learns towards the end of the play that Walter had offered to help him, had tried to extricate him from the bond to his father, he reasserts the position he has held for 16 years: That Walter is the villain, not his father. Rather than see his father with a realistic mixture of love and regard on the one hand, and appropriate skepticism about his failings on the other, he has split the image of a whole, complex father between the two persons of his father and Walter. So for many years, he has idealized his father and denigrated Walter. One is all-good, the other all-bad. This splitting in response to the problem of how to regard both his father and himself has cost Walter the ability to make autonomous choices about his life, and has robbed Esther of a freely chosen life for the couple. If Victor came to hate his father, his image of himself would be subsumed in regret and denigration for all the lost years, too. He has to maintain his simplified, sympathetic view of his father to keep his self-respect.

Victor therefore stands for the ideal of self-sacrifice, of caring for the

patriarch, of family above ambition, no matter what the cost. But to do this, he has to maintain the idea that Walter is nothing but a selfishly motivated, self-serving cad who would sacrifice his father and brother if that is what it took to be successful. It is Cain and Abel all over again. But in this modern version, we can see this division of the good and bad brothers as a fiction of their psychologies.

When the production is successfully done with equal emotional weight and sympathy for Victor and Walter – as it was in this one in which Robert Prosky's sons played Victor and Walter, it demonstrates the tragic role of splitting as a central organizing aspect of a family suffering estrangement. Victor and Walter cannot understand each other because they are separated, estranged parts of a whole. Victor represents the self-sacrificing, dutiful boy who does not ask questions, even if that means sacrificing the future for himself and for his wife as well. Walter is the boy who struggles against the family seduction to a loyalty that also means a kind of individual collapse. He is, or was, self-interested, ambitious, hard working. He refuses to give in to the destructive and depressive, needy pull that took over the family at the time of the economic and emotional crash, the Depression.

I have said something about the way the internalization of the past organizes these characters. But we can also see how it has influenced their view of the future. The internal image of the future, for everyone, is modeled

on a transfer and transformation of the past. In these sons we can see how the image each carries of the past shapes what they have seen as a future they have, consciously and unconsciously, molded through the years. If Walter has ruthlessly made something quite considerable of himself, he has done so in an identification with the father, but it is the identification he had before the economic and emotional collapse. He has become, like that aspect of his father, somewhat ruthless in the pursuit of ambition. He has cast his marriage and children aside in the process, as his father may have done before collapsing and asking them to support him. In a sense, Walter sacrificed his family in both generations, both his father and Victor, and his wife and children. But while Victor finds him ruthless and self-interested, and makes a compelling case for that point of view, Walter has fought for life, for not being bound by the past, for not dwelling in loss and catastrophe. He has fought for a future, and he is still, or once again, doing so. Walter has also been identified with his mother, especially with the mother's anger at the father for ruining her musical career. He is not going down with the ship as she did. It is as though he is also setting right her loss.

When Walter enters, one of the first things he does is to retrieve one of her gowns, saying it is for the only one of his children, his daughter Jeannie, with whom he seems to have significant contact. But I think there is also a hint that he is unconsciously identified with her in his love of her beautiful and feminine things. Perhaps if this play had been written in the modern era,

Walter would have had to out his own unconscious homosexuality or transvestism in the identification with his mother. (I am not saying that he is, in this play, secretly homosexual, but that current theatrical preoccupation might have been invoked to organize his inner situation in that way.) It is fairer to say in Miller's idiom, that in identification with his mother's resentment he has been unable to sustain a family, unable to achieve what Victor has.

In the present time of the play, Walter has learned a great deal and tries to approach Victor with his self-knowledge won through suffering. He longs for Victor, for his other half, and experiences loss again when Victor, in his own concrete way, will not and cannot meet him halfway. Walter's memory of the family is that his father killed his mother. Exactly how he did so is not specified, but presumably it was by collapsing after the economic crash, and by sacrificing her career to his own vision of the family even before the crash. Walter is convinced that he tried to do this to Walter as well. Walter believes his father succeeded in killing life off for Victor and Esther. So that is the way he remembers the family, and when he is pressed by Victor to see himself, Walter, as the villain of the piece, he reaches into this version of the family that justifies sacrificing his own family to his ruthlessness.

The play's tragedy is the failure of Walter's quest to achieve reconciliation with Victor and for either brother to fill out the missing parts of

himself. Esther begs Victor to listen to Walter, but he refuses. Victor cannot hear because of his own defensive structure, which has only hardened with time and the accrual of losses on top of the original surrender to his father. Now he is stuck in the sacrifice, and that keeps him from being able to retrace his steps, go back to school and in some way pick up where he chose the fork in the road that he still pursues. Walter has changed, but in the face of Victor's denial, he regresses to self-justification in the story of why he has led his life as he did. This doesn't mean this is the best he can do. He seems to have been doing much better since his breakdown, but in the battle with his brother, he is defeated and in that way, the "victory" is Victor's. Walter has been living with his regret, mourning his losses and maturing. Defeated in the confrontation with Victor, he moves back to the position that represents all the forces that organized his flight from his family. He was driven from the family's defeat, driven away from a feared fate and identification with his father, driven to have the life in medicine like the one in music he thinks his mother sacrificed. And Victor is driven now, in the confrontation with Walter, into a hardened, once more reified, unreflective position: he cannot afford to forgive Walter. Even more he cannot afford to understand the dilemma Walter faced, because to understand that, to empathize with that, would call into question all the major decisions he took. He may well have taken them passively, without conscious decision, but take them he did. Both Victor and Walter have made decisions without really seeing what the implications were.

As Walter says, “The time comes when you realize that you haven’t merely been specializing in something – something has been specializing in you . . . the whole thing comes down to fear.”

This is a play about emotional catastrophe and its price. These brothers, have lived their lives trying to avoid an emotional catastrophe that has actually already happened. The first dramatic crash was the economic crash in which the father collapsed emotionally. But perhaps even before this, the parents’ marriage was a quiet disaster, one played nightly on the harp that Solomon says, “. . . is the heart and soul of the deal.” These lives of fear, phobia, inhibition of possibility and stagnation, are continuations of fear of emotional collapse that had already happened to the family at the beginning of their adulthoods. The father lived in fear of being abandoned on the lawn – but he had already lost everything, and he enshrined that loss in his role as a victim, recruiting Victor as his caretaker. Victor lived in fear of losing himself, but in so doing he perpetuated the loss of himself to his father, sacrificing Esther and the possibilities in the relationship with her, in echo of his parents’ loss of their possibilities. And Walter, who on the surface was so successful out of fear of the same loss, lost his mind albeit temporarily and lost the capacity for a loving relationship. Esther is not so fully developed as a character, but she speaks like a Greek chorus for the loss, the tragedy in Victor’s life that she has borne with him. And so, in the end, Walter, Victor and Esther live out the fears of their parents’ loss. Their tragedy is that with each

new opportunity, with each chance to take and mourn their losses and move to new possibility, they make the same choices in regard to each other. These choices about a future with potential for growth are made from the model of the same old internal catastrophes they carry within, and therefore they remain isolated and disappointed.

As for Solomon, the wise? He has seen it all. Like Tiresias, he has lived it all, grown the wiser for experience and age, but at almost 90, he still has resilience. His life, while also full of tragedy and loss, is a foil to the brothers who cannot bounce back and move on. He is father, commentator, and survivor. The play's first sound is the laughter with which Victor accompanies the laughing record, senseless laughter echoing against the mournful strains of a trumpet. Enter the brothers Walter and Victor who live out destinies, determined by their personalities and perceptions of their parents. As Miller says, "At the end, demanding of one another what was forfeited to time, each is left touching the structure of his life." Then the play ends with the echoing refrain of Solomon's laughter, as if to say, "This is the endless human comedy!"