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Politics as Theater

By Arthur Miller

Masquerading as a journalist last August I attended the Democratic Convention. Like most writers I am always looking for America.

This last time in Miami I was struck by something which has been observed since politics began—that an election campaign is not only like theater, it is theater. What we are doing now is trying to cast the part of President.

Of course, if the system worked as it is supposed to, the thing would be decided on positions taken toward issues, but the issues mean next to nothing, apparently.

In fact, the last time in my memory that issues really counted was during the first Roosevelt campaign. The issue was, when do we start eating again? Hoover's position was that you aren't as hungry as you think. Roosevelt's position was that you are. Roosevelt got elected. The only other time the issues had meaning was when Eisenhower said he would go to

Korea to end the war and Stevenson foolishly summoned us to fight on indefinitely. Eisenhower won.

I suppose the reason why issues mean so little anymore is that both parties attempt to occupy much the same positions. Another reason is that people simply don't remember anything.

I had an exchange in my new play which I decided to cut, in which Lucifer offers God a program by which they could change the world's future, a future devoured by war. And God says, "You can never change the future, only the past." "How can you change the past?" Lucifer asks. "Why the past is always changing," God replies, "people can never remember anything, or else you just lose a few documents."

For my own taste, Nixon is a god-awful actor; for one thing his gestures are always at odds with what he's saying. Either that or they're late. It's a lot like Ed Sullivan, a performer who was so at odds with his own arms that he finally took to clasp-

ing his chest. Senator McGovern is a better actor in that he is simpler. At times he even seems rather graceful, as political actors go. But he lacks that touch of larceny which we enjoy in our leaders.

McGovern's difficulty, and Nixon's advantage, stems from the nature of the role both are trying to win. And that brings us to the kind of play they are offering themselves for as the hero.

McGovern seems to see us as wandering in the moral wilderness; we are being seduced by idols of brass; we are losing sight of our destiny, which is to climb the hard path toward the promised land where we will enter God's grace, lift up the poor and weak, and live in peace. This stance works best, however, when people are really hurting. When Roosevelt led his head-on attack on big business and the malefactors of great wealth, when he called up the virtues of the little man, he was talking to a country of little men who were desperate for a voice of hope. People

always respond best to a call for righteousness when it is accompanied by the call to lunch.

It seems to me that the real reason McGovern's appeal hasn't caught fire may turn out to be a very tragic one. In effect, he is putting himself forth as spokesman for the small farmer, the small businessman—any and everybody who isn't rich, powerful, and in a position of man the manipulator. But is the small farmer really there anymore? Can any sizable group of Americans really conceive themselves any more apart from their umbilical connection with whatever Big Daddy?

If I am right, then McGovern is trying out for the wrong play. We are not casting the Moses to lead us out of the desert, but the chief officer of a bank in which we are all depositors.

If you take a glance at the Lincoln-Douglas debates which once electrified this country, it is unimaginable that such long and closely reasoned speeches could ever be listened to in our time. It is impossible to sustain attention that long. (And besides, who

would listen to a five-foot shrimp arguing with a scarecrow whose arms were too long for his sleeves?)

What we want now is the theatrical impression of a man successfully impersonating integrity, and on two crucial occasions in our recent history we have made decisions based almost totally on such impressions, one being Nixon's Checkers speech and the other Eagleton's revelation of his medical past. Our values were tested and the outcome was that we could trust a man who might or might not be corrupt, but we could not trust a man who had known despair.

And what this tells about our inner attitudes, I think, is that we are far more apprehensive than we are confident of ourselves; and that what we want in a political leader is enough larceny, enough insensitivity to permit him to do our dirty work for us, to fight dirty in a dirty world.

Arthur Miller's latest play is "The Creation of the World and Other Business."