

**Fichandler's Fall: Cold War Theater Audiences of 1980**

**By**

**Genevieve Hoeler**

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In mid-June 1979, Arena Stage Theater Company's Managing Director Thomas Fichandler received a letter from Stage Producer Michael Redington, inviting the Washington D.C. theater company to perform in the Hong Kong Arts Festival. The annual Hong Kong Arts Festival had begun in 1973, only seven years earlier, to help shape what became known as the “Hong Kong identity.”<sup>1</sup> The drive to create a national identity for the citizens of Hong Kong drove many of the cultural innovations of the colony during the 1970s and into the 1980s. The Hong Kong Arts Festival was created, in part, to create a more colorful and expressive image for Hong Kong, which was typically known for its hard capitalist market.<sup>2</sup> Inviting a regional American theater company to perform would prove a telling moment for Hong Kong's cultural history.

Arena stage was not an average professional regional theater company. It started in a converted movie theater co-founded by Zelda Fichandler and her drama professor from George Washington University, Edward Mangum. Mangum attended a show at Margo Jones's regional theatre in Dallas, Texas—a theater that closed within four years of Jones's death<sup>3</sup>— and suggested to Fichandler that they start their own theater, an arena theater.<sup>4</sup> Magnum left the project two years later, making Fichandler Arena Stage's producing director and her husband, Tom Fichandler, the managing director. Michael Grossberg quotes Fichandler, saying, “The hardest thing, in nurturing new theatre, was accumulating credibility...[t]here was no theatre in our community. Everything had closed. I used to hear in the lobby: 'What do they do in the daytime?' People didn't understand the idea of regional theatre, because the only thing they knew about was touring productions.”<sup>5</sup> After four years, Arena moved from the 247 seat theater to the once brewery called the Old Vic, which sat 500 people.<sup>6</sup> By 1957, Arena was able to become a not-for-profit theater, and by 1961, Arena moved for a final time and began establish themselves as successful pioneers for the regional theater.

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1 John M Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 167.

2 J.H Bremridge, “The Travel Industry and the Hong Kong Arts Festival,” n.d., para. 1, Box 151, Folder 2, in the Zelda Fichandler papers, 1950-2000, George Mason University Special Collections & Archives.

3 Michael Grossberg, “40 Years ‘Back Stage’: The Rise of Regional Theatre,” *Back Stage – The Performing Arts Weekly* 41, no. 50 (December 15, 2000): A6.

4 Anne L. Fliotsos, *American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 159.

5 Grossberg, “40 Years ‘Back Stage,’” A6.

6 Fliotsos, *American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century*, 159.

Within the next fifteen years, Arena Stage broke ground in more ways than one. Arena Stage produced “The Great White Hope,” written by Howard Sackler which won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1969. Under the direction of Zelda Fichandler, “The Great White Hope” became the first regional theatre production performed on the Broadway stage, and kicked off the careers of James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander. In 1973, Arena Stage became the first American theater company to pass through the iron curtain and tour Soviet Russia with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind*.<sup>7</sup> By 1976, Arena Stage became the first theater to win the special Tony for regional theaters.<sup>8</sup>

With previous accomplishments in mind, Arena Stage was an obvious choice as the first theater to represent the United States in the Hong Kong Arts Festival. Redington assured Fichandler that Arena Stage would be warmly welcomed by the Hong Kong audiences especially since an American repertory theatre had never played at the festival before. He added, “I believe it would be an honour for both Hong Kong and yourselves if the Arena Theater were to be the first American company.”<sup>9</sup> Thomas Fichandler soon indicated his and the rest of the company's interest in the project. Michael Redington informed the Hong Kong Arts Festival Artistic Director Hubert Willis of Arena Stage's willingness to participate in their 1980 festival. Delighted, Hubert Willis wrote a letter indicating that the two play options, subject to his approval, should be “representative of American drama.”<sup>10</sup> Arena Stage organized a list of possible plays that included *You Can't Take it with You*, *After the Fall*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Burlesque*, *The Little Foxes*, *Secret Service*, and *Dead End*.<sup>11</sup> The company postponed all other development projects until they chose two appropriate plays for the festival. Arena Stage eventually settled on *You Can't Take it with You* by Kaufman and Hart, to be directed by Douglas C. Wager, and *After the Fall* by Arthur Miller, to be directed by Zelda Fichandler. These plays would represent American drama to the theater going audiences of Hong Kong. The focus for this study will be *After the Fall* by Arthur Miller and the impact of this on Hong Kong and Washington D.C.

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7 Ibid., 160.

8 Grossberg, “40 Years ‘Back Stage,’” A6.

9 Michael Redington, “For Tom Fichandler from Michael Redington,” June 15, 1979, Box 185, Folder 02, in the Zelda Fichandler papers, 1950-2000, George Mason University Special Collections & Archives.

10 Hubert Willis, “From Hubert Willis to Michael Redington,” June 29, 1979, Box 185, Folder 02, in the Zelda Fichandler papers, 1950-2000, George Mason University Special Collections & Archives.

11 David Chambers, “To: All Department Heads and the Acting Company,” July 3, 1979, Box 185, Folder 02, in the Zelda Fichandler papers, 1950-2000, George Mason University Special Collections & Archives.

audiences.

It is curious why Fichandler chose *After the Fall* to represent American drama to Hong Kong audiences. *After the Fall* was not particularly well-received during its premiere production in 1964. The play is commonly seen as an autobiographical, psychological drama starring two characters: Quentin, who represents Miller, and Maggie, who almost exactly depicts Marilyn Monroe, Miller's ex-wife. John Elsom remarked in his book *Cold War Theater*, "This was taken to be an account of their marriage, but written in an odd style, with flashbacks and dream sequences, loosely connected by narration. It was as if Miller had lost confidence not only in politics and his marriage, but in his former way of looking at the world."<sup>12</sup>

Fichandler was familiar with Miller's work. She had directed Miller's *Death of Salesman* in 1974 and 1976 at Arena Stage, and had a kind of rapport with the playwright that indicated that the professional relationship between them was strong. This was proven further when, approximately seven years following *After the Fall*, Fichandler directed a production of *The Crucible* which went to the Israel Festival in Jerusalem in 1987. Considering her relationship with Miller's work, it is a mystery why she chose to direct one of Arthur Miller's most unpopular plays for the Hong Kong Arts Festival. Zelda Fichandler said in an interview with Sheri Tellman that *After the Fall* was one of Miller's "most positive statements on the condition of man's isolation and separateness."<sup>13</sup> Tillman quotes the director further:

The theatre has an unusual ability of all the performing arts to open up man's awareness of his own internal life and his life in the world at large by role playing—by acting out stories or patterns of behavior which we recognize because we do the same thing, or don't do the same thing...I think my choice of plays, while I hope socially interesting to the audience, comes from this personal source.<sup>14</sup>

Fichandler, according to Tillman, blames the timeliness of the play's first production. Marilyn Monroe just committed suicide causing the "sensational, but personal, aspects for the material [to supersede] the value embodied in the text."<sup>15</sup> With almost twenty years to reflect and forget about the American movie star's suicide, perhaps Fichandler thought the theater audiences, especially those in

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12 John Elsom, "Cold War Theater," in *Cold War Theater*, 1992, 17.

13 Sheri Tillman, "Zelda Fichandler: The Guiding Light of the Arena Stage Company Talks about the Group's Founding...and Her Choice of 'After the Fall,'" n.d., 7, Box 185, Folder 02, in the Zelda Fichandler papers, 1950-2000, George Mason University Special Collections & Archives.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

Hong Kong, would focus on the story being told on the stage, not on the one implied by the content.

Time and place greatly influence an audience's reception to a piece. As Alan Ackerman remarks in his article “Liberalism, Democracy, and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Theatre,” the “power and tastes of spectators” affect how we look at the cultural importance of drama in that period.<sup>16</sup> Cold War culture greatly affected how Hong Kong and American theatergoers of the 1980s reacted to *After the Fall* through the growing need for cultural identity in Hong Kong, the rising belief in psychoanalysis, and the establishment of Marilyn Monroe as an idealized sex symbol in the United States. Elsom reiterates this point in *Cold War Theater*:

[C]onsider the impact of the Cold War upon the cultures of various countries, taking the theatre as my point of departure, and [...]speculate about whether the Cold War itself may not have been affected by the cultural climates in which it was being conducted.<sup>17</sup>

There is very little secondary source information about the travels Arena Stage made to this culturally stratified colony of Hong Kong in 1980. The most that external sources provide about this trip comes in similar forms of, “Arena Stage went to Hong Kong in 1980 as the first American theater company to perform in the Hong Kong Arts Festival.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, a majority of my research comes from primary sources found in the Zelda Fichandler papers, 1950-2000 guide at George Mason University's Special Collections and Archives. These files contain exchanges and memos about initial inquiries between the Hong Kong Arts Festival and Arena Stage, preparations for the trip to Hong Kong, information about the production of *After the Fall*, and reviews of the piece.

Three especially telling documents include a lengthy letter written by Stanley Anderson<sup>19</sup> to Zelda Fichandler while he was actively present in Hong Kong, reviews specifically analyzing *After the Fall*, and the reviews made by American audiences of the production of *After the Fall* by Arena after they returned from Hong Kong. These sources reveal the disparity between the Chinese and British audiences, the American ignorance—however unintentional—of their Chinese audience, and Western

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16 Alan Ackerman, “Liberalism, Democracy, and the Twentieth-Century American Theater,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 767, doi:10.1093/alh/ajj045.

17 Elsom, “Cold War Theater,” 17.

18 This quote is a compilation of external resources that talk about this trip, however briefly, including “American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century,” and “Women Directors Speak: Exploring the influence of gender on their work.”

19 I cannot really confirm whether or not this letter was written by Stanley Anderson. My informed assumption is based on files within the Zelda Fichandler Guide. In the journal, the author claims that “Mark is still my favorite mall room mate.” The only person to stay with Mark on this trip was Stanley Anderson.

attitudes towards Hong Kong during 1980s. Most importantly, this paper will analyze Zelda Fichandler's production of *After the Fall* using audience theory as a practical application to further understand the Cold War influence on theater going audiences in America and Hong Kong. Further, it will prove that, although very few texts talk about it, Arena Stage's participation in Hong Kong's Art Festival holds historical significance in our understanding of Cold War culture in 1970-1980.