

Our Lady of the World's Fair: Bringing Michelangelo's Pietà to Queens in 1964 by Ruth D. Nelson

His success, however, took a heavy toll on his personal life, and his search for a "philosophical center" led Mielziner to the Catholic Church. A friend who was undergoing instruction in the Catholic faith invited Mielziner to Mass at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle on the corner of Columbus Avenue and 60th Street. Spiritually hungry, he listened with an open mind and heart to the message given by the priest from the pulpit, Father Fulton Sheen. After six months of instruction, there remained only one obstacle to his reception into the Catholic Church, and that was the matter of his divorce. Father Sheen explained, however, that because neither Mielziner nor his wife was baptized at the time of their marriage, he would be eligible for an allowance by the church for the dissolution of the marriage, referred to as the Pauline Privilege. Still somewhat resistant, he balked at what he viewed as a limitation on his intellectual freedom. Sheen did not argue, he merely asked, "And are there no limitations which you find it necessary to observe in your own work?" Of course there were.

Mielziner had already read and been influenced by G. K. Chesterton's book *Orthodoxy*. Chesterton had written of his own conversion, and he called on others to live in the world and not to retreat from it. Mielziner commented in one of his letters that

[it was] a period in my life when I was going through an internal struggle which, in a sense, was the desire to embrace a strong faith that would make demands on my life. In opposition to this was my concern and fear and doubts that accepting the dogma of, in my case, Catholicism would restrict what I felt was freedom of thought, and the dangers of a closed mind on the social and intellectual level. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton showed me the answer. In this book he convinced me, to my complete satisfaction, that in accepting a creed, I gained a freedom rather than lost one. It was a freedom I did not enjoy previous to the time of accepting a definite faith.

Satisfied that conversion would enhance his intellect, Mielziner was received into the church on Christmas Day of 1936 by Father Sheen in New York's Church of the Blessed Sacrament. He was thirty-five years old. Of his conversion, his father said to him, "Since you cannot stay with the religion of your ancestors, I am glad you're going into a real one. I have only one request. As long as you live, take pride in your Jewish heritage. There are many things in it we can be proud of."

Part of Catholicism's attraction for Mielziner was its discipline. In an interview, Mielziner reflected on the value of religion for those with creative gifts: "There is so much ego in the theater, so much temperament— people tend to forget that the talent they have is a gift, on lend-lease from a higher authority. It's important if they can be reminded through religion." Sheen remained Mielziner's spiritual adviser and close friend throughout his life. Later named an archbishop, Sheen may be best remembered for his broadcast *Life Is Worth Living*, the popular inspirational television series that was watched by millions of viewers from all walks of life, regardless of religious belief, from 1952 until 1957.

With the advent of World War II, Mielziner once again enlisted, this time with the Army Air Forces, and, with his expertise, offered to develop camouflage, earning him the rank of major. He commented that "on the stage my job was to make people grasp a situation as quickly as possible. In camouflage, my job was to keep them from grasping it at all." But over time his enthusiasm dampened, and with the assistance of Sheen and other well-placed contacts, he was transferred to Washington's *Office of Strategic Services (OSS)*, a wartime intelligence agency.

While he was stationed at Jefferson Barracks near Saint Louis, Mielziner met Father Stanley Kusman, a Marianist priest. Kusman, whose charisma and dedication earned him the sobriquet "the poor man's Bishop Sheen," enlisted as an army chaplain and was assigned to the Italian campaign. Mielziner seemed to have an uncanny ability to bond with the most exceptional priests, and he and Kusman developed a friendship that would last till Kusman's death. Mielziner's deep spirituality joined with his creative talent could have potentially found its fullest expression in the church rather than the theater. In a 1955 interview, Mielziner commented, "If I were starting from scratch, I'd go to a Catholic school, the best of its kind I could find. I'd study church architecture, church structure, and décor. Then I'd devote my working efforts to the liturgical arts. As a matter of fact, I may take a whack at liturgical art yet. Not tomorrow, mind you. Say ten or twelve years from now, after the kids have grown up and I no longer have to keep my nose to the grindstone." With the announcement that the Vatican pavilion would host the *Pietà*, Mielziner now had the chance "to take a whack." As it happened, Father Kusman was leading a retreat in Rome in 1960 when he learned that Cardinal Spellman had requested the *Pietà* loan from Pope John XXIII. As soon as he returned to the States, he said to Mielziner, "Why not ask the Cardinal if you can submit a design?" Within an hour, Cardinal Spellman had phoned his reply—he enthusiastically accepted. Little did Mielziner realize that his offer would consume almost a year of his time. He worked on preliminary sketches until 2:00 a.m. that night. After a number of sketches, he arrived at his final design—the one critics hated and the people loved.