

Belvoir presents

DEATH OF A SALESMAN



Photo: Michael Corridore

By Arthur Miller

Director **Simon Stone**

RESOURCES for Teachers

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

By **ARTHUR MILLER**

Director **SIMON STONE**

Set Designer	RALPH MYERS
Costume Designer	ALICE BABIDGE
Lighting Designer	NICK SCHLIEPER
Composer & Sound Designer	STEFAN GREGORY
Assistant Director	JENNIFER MEDWAY
Fight Choreographer	SCOTT WITT
Stage Managers	LUKE McGETTIGAN, MEL DYER (from 31 July)
Assistant Stage Managers	MEL DYER, CHANTELE FOSTER (from 31 July)
Stage Management Secondment	GRACE NYE-BUTLER

With:

The Woman / Jenny / Miss Forsythe	BLAZEY BEST
Biff	PATRICK BRAMMALL
Willy Loman	COLIN FRIELS
Ben	STEVE LE MARQUAND
Linda / Letta	GENEVIEVE LEMON
Happy	HAMISH MICHAEL
Charley / Stanley	PIP MILLER
Bernard / Howard	LUKE MULLINS

Belvoir's production of *Death of a Salesman* opened at Belvoir St Theatre on Wednesday 27 June 2012.



Colin Friel

Photo: Heidrun Löhr

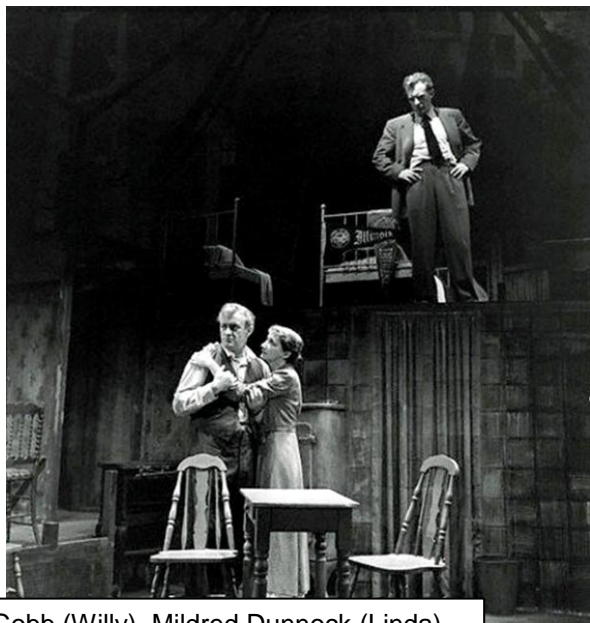
INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller and *Death of a Salesman*

- Arthur Miller is widely regarded as one of the greatest twentieth century dramatists. Over the course of his career, he wrote around 35 stage plays, the best known of which include *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *All My Sons* (1947), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and *The Price* (1968).
- He is also known for his many screenplays, radio plays and essays.
- *Death of a Salesman* premiered on Broadway on the 10th February 1949.
- Initial reviews praised the play for its emotional intensity and dramatic impact, along with the innovatively fluid approach to time and space that its narrative takes.
- The set and lighting design of this initial production, by Jo Mielziner, was particularly singled out for attention.
- *Death of a Salesman* was awarded both the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony Award for Best Play.
- The initial run of the play lasted for 742 performances, and since then, it has been performed countless times, in many different countries and cultural contexts.
- The Loman family, and particularly the character of Willy Loman, became emblematic of a broader struggle between the individual and modern society. In such a way, the characters resonated with their initial audiences, much as they continue to do now.



Arthur Miller



Lee J Cobb (Willy), Mildred Dunnock (Linda) and Arthur Kennedy (Biff) on stage in the 1949 opening production of *Death of a Salesman* on Broadway.

“... there was no applause at the final curtain... Strange things began to go on in the audience. With the curtain down, some people stood to put their coats on and then sat again, some, especially men, were bent forward covering their faces, and others were openly weeping.

People crossed the theatre to stand quietly talking with one another. It seemed forever before someone remembered to applaud, and then there was no end to it. I was standing at the back and saw a distinguished-looking elderly man being led up the aisle; he was talking excitedly into the ear of what seemed to be his male secretary or assistant. This, I learned, was Bernard Gimbel, head of the department store chain, who that night gave an order that no one in his stores was to be fired for being over-age”

(Arthur Miller's recollections of the opening night of *Death of a Salesman*, from his autobiography, *Timebends*, p.191)

CAST AND CHARACTER LIST

Willy Loman,	a 61-year-old travelling salesman
Linda,	Willy's wife
Biff,	Willy's eldest son
Happy,	Willy's younger son
Charley,	Willy's neighbour and longstanding friend
Bernard,	Charley's son
Ben,	Willy's older brother
The Woman,	Willy's mistress
Howard Wagner,	Willy's boss
Stanley,	a waiter and acquaintance of Happy
Letta and Miss Forsythe, two young women who Biff and Happy meet	
Jenny,	Charley's secretary

SYNOPSIS

How It All Goes Down

Willy Loman, an old salesman, returns early from a business trip. After nearly crashing multiple times, Willy has a moment of enlightenment and realizes he shouldn't be driving. Seeing that her husband is no longer able to do his job as a traveling salesman, Willy's wife, Linda, suggests that he ask his boss, Howard, to give him a local office job at the New York headquarters. Willy thinks that getting the new job is a sure thing since he (wrongly) sees himself as a valuable salesman.

We begin to learn some family background and hear about Willy and Linda's grown sons, Biff and Happy. Biff has just returned home from working as a farmhand in the West. Willy thinks Biff could easily be rich and successful, but is wasting his talents and needs to get on track. Willy thinks Biff is being wish-washy to spite him.

Later that night, Willy starts having flashbacks and talking to imagined images as if they were real people. You guessed it. Something is wrong. He's ranting so loudly that Happy and Biff wake up. The brothers are legitimately worried, as they have never seen their father like this. Biff, feeling as though he should stay close to home and fix his relationship with his dad, decides to talk to a former employer, Bill Oliver, about getting a loan to start a business.

In the middle of the night, Willy's talking to himself so loudly that everyone wakes up. Linda admits to her sons that she and Willy are struggling financially. Worse, Willy has been attempting suicide. She's worried and takes it out on her boys, accusing Biff of being the cause of Willy's unhappiness. Now Willy gets in on the family discussion and the situation goes downhill. He and Biff begin to argue, but Happy interjects that Biff plans to see Oliver the following morning. Willy is overjoyed. Everyone goes to sleep believing that tomorrow will fulfill their dreams: Willy expects to get a local job, and Biff expects to get a business loan.

The next day, of course, everything goes wrong. Willy feels happy and confident as he meets with his boss, Howard. But rather than give him a transfer to the New York office, Willy ends up fired. Destroyed by the news, he begins to hallucinate and, yes, once again speak with imaginary people as he heads out to meet his sons at a restaurant.

Waiting for their dad at the restaurant, Biff explains to Happy that Oliver wouldn't see him and didn't have the slightest idea who he was. Distressed, spiteful, and something of a kleptomaniac,

Biff stole Oliver's fountain pen. By now, Biff has realized that he was crazy to think he would ever get a loan, and that he and his family have been lying to themselves for basically their entire lives. When Willy comes into the restaurant demanding good news, Biff struggles to explain what happened without letting his father down. Willy, who can't handle the disappointment, tries to pretend it isn't true. He starts drifting into the dreamy past again, reliving the moment when Biff discovered his (Willy's) affair with a woman in Boston. While their dad is busy being detached from reality, Biff and Happy ditch him for two girls.

Biff and Happy return home from their dates to find their mother waiting for them, fuming mad that they left their father at the restaurant. A massive argument erupts. No one wants to listen to Biff, but he manages to get the point across that he can't live up to his dad's unrealistic expectations and is basically just a failure. He's the only one who sees that they've been living a lie, and he tells them so.

The night's fight ends with Willy realizing that Biff, although a "failure," seems to really love him. Unfortunately Willy can't get past the "failure" bit. He thinks the greatest contribution that he himself can make toward his son's success is to commit suicide. That way, Biff could use the life insurance money to start a business.

Within a few minutes, there's a loud crash. Willy has killed himself.

In the final scene, Linda, sobbing, still under the delusion that her husband was a well liked salesman, wonders why no one came to his funeral. Biff continues to see through his family's lies and wants to be a better man who is honest with himself. Unfortunately, Happy wants to be just like his dad.

Source, accessed 6/7/2012: <http://www.shmoop.com/death-of-a-salesman/summary.html>

ACTIVITIES – Thinking about character & staging

Before seeing the production

1. In the script for *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller provides very detailed opening descriptions of his characters. Working in groups, choose one of the characters below, and read Miller's description of them, using a dictionary for any words that you don't understand:
 - What does each description tell us about the character?
 - In what ways would these description help the actors, director and designers to prepare for the production?

*From the right, **WILLY LOMAN**, the Salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. He hears but is not aware of it. He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms. A word-sigh escapes his lips—it might be “Oh, boy, oh, boy.” He closes the door, then carries his cases out into the living-room, through the draped kitchen doorway. LINDA, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right. She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to WILLY's behavior—she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end.*

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

BIFF gets out of bed, comes downstage a bit, and stands attentively. BIFF is two years older than his brother HAPPY, well built, but in these days bears a worn air and seems less self-assured. He has succeeded less, and his dreams are stronger and less acceptable than HAPPY's. HAPPY is tall, powerfully made. Sexuality is like a visible color on him, or a scent that many women have discovered. He, like his brother, is lost, but in a different way, for he has never allowed himself to turn his face toward defeat and is thus more confused and hard-skinned, although seemingly more content.

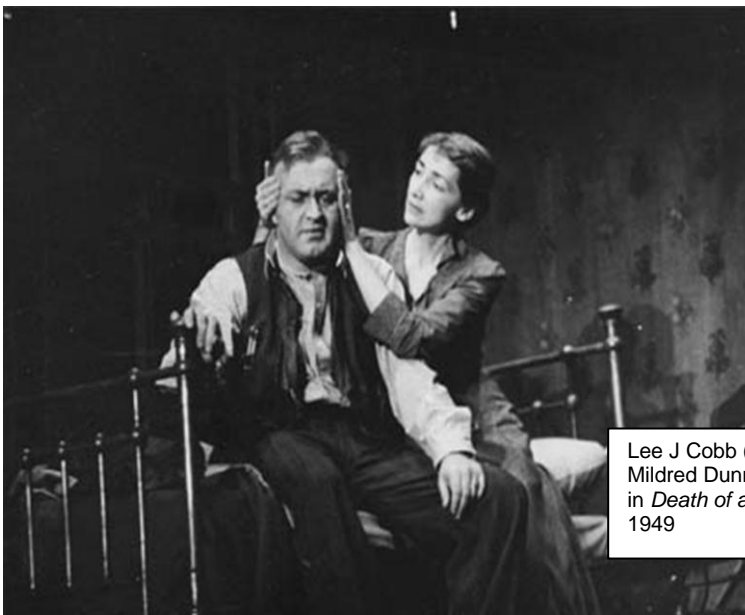
(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

2. Matthew Roudané has argued that Arthur Miller gives us a window into his “character’s spines, or their fundamental nature” through both his very detailed stage directions and the imagery he uses throughout the dialogue he writes:

“[Miller] presents no fewer than twenty-five scenes in which Willy’s body language and dialogue create images of the fall, the falling, or the fallen... Willy often seeks relief by collapsing into a chair, where he *“lies back exhausted”*. He also sits down in a chair after Howard fires him... After Biff discovers his father with the Woman, Willy, *“getting down beside Biff”* explains his loneliness. A shattered Biff exits while *“Willy is left on the floor on his knees”*”

(Matthew Roudané, ‘*Death of a Salesman* and the poetics of Arthur Miller’, p66)

- ❖ What does Arthur Miller communicate about his characters through this ‘falling’ imagery?
- ❖ What mood or impression does this create for/of the play as a whole?



Lee J Cobb (Willy) and Mildred Dunnock (Linda) in *Death of a Salesman*, 1949

STAGING THE TEXT

In pairs or groups, prepare a staged reading of the extract below, using Miller’s stage directions and dialogue to help you with the physical position of the characters – where they sit and stand (particularly in relation to each other), and the way that they move around the stage

[From the right, WILLY LOMAN, the Salesman, enters, carrying two large sample cases. The flute plays on. He hears but is not aware of it. He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. Even as he crosses the stage to the doorway of the house, his exhaustion is apparent. He unlocks the door, comes into the kitchen, and thankfully lets his burden down, feeling the soreness of his palms. A word-sigh escapes his lips—it might be “Oh, boy, oh, boy.” He closes the door, then carries his cases out into the living-room, through the draped kitchen doorway. LINDA, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right. She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to WILLY’s behavior—she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as

sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end.]

LINDA [*hearing WILLY outside the bedroom, calls with some trepidation*]: Willy!

WILLY: It's all right. I came back.

LINDA: Why? What happened? [*Slight pause.*] Did something happen, Willy?

WILLY: No, nothing happened.

LINDA: You didn't smash the car, did you?

WILLY [*with casual irritation*]: I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me?

LINDA: Don't you feel well?

WILLY: I'm tired to the death. [*The flute has faded away. He sits on the bed beside her, a little numb.*] I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda.

LINDA [*very carefully, delicately*]: Where were you all day? You look terrible.

WILLY: I got as far as a little above Yonkers. I stopped for a cup of coffee. Maybe it was the coffee.

LINDA: What?

WILLY [*after a pause*]: I suddenly couldn't drive any more. The car kept going off on to the shoulder, y'know?

LINDA [*helpfully*]: Oh. Maybe it was the steering again. I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker.

WILLY: No, it's me, it's me. Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm—I can't seem to—keep my mind to it.

LINDA: Maybe it's your glasses. You never went for your new glasses.

WILLY: No, I see everything. I came back ten miles an hour. It took me nearly four hours from Yonkers.

LINDA [*resigned*]: Well, you'll just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way.

WILLY: I just got back from Florida.

LINDA: But you didn't rest your mind. Your mind is overactive, and the mind is what counts, dear.

WILLY: I'll start out in the morning. Maybe I'll feel better in the morning. [*She is taking off his shoes.*] These goddam arch supports are killing me.

LINDA: Take an aspirin. Should I get you an aspirin? It'll soothe you.

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

IMAGINING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Responses to the first production

“Miller’s new play is a triumph in writing, in acting and in stagecraft”

(Ward Morehouse, *New York Sun*, 11 February 1949)

“*Death of a Salesman* is a truly great play... it is the theatre at its best”

(R E P SENDERFER, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 24 Jan 1949)

“*Death of a Salesman*... is easily the best and most important new American play of the year”

(Richard Watts, *New York Post*, 11 February 1949)

“Arthur Miller has written a superb drama. From every point of view *Death of a Salesman*... is rich and memorable drama... Mr Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hopes and anguish to the theatre”

(Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times*, 11 February 1949)

After its premiere, *Death of a Salesman* was widely praised by critics and audiences. Early reviews drew particular attention to its dramatic impact, highlighting the unusual narrative structure of the play, where action moves fluidly between past and present, and between reality and imagination. Reviewers were also struck by the ‘ordinariness’ of Miller’s central characters, Willy Loman and his family, a quality that enabled them (and their ‘hopes and anguish’ as described above by Brooks Atkinson) to have an impact on audiences.

However, early responses to the play weren’t universally positive. When Elia Kazan, close friend of Arthur Miller and director of the play’s first production, sent the play to the producer Cheryl Crawford for consideration:



Arthur Miller and Elia Kazan sitting on the set of the original Broadway production, 1949.

“Her reaction was negative. She explained, ‘I didn’t care much for the title, *Death of a Salesman*, but what really bothered me was the flashbacks – I couldn’t see how they would work out. And the main character struck me as pathetic rather than tragic. Who would want to see a play about a travelling salesman? Too depressing.’ This, after all, was a time of postwar boom, on the verge of the 1950s in which, the writer Herbert Gold recalled, the instructions given to television scriptwriters was to produce ‘happy stories about happy people with happy problems’. What, after all, could Willy Loman have to do with the new explosion of consumerism, the feel-good America now four years removed from the war and nearly a decade from the Depression?”

(Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: 1915-1962*, p320)

Ironically, Crawford’s criticisms point to one of the reasons why the play was so lauded, and why it was important and affecting for its audiences. It was precisely because the Loman’s were not ‘happy people with happy problems’ that their struggles resonated with audiences.

Post-war American society

American society in the period after World War Two, from 1945 onwards, was filled with confidence and positivity, and characterised by growing consumerism. To own your own home, fill it with the latest appliances, and park your new car in its garage, became a symbol of success. In his influential work of 1950, *The Lonely Crowd*, sociologist David Riesman pointed to a change in American society, from an emphasis on production, that is, manufacturing and 'making things', and a culture of scarcity left over from the Great Depression, to a culture of consumption, with consumer needs being met by a growing service and sales industry.

During the war, the government had invested heavily in industry, getting America's factories running again after the Great Depression in order to support the war effort. When these factories were no longer needed for war machinery and munitions, they were put to use producing larger consumer goods such as cars and household appliances.

The post-war period saw an economic boom in America. The Gross National Product (GNP) doubled during the course of the 1950s, and again in the 1960s. As a result, Americans were prosperous. They had money to spend, and things to spend it on. By 1960, 62% of Americans owned their own home, and an even greater percentage owned their own car, as the growth of outer suburbs moved the status of car ownership from luxury to necessity.

When money wasn't immediately available, Americans confidently borrowed it to finance their new cars, and fill their homes with the latest whitegoods. Banks were happy to provide both short-term consumer credit, and equally happy to finance longer-term credit (for home mortgages). A central source of Willy's stress in *Death of a Salesman* comes from the pressure of earning enough to meet the various repayments that he needs to make each month.

Consumerism became synonymous with success, and the 'American Dream' of this period was underpinned by the figure of the 'self-made' man, embodied by the character of Ben in *Death of a Salesman*, who repeatedly appears from inside Willy's imagination to share his story about success in the jungle:

“WILLY:... Boys! Boys! [YOUNG BIFF and HAPPY appear.] Listen to this. This is your Uncle Ben, a great man! Tell my boys, Ben!

BEN: Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. [*He laughs.*] And by God I was rich.

WILLY: [*to the boys*] You see what I have been talking about? The greatest things can happen!
(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

Consumerism:

The preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods.

(*The Oxford Dictionary online*)

WILLY: What do we owe?

LINDA: Well, on the first there's sixteen dollars on the refrigerator—

WILLY: Why sixteen?

LINDA: Well, the fan belt broke, so it was a dollar eighty.

WILLY: But it's brand new.

LINDA: Well, the man said that's the way it is. Till they work themselves in, y'know.

[*They move through the wall-line into the kitchen.*]

WILLY: I hope we didn't get stuck on that machine.

LINDA: They got the biggest ads of any of them!

WILLY: I know, it's a fine machine. What else?

LINDA: Well, there's nine-sixty for the washing machine. And for the vacuum cleaner there's three and a half due on the fifteenth. Then the roof, you got twenty-one dollars remaining.

WILLY: It don't leak, does it?

LINDA: No, they did a wonderful job. Then you owe Frank for the carburetor.

WILLY: I'm not going to pay that man! That goddam Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!

LINDA: Well, you owe him three and a half. And odds and ends, comes to around a hundred and twenty dollars by the fifteenth.

WILLY: A hundred and twenty dollars! My God, if business don't pick up I don't know what I'm gonna do!

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

The Travelling Salesman



An advertisement from 1955 advertising a brand of display case for travelling salesmen

During the first half of the twentieth century, this view of the exploring and entrepreneurial self-made man, discovering and conquering territories, changed. Focus shifted from the agricultural and manufacturing industries towards white-collar jobs, as reflected in David Riesman's descriptions in *The Lonely Crowd* of the shift from production to consumption. In this way, the figure of the 'salesman' came to prominence. The travelling salesman became the new 'self-made man', the embodiment of the American Dream, where anyone could rise to the top of their profession, with minimal skill and maximum charm.

The 1920s and 1930s were a golden era for travelling salesmen.

Talking point:
How is success measured in today's society?

new

In Arthur Miller's own words, the salesman of the 1920s was:

"a vital force in building the trade and commercial network of the country. The salesman needed little or no education, but an engaging personality and a faith in the inevitability of next week's upswing. Every salesman knew some other man who had hit it big, opened his own business, and died respected and rich. The myth of the salesman exemplified the open ranks of a society where practically

overnight a man could leap to the head of the line" (Arthur Miller, from *Salesman in Beijing*, quoted in Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*, p108)

"Organised selling in America flourished also for cultural reasons. In a country that, from the outset, held democratic elections and had no established church or hereditary aristocracy, salesmanship provided political and religious groups with a way to compete for followers. Moreover, with more fluid class boundaries than in European countries, the skills of salesmanship, especially beginning in the late nineteenth century, seemed to offer a pathway to personal success. In the early twentieth century, Americans read how-to-sell books and turned Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), which portrayed Jesus Christ as a successful sales and advertising executive, into a bestseller."

(Walter A Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, pp4-5)



Willy has bought into this dream of material success, but he finds it impossible to achieve. *Death of a Salesman* is set in post-war boom time, when the demand for consumer goods stretched far beyond the

"As a salesman [Willy] has got to get by on a smile and a shoeshine. He has to charm. He is a performer, a confidence man who must never lack confidence. His error is to confuse the role he plays with the person he wishes to be. The irony is that he, a salesman, has bought the pitch made to him by his society. He believes that advertisements tell the truth and is baffled when reality fails to match their claims. He believes the promises that America made to itself – that in this greatest country on earth success is an inevitability"

(Bisby, A Critical Study, p.107)

supply: "Salesmen hardly needed to sell, simply taking orders from those happily escaping wartime austerity. Yet the year he [Willy] proudly quotes as his most successful is 1928, twenty years earlier" (Bigsby, *A Critical Study*, p109). His situation is made even more difficult by the fact that the mass production and ready availability of products in this period increased competition for salesmen, who needed to be armed with ever more specialised training and knowledge.

The 'happy' American Family

Added to this picture of prosperity and opportunity, was the equally potent myth of the Typical American Family, referred to above by Herbert Gold. This family was happy and successful, living prosperous lives in comfortable homes equipped with every new gadget. David Halber writes about the 'television family of the 1950s', who embody all of these attributes:

"While Arthur Miller was writing about the conflicts and tensions in the American family, television was broadcasting an antiseptic, idealised portrait of family life: 'Moms and dads never raised their voices at each other in anger... No family difference was so irreconcilable that it could not be cleared up and straightened out within the allotted twenty-two minutes. Moms and dads never stopped loving each other. Sibling love was always greater than sibling rivalry. No child was favoured, no one was stunted. None of the dads hated what they did, though it was often unclear what they actually did. Whatever it was, it was respectable and valuable; it was white-collar and it allowed them to live in the suburbs... and not to worry very much about money. Money was never discussed, and the dark shadow of poverty never fell over their homes'"

(David Halber, 'The Television Family of the 1950s', as quoted in William J Newman, 'The Role of the Family in Miller's Plays', p93)

ACTIVITY

After the show

- Write a list of each of the attributes of Halber's television family of the 1950s (eg Moms and Dad never raised their voices at each other).
- How does your list compare to Arthur Miller's portrayal of the Loman family in *Death of a Salesman*?



COMPARE THE 'FATHER KNOWS BEST' IMAGE ABOVE WITH THE PRODUCTION IMAGE BELOW – are there any similarities you can spot?



Hamish Michael,
Colin Friels,
Patrick Brammall

Photo:
Heidrun Löhner

***Death of a Salesman* as a radical new work**

Through the daily challenges and inner struggles of the Lomans, Arthur Miller presents us with an alternative vision of post-war America. Willy and his family become victims of this culture of consumerism, where the market takes priority over the individual. When he stops making sales, his younger boss fires Willy, despite all of his years at the company. Human beings in this sense become commodities with use by dates. In preparing promotional material for the original production of *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, publicist Merle Debusky focused on the uniqueness of play: "At that time in American drama a play had an antagonist and a protagonist and you knew they were individuals. In *Salesman* the antagonist is not an individual; the antagonist is society" (Martin Gottfried, *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work*, pp143-4). Both Willy and Biff struggle against society's expectations of the roles that they should play.

The subversive picture of American society put forward in *Death of a Salesman* made it a radical new work for its time. In his autobiography, Arthur Miller describes the outrage on opening night of "a woman who shall not be named", who called the play "a time bomb under American capitalism". He responds by saying: "I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last" (Arthur Miller, *Timebends*, p184).

Death of a Salesman takes its audience away from this 'pseudo-life', largely through the journeys that Willy and Biff, in particular, take. During the course of the play, we get the sense that throughout his life Willy has focused his energies in the wrong areas. Aiming for success in a white-collar world, he has ignored the personal satisfaction and sense of achievement to be gained from 'producing' and 'making things': "Willy has the self-reliant skills of the artisan: he is 'good at things', from polishing a car to building a front porch... But self-reliance has collapsed, the tools rust, and Willy has become the futile and pathetic victim of a machine culture" (Richard J Foster, '*Death of a Salesman* as Tragedy', p109). However, while Willy never quite manages to let go of his dreams of material success, through the course of the play Biff comes to a point of self-realisation: "Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say who I am!" (Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act Two). Biff rejects the conventional picture of 'success', choosing to seek personal happiness instead.



Lee J Cobb (Willy), Arthur Kennedy (Biff) and Cameron Mitchell (Happy) in *Death of a Salesman*, 1949

Making connections with contemporary experience

ACTIVITIES- After the show

1. How is Willy Loman's world similar to our world today?

- What sorts of social problems and issues are raised in the script extract and pieces of commentary below?
- How are these problems and issues still relevant today?
- Work in groups to devise a short scene set in a family home that introduces some of these issues. Who are your characters? What are their struggles?

WILLY: Why don't you open a window in here, for God's sake?

LINDA [*with infinite patience*]: They're all open, dear.

WILLY: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks.

LINDA: We should've bought the land next door.

WILLY: The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?

LINDA: Yeah, like being a million miles from the city.

WILLY: They should've arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighborhood. [*Lost*] More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room!

LINDA: Well, after all, people had to move somewhere.

WILLY: No, there's more people now.

LINDA: I don't think there's more people. I think—

WILLY: There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink from that apartment house! And another one on the other side . . .

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

"Willy exists in a world that increasingly detaches itself from him, reminding him daily of his own insignificance"

(Roudané, '*Death of a Salesman*', p80)

CHARLES ISHERWOOD: The stock market may be roaring, but we are still deep in recovery and unemployment is rife. Do you agree that the play has a fresh urgency in this environment?

JOE NOCERA: I tend to think that there is never a bad time to revive "Death of A Salesman," not just because it is such a great play but because it has so much to say about who we are as Americans. We strive endlessly; we're fueled by ambition; we often measure ourselves by how much money we have, and so on. Here in the age of income inequality – a time when we haven't yet recovered from the financial crisis, and millions of Americans are searching for work – it surely hits home when Willy Loman is fired, after 36 loyal years to his company, by the wealthy (and altogether supercilious) son of the man who had hired him all those many years ago.

Yet as much as that scene speaks to this moment, it also transcends it. In the business world, the 1950s and 1960s was the era of 'The Organization Man' (a phrase coined by the great journalist William Whyte). The implicit bargain was that if employees were loyal to their company, the company would be loyal to them.

ISHERWOOD: What a quaint idea, from the increasingly distant 20th century.

NOCERA: That compact broke down a long time ago--as corporations began to place 'shareholder value' over all other values, and firing employees became something executives did whenever the share price dropped. That has been the corporate ethos for at least 30 years. How could Arthur Miller have known that the plight of Willy Loman would eventually be the plight of tens of millions of white collar workers who had outlived their usefulness to the companies they had devoted their lives to, and had derived their sense of self from? He was prophetic.

"With employment continuing to lag and millions of homes in foreclosure, there are surely many men and women avoiding the mirror and its accusations, believing, like Willy, that their inability to achieve the golden ideal of financial success is somehow a personal indictment. In the more than half-century since the play opened the compulsion to measure a man's worth by the size of his paycheck has probably become only more pronounced in American culture."

(Christopher Isherwood,
'Salesman Comes Calling, Right on Time',
The New York Times,

Blazey Best, Colin Friels

Photo: Heidrun Lühr



2. Consumerism then and now

Look at these examples of consumer advertising, all from 1949, the year in which *Death of a Salesman* premiered:

- Is the ethos of consumerism still as strong now as it was at the time of *Death of a Salesman*'s original production?
- What sorts of consumer goods are most sought after today?
- Work in pairs or groups to source clippings from contemporary magazines or newspapers to illustrate your argument.



3. Who is our Willy Loman?

Many reviewers and critics, and indeed Arthur Miller himself, have argued that the character of Willy Loman embodies the broader social changes that were occurring in the post-war period in America. Flashing forward to Australia in 2012...

- In what ways is Australia a society in transition or crisis?
- Which figure would you choose to represent this on stage?
- Who would the Willy Loman of contemporary society be?



Lee J Cobb
as Willy Loman,
1949

Colin Friels as Willy Loman 2012



Genevieve Lemon, Colin Friels

Photo: Heidrun Löhr



THE PLAY'S ENDURING IDEAS

Death of a Salesman has been performed many times since its opening in 1949, in both English and non-English speaking countries, and in a diverse range of languages and cultural contexts. It has even been played “before a native audience in a small Arctic village, with the same villagers returning night after night to witness the performance in a language they didn’t understand” (Brenda Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, p106).



Ying Ruocheng (Willy) and Zhu Lin (Linda) in *Death of a Salesman*, Beijing, 1983



Arthur Miller with the cast of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, 1983

This continued success points to the play’s enduring ideas. While it is certainly a product of its time, that is, of post-war America, the play is centred on fundamental human experiences, and Miller’s characters embody fundamental human traits. Audiences recognise themselves and their world in what they see before them on stage. Arthur Miller argued that his plays “are my response to what was ‘in the air’, they are one man’s [his] way of saying to his fellow men, ‘This is what you see every day, or think or feel; now I will show you what you really know but have not had the time, or the disinterestedness, or the insight, or the information to understand consciously’. Each of these plays, in varying degrees, was begun in the belief

that it was unveiling a truth already known but unrecognised as such”. By unveiling these truths, theatre “makes or should make man more human, which is to say, less alone” (Arthur Miller, ‘Introduction to the Collected Plays’, p11).

Miller’s characters are familiar to audiences. Their struggles, joys and hopes are archetypal: “The adulterous father. The marginalised mother. Wayward children. A family’s battles to pay bills. Unemployment. The child’s quest. Spite. Loss. Felt but unexpressed love. Guilt and shame. Self-reliance. Theatregoers see themselves, their parents, or their children in the play. As David Mamet said to Miller after watching the play in 1984, ‘that is *my* story – not only did you write it about me, but *I could go up on stage right now and act it*’” (Roudané, ‘*Death of a Salesman*’, p62).

“Willy was representative everywhere, in every kind of system, of ourselves in this time... it was not simply as a type but because of what he wanted. Which was to excel, to win out over anonymity and meaninglessness, to love and be loved, and above all, perhaps, to count”

(Miller, *Timebends*, p184)

“The assumption... was that everyone knew Willy Loman... If I had wanted, then, to put the audience reaction into words, it would not have been ‘What happens next and why?’ so much as ‘Oh, God, of course!’”

(Miller, ‘Introduction’ p24)

ACTIVITIES – Thinking about Theme & Character

After the show

1. What are the 'enduring ideas' in *Death of a Salesman* that emerge from the commentary below? Work in pairs or groups to find a visually interesting way to put these ideas on paper, before presenting them to the class.

"Over the years Miller has offered a number of intriguing interpretations of *Death of a Salesman*. It is about 'the paradoxes of being alive in a technological civilisation'; it is about 'the alienation brought by technological advance... the price we pay for progress'. It is 'a story about violence within the family', about 'the suppression of the individual by placing him below the imperious needs of... society'. It is 'a play about a man who kills himself because he isn't liked'. It expresses 'all those feelings of a society falling to pieces which I had', feelings that, to him are one of the reasons for the play's continuing popularity. But the observation that goes most directly to the heart of the play is contained in a comment made in relation to the production he directed in China in 1983: '*Death of a Salesman*, really, is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America'

(Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*, pp101-2)

Death of a Salesman is "the story of a man distracted from human necessities by public myths"

(Roudané, '*Death of a Salesman*', p63)

In his first set of director's notes to Arthur Miller, Elia Kazan (director of the first production of *Death of a Salesman*) set down a series of 'fundamental statements' about the play:

Basic: This play is about Willy Loman.

Basic: This is a love story... the end of a tragic love story between Willy and Biff.

Basic: He built his life on his son... But he taught the son wrong. The result: the son crashes and he with him.

Basic: Without Biff loving Willy and Willy loving Biff, there is no conflict.

Basic: The whole play is about love... love and competition.

Basic: What the audience should feel at the end of this performance is only one thing: Pity, compassion and terror for Willy. Every dramatic value should serve this end. Your own feeling for your own father!"

(Quoted in Gottfried, *Arthur Miller*, pp136-7)

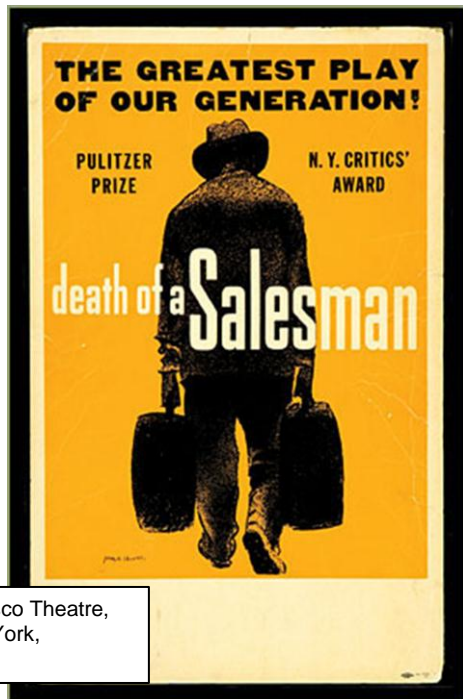
2. Work in groups to create a list of character traits of one member of the Loman family – Willy, Linda, Biff or Happy. Come back together as a class to discuss your lists, identifying the 'human traits' in each.

ACTIVITY

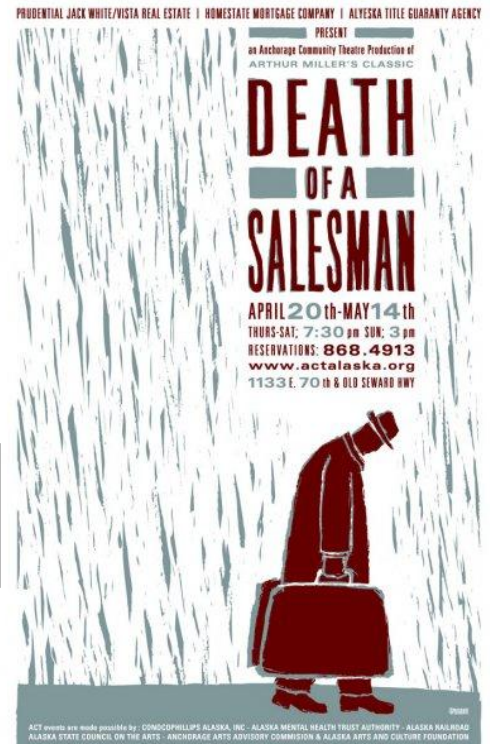
Production posters – Thinking about POSTER and PROMOTION

Following is a selection of posters from productions of *Death of a Salesman*, including the original 1949 production.

- What visual elements can you see?
- Are there common elements?
- How are these elements used to communicate the ideas of the play?
- What impressions of the play do they give?

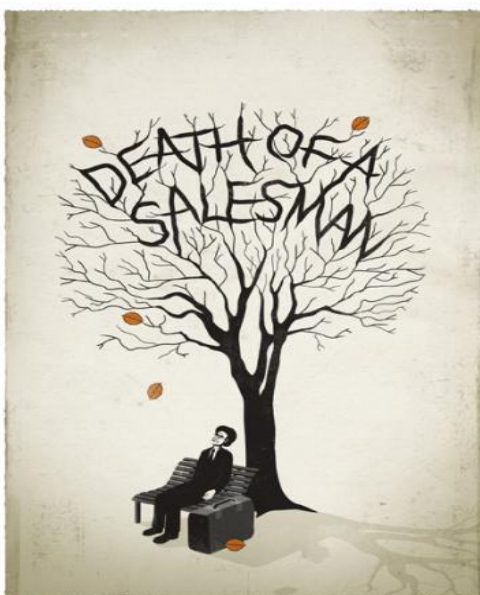


Morosco Theatre,
New York,
1949



Anchorage
Community
Theatre, Alaska,
USA, 2006

Globe Theatre,
San Diego, USA,
2011



Full House Productions, Hamilton,
New Zealand,
2011





2010 DEATH OF A SALESMAN
 soulpepper ARTHUR MILLER
 OCTOBER 16 – NOVEMBER 13
 416.866.8666
 SOULPEPPER.CA

Soulpepper Theatre Company,
 Toronto, Canada,
 2010



Belvoir Street Theatre,
 Sydney,
 2012

ACTIVITY After the play

Design your own poster for *Death of a Salesman*, and write a short concept statement to accompany it (50-100 words)

WILLY LOMAN AS A TRAGIC HERO

"In *Death of a Salesman* Miller transforms Greek Tragedy and brings it down, crashing, to earth"
(Enoch Brater, 'Introduction' to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Methuen, 2010, xxi)

"Miller's play is a tragedy modern and personal, not classic and heroic... its central figure is a little man sentenced to discover his smallness rather than a big man undone by his greatness"

(John Mason Brown, 'Seeing Things', 1949, as quoted in Brenda Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, p.62)

Early reviews of *Death of a Salesman*'s opening season in 1949 had little hesitation in labeling the play a modern 'tragedy'. Since then however, debate has raged over whether the play can actually be called a 'tragedy' in the traditional sense – whether it fulfills, or rather subverts, the form as laid out by classical dramatists.

WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

Tragedy defined:

- a great work of art
- ennobles and uplifts the audience
- creates catharsis in the audience (a purging of emotions)

Tragic Figures:

- are noble figures better than the average person
- they suffer a reversal of fortune
- they endure great suffering
- they recognize the consequences of their actions

Conventional ideas about what constitutes a tragedy are based around a classical Greek model. The Ancient Greeks believed that tragedy was the highest form of drama, and Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle laid out guidelines for the ideal form that a tragedy should take. For centuries, European playwrights aimed to write tragic drama that met these criteria.

These criteria are based around three main ideas. Firstly, the central hero or character must have 'stature' of some kind. They have to be "larger and grander than the norm" (Foster, '*Death of a Salesman* as Tragedy', p103), ensuring that when they 'fall' at the end of play, it has a greater impact on the audience. Secondly, the world that the central character inhabits, must

be ruled or controlled by a larger than life 'order' (usually that of the gods in Ancient Greek drama), which the hero challenges or violates, and which in turn punishes him for that violation. Finally, a key aspect of tragedy is the idea that towards the end of the play, the central hero must come to some form of self-realisation about his or her situation.

Some reviewers and academics have argued that *Death of a Salesman* is not a tragedy in this conventional sense. Key to their argument is the fact that Willy Loman is an ordinary man, too ordinary to possess stature of any kind. Furthermore, he comes to no point of self-realisation or recognition, as a tragic hero 'should'. Instead it is Biff who fulfills that role. It is Biff who says at the end of play "I know who I am" (Act Two). As Brenda Murphy explains: "Could *Death of a Salesman* be a tragedy if its hero underwent no 'recognition', in the Aristotelian sense, no fundamental process of learning and transcendence as a result of his experience?" (Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, p62). Many reached the conclusion that, by 'the test of tradition', *Death of a Salesman* failed to be a tragedy.

Arthur Miller countered early critics of *Death of a Salesman* by arguing that the play should instead be measured by a test of 'feeling': "what counts is the tragic sense, not the mechanical details of an abstract formula for the tragic" (Foster, '*Death of a Salesman* as Tragedy', p104). Willy becomes more than just a pathetic character, and this is largely because the audience sees more him than that. Our 'felt experience' of his character



Lee J Cobb (Willy) and Arthur Kennedy (Biff) in the 1949 production of *Death of a Salesman*

"includes a sense of his idealism and his will to succeed against all odds. Willy is not merely pitiable. Although his enthusiasm may outstrip the realities of his situations, it also lets us admire his joy of living" (Robert A Martin, 'The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, p100).

"...the man is exhausted. A small man can be just as tired as a great man"

(Linda, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

Miller expressed these views initially in an article for the *New York Times* entitled 'Tragedy and the Common Man': "In this age few tragedies are written. It has



Lee J Cobb (Willy) in the 1949 production of *Death of a Salesman*

often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us... we are often held to be below tragedy – or tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied". Rejecting this position, Miller argued instead that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (Arthur Miller, 'Tragedy of the Common Man', *The New York Times*, 27 February 1949). Willy Loman is this 'common man' – he is the embodiment of this view. In this sense, *Death of a Salesman* was again radical for its time.

Willy may not have 'stature' in a traditional sense. He is not a king or a leader of any kind. However, Miller argued that part of the enduring appeal of the play was precisely because of this. He described *Death of a Salesman* as "a democratic tragedy, which elevated a discarded salesman to the centre not only of his universe, but of ours," (Bigsby, *Arthur Miller*, p322). Willy's

dogged pursuit of his unrealistic dreams places him in a tragic predicament, and the more intensely he focuses these dreams the more the tragedy approaches its climax. This intensity raises Willy above the ordinary, and provides him with something like 'stature'.

"...the closer a man approaches tragedy the more intense is his concentration of emotion upon the fixed point of his commitment, which is to say the closer he approaches what in life we call fanaticism."

(Miller, 'Introduction', p7)

Instead of a tragic hero in the classical sense, who violates a higher moral order, and needs to 'fall' so that order can ultimately be restored, Miller presents us with an individual who struggles with society's expectations of him. These expectations become the higher moral order of that play. As Miller argued: "I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his sense of

personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society" (Arthur Miller, 'Tragedy of the Common Man').

"Every man... has an image of himself which fails in one way or another to correspond with reality. It's the size of the discrepancy between illusion and reality that matters. The closer a man gets to knowing himself, the less likely he is to trip up on his own illusions."

(Arthur Miller interviewed by Murray Schumach, 'Arthur Miller Grew in Brooklyn', *The New York Times*, 6 February 1949)

The ideas that Arthur Miller expressed on stage in *Death of a Salesman*, and in print in 'Tragedy and the Common Man' were radical and powerful for their time. At their core, they assert that one individual's life can have meaning. As Linda Loman says of Willy in the play:

"I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the papers. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

Willy becomes an Everyman figure. He is quite simply a man who "wishes his reality to come into line with his hopes" (Bigsby, *Critical Study*, p101). Through the representation

of his journey on stage, the daily difficulties and larger struggles faced by ordinary people take on a greater significance.

ACTIVITIES – Thinking about Tragedy After the play

1. Read each of the following extracts, and briefly summarise the key points made by each author.

- Is the extract in favour or against the idea of *Death of a Salesman* being a 'tragedy'?
- What justifications does the author give for his or her position?

"The tragic hero is a thinker dismayed at where thought has taken him, a man betrayed by actions that accomplish nothing but their own undoing, who nonetheless discovers a truth lost somewhere between thought and its realisation. The tragic hero dies in a moment of transcendent truth, all illusion flown. Oedipus learns a terrible truth and stares it in the face. Macbeth understands that he is no more than a man... Hamlet, through a play, learns the power of seeming and understands a truth that hastens him to his death. Willy, by contrast, is blinded with the sun of a false epiphany"

(Bigsby, *Critical Study*, p119)

"Willy Loman is Miller's 'common man' – an ordinary man who lead an ordinary life, but who is nonetheless capable of "sustaining the scope, depth, and sheer dramatic tension traditionally associated with legendary figures from the grand theatrical past... figures of the heroic dimension of Oedipus and Lear"

(Brater, 'Introduction', xxxviii)

"Willy's great intensity provides a recognisable touch, at least, of something like 'stature'. And perhaps his incoherence of mind and will resembles the 'flaw' of nature or judgement usually borne by the traditional tragic hero. Like Hamlet... Willy's personal tragedy is that he is inherently unable to bring himself to take the rational action necessary to save himself and put his world in order"

(Foster, '*Death of a Salesman* as Tragedy', pp104-5)

"There is... something in Willy Loman, confused, infuriating, resentful, baffled though he is, that nonetheless raises him above the level of those who never question, are undisturbed by dreams of possibility, who rest content with the routines of a life never burnished with a transcendent hope"

(Bigsby, *Critical Study*, p106)

"...does Willy Loman really have an opportunity to develop as a free human being, or are his actions and choices those that proceed from a pitiful and confused character in an impossible situation that leads inexorably to his self-destruction?... If Willy lacks the ability to engage the circumstances that create a life of disappointment, and if he must die self-defeated, isn't he really just a pathetic character?"

(Martin, 'The Nature of Tragedy', pp99-100)

ACTIVITIES FOR ENGLISH STUDENTS

1. DEBATING THE QUESTION

Work in groups to prepare a debate or a mock TV panel show addressing the question of whether or not *Death of a Salesman* can be considered a tragedy. Choose roles that are appropriate for the debate (for example: a newspaper theatre critic, theatre director, university academic, audience member, or even Arthur Miller himself!), and present the discussion to your class.

2. Extension Activity –

Extended response question: To what extent can Willy Loman be considered a 'tragic hero'?

EXPERIMENTING WITH FORM

The dominant form in American drama in the first half of the twentieth century was that of domestic realism. Most plays were set in the present, and the action on stage revolved around realistic characters dealing with their own problems. These situations were often used to touch upon broader social, political or moral issues.

The domestic realism commonly followed a linear timeline. Events were depicted in the order in which they occurred, and if not, scenes from the past were clearly signposted and marked by obvious transitions on stage.

Death of a Salesman, just as it broke with many of the conventions of theatrical tragedy, also broke with the conventions of domestic realism, by, as Miller himself described it, “explod[ing] the watch and the calendar” (Miller, ‘Introduction’, p6). The present action in the play happens over a twenty-four hour period, but there are also scenes from the past, which range over a period of twenty years. Some scenes occur in the ‘reality’ of the present and are peopled with ‘real’ characters, while others occur in Willy Loman’s imagination or memory, with characters from Willy’s past.

Miller “expanded the dramatic possibilities of the common man” (Berkowitz, ‘Domestic Realism’, p64), by aiming to ‘open up’

“The first image that occurred to me which was to result in *Death of a Salesman* was of an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man’s head. In fact, *The Inside of His Head* was the first title”
(Miller, ‘Introduction’, p23)

Willy’s head, and represent his stream of consciousness on stage for the audience: “I was obsessed in those days by vague but exciting images of what can only be called a trajectory, an arched flow of storytelling with neither transitional dialogue nor a single fixed locale, a mode that would open a man’s head for a play to take place inside it, evolving through concurrent rather than consecutive actions” (Miller, *Timebends*, p129). For Willy, the past is just as real as the present, and this is reflected in the form that *Death of a Salesman* takes.

Throughout the play, scenes shift fluidly between present and past, between ‘reality’ and the inside of Willy’s head.

Similarly, action moves easily and rapidly between locations. A variety of tools and techniques are used to mark these transitions. Lighting changes feature heavily, as do music and sound effects. Miller also makes use of offstage voices and of ‘wandering talk’ from Willy, where his internal shift from being in the present to remembering the past is signposted by erratic speech or disordered dialogue.

REALISM:

“the illusion of reality is maintained; realism avoids gross violations of the laws of nature (people don’t fly) or the introduction of purely symbolic characters or events... while presenting characterisations and behaviour that are at least possible... a realistic play asserts the claim that it speaks the truth”

(Gerald M Berkowitz, ‘The Domestic Realism of Arthur Miller’, p66)



Lee J Cobb (Willy) and Mildred Dunnock (Linda) in *Death of a Salesman*, 1949

“The *Salesman* image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes ‘next’ but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be ‘brought forward’ in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to”

(Miller, ‘Introduction’, p23)

ACTIVITIES – THINKING ABOUT STRUCTURE

Before or after the play

1. Read through each of the two script extracts from *Death of a Salesman* below.

- What techniques does Miller use to move from one temporal or spatial moment to the next?
- In what ways could set or lighting design help this transition on stage?
- Choose one of the scenes to rehearse in groups, and then perform it to the class.

HAPPY [*getting into bed*]: I wish you'd have a good talk with him.

[The light on their room begins to fade.]

BIFF [*to himself in bed*]: That selfish, stupid . . .

HAPPY: Sh . . . Sleep, Biff.

[Their light is out. Well before they have finished speaking, WILLY's form is dimly seen below in the darkened kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, searches in there, and takes out a bottle of milk. The apartment houses are fading out, and the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves. Music insinuates itself as the leaves appear.]

WILLY: Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that's all. Don't make any promises. No promises of any kind. Because a girl, y'know, they always believe what you tell 'em, and you're very young, Biff, you're too young to be talking seriously to girls.

[Light rises on the kitchen. WILLY, talking, shuts the refrigerator door and comes downstage to the kitchen table. He pours milk into a glass. He is totally immersed in himself, smiling faintly.]

WILLY: Too young entirely, Biff. You want to watch your schooling first. Then when you're all set, there'll be plenty of girls for a boy like you. *[He smiles broadly at a kitchen chair.]* That so? The girls pay for you? *[He laughs.]* Boy, you must really be makin' a hit.

[WILLY is gradually addressing—physically—a point offstage, speaking through the wall of the kitchen, and his voice has been rising in volume to that of a normal conversation.]

WILLY: I been wondering why you polish the car so careful. Ha! Don't leave the hubcaps, boys. Get the chamois to the hubcaps. Happy, use newspaper on the windows, it's the easiest thing. Show him how to do it, Biff! You see, Happy? Pad it up, use it like a pad. That's it, that's it, good work. You're doin' all right, Hap. *[He pauses, then nods in approbation for a few seconds, then looks upward.]* Biff, first thing we gotta do when we get time is clip that big branch over the house. Afraid it's gonna fall in a storm and hit the roof. Tell you what. We get a rope and sling her around, and then we climb up there with a couple of saws and take her down. Soon as you finish the car, boys, I wanna see ya. I got a surprise for you, boys.

BIFF [*offstage*]: Whatta ya got, Dad?

WILLY: No, you finish first. Never leave a job till you're finished—remember that. *[Looking toward the "big trees"]* Biff, up in Albany I saw a beautiful hammock. I think I'll buy it next trip, and we'll hang it right between those two elms. Wouldn't that be something? Just swingin' there under those branches. Boy, that would be. .

[Young BIFF and young HAPPY appear from the direction WILLY was addressing. HAPPY carries rags and a pail of water. BIFF, wearing a sweater with a block "S," carries a football.]

BIFF [pointing in the direction of the car offstage]: How's that, Pop, professional?

WILLY: Terrific. Terrific job, boys. Good work, Biff.

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

LINDA: Willy, darling, you're the handsomest man in the world—

WILLY: Oh, no, Linda.

LINDA: To me you are. [*Slight pause.*] The handsomest.

[From the darkness is heard the laughter of a woman. WILLY doesn't turn to it, but it continues through LINDA's lines.]

LINDA: And the boys, Willy. Few men are idolized by their children the way you are.

[Music is heard as behind a scrim, to the left of the house, THE WOMAN, dimly seen, is dressing.]

WILLY [*with great feeling*]: You're the best there is, Linda, you're a pal, you know that? On the road—on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life outa you.

[The laughter is loud now, and he moves into a brightening area at the left, where THE WOMAN has come from behind the scrim and is standing, putting on her hat, looking into a 'mirror', and laughing.]

WILLY: 'Cause I get so lonely—especially when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business, a business for the boys. [*He talks through THE WOMAN's subsiding laughter; THE WOMAN primps at the 'mirror.'*] There's so much I want to make for—

THE WOMAN: Me? You didn't make me, Willy. I picked you.

WILLY [*pleased*]: You picked me?

THE WOMAN [*who is quite proper-looking, Willy's age*]: I did. I've been sitting at that desk watching all the salesmen go by, day in, day out. But you've got such a sense of humor, and we do have such a good time together, don't we?

WILLY: Sure, sure. [*He takes her in his arms.*] Why do you have to go now?

THE WOMAN: It's two o'clock . . .

WILLY: No, come on in! [*He pulls her.*]

THE WOMAN: . . . my sisters'll be scandalized. When'll you be back?

WILLY: Oh, two weeks about. Will you come up again?

THE WOMAN: Sure thing. You do make me laugh. It's good for me. [*She squeezes his arm, kisses him.*] And I think you're a wonderful man.

WILLY: You picked me, heh?

THE WOMAN: Sure. Because you're so sweet. And such a kidder.

WILLY: Well, I'll see you next time I'm in Boston.

THE WOMAN: I'll put you right through to the buyers.

WILLY [*slapping her bottom*]: Right. Well, bottoms up!

THE WOMAN [*slaps him gently and laughs*]: You just kill me, Willy. [*He suddenly grabs her and kisses her roughly.*] You kill me. And thanks for the stockings. I love a lot of stockings. Well, good night.

WILLY: Good night. And keep your pores open!

THE WOMAN: Oh, Willy!

[*THE WOMAN bursts out laughing, and LINDA's laughter blends in. THE WOMAN disappears into the dark. Now the area at the kitchen table brightens. LINDA is sitting where she was at the kitchen table, but now is mending a pair of her silk stockings.*]

LINDA: You are, Willy. The handsomest man. You've got no reason to feel that—

WILLY [*coming out of THE WOMAN's dimming area and going over to LINDA*]: I'll make it all up to you, Linda, I'll—

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

Arthur Miller has likened the structure of *Death of a Salesman* to many different things.

- Read the extracts below and write a list of the analogies that he uses.
- Work in pairs to create a scene breakdown of the play, using one of these analogies (for example: a layer cake, a CAT scan, geological strata or a single chord) to present it visually.

"Miller likened the structure of *Salesman* to a CAT scan, which simultaneously reveals inside and outside, as he did to geological strata, in which different times are present in the same instant"

(Bigsby, *Arthur Miller*, p326)

"...how wonderful, I thought, to do a play without any transitions at all, dialogue that would simply leap from bone to bone of a skeleton that would not for an instant cease being added to, an organism as strictly economic as a leaf, as trim as an ant. And more important than even that, a play that would... cut through time like a knife through a layer cake or a road through a mountain revealing its geologic layers, and instead of one incident in one time-frame succeeding another, display past and present concurrently, with neither one ever coming to a stop"

(Miller, *Timebends*, p131)

"What was wanted... was not a mounting line of tension, nor a gradually narrowing cone of intensifying suspense, but a bloc, a single chord presented as such at the outset, within which all the strains and melodies would already be contained"

(Miller, 'Introduction', p24)

PRODUCTION DESIGN

Death of a Salesman presents a challenge for set designers. If the play is at its core, as Miller has suggested, “the materialisation of Willy’s mental processes” (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing*, p7), then the set has to represent the past, the present and Willy’s imagination. Furthermore, it has to do so in a way that allows actors to easily shift between the three, over a very large number of scenes. So a set designer, in essence, has to find “a solution... to the problem of a play that present[s] time as fluid” (Biggsby, *Arthur Miller*, p329).

The designer for the play’s opening production in 1949 was Jo Mielziner, who was chosen in part because of his extensive work as a lighting designer. Mielziner suggested that the scenery should be minimal, with the exception of the Loman house with its living room and kitchen on stage level, and bedrooms above. All of the other transitions, temporal and spatial, would be achieved through props and lighting: “for instance, when Willy goes from the house to the home office, the young boss would simply roll a table and recording machine on stage with him as he entered” (Gottfried, *Arthur Miller*, p136):

“Mielziner filled the stage with realistic props: a kitchen table with three chairs, a small refrigerator, telephone, wastebasket, stairs, three beds, an athletic trophy, and a chest of drawers. But these realistic props were placed within a highly expressionistic set. No solid walls separated Willy and Linda’s bedroom, situated highly elevated and stage right from the kitchen, or the boys’ bedroom, located on the second floor, from the kitchen... The back of each room had walls of sorts, but they were translucent backdrops. Since no walls separated the rooms, characters were not necessarily confined spatially or, in the daydream sequences, temporally. When the action occurs in time present, for instance, the actors observe the imaginary wall lines. But, Miller’s stage directions indicate, ‘*in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping ‘through’ a wall onto the forestage*”

(Roudané, *Death of a Salesman*, p64)

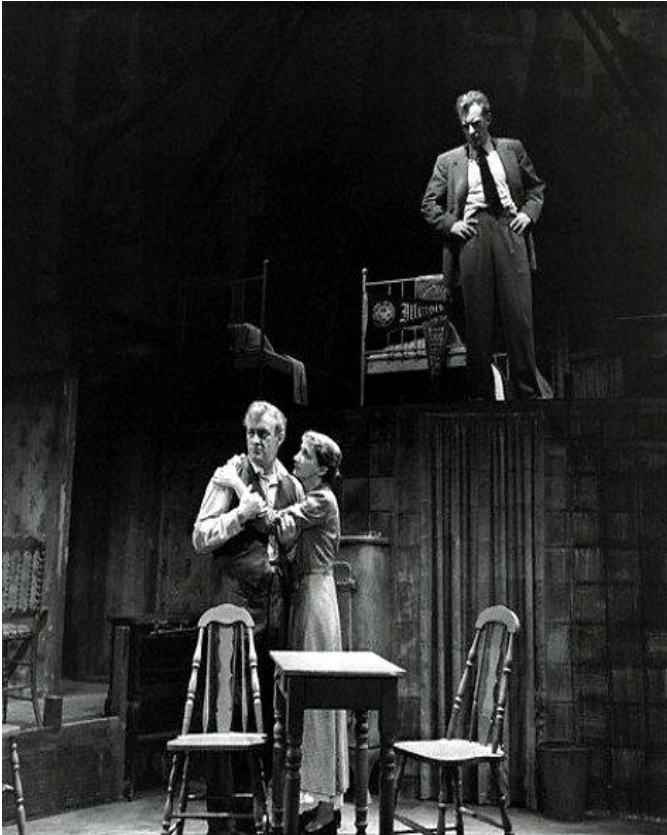
THINKING ABOUT SET DESIGN ACTIVITIES - Before and after the play

1. Read Matthew Roudané’s description of Jo Mielziner’s set above, and then carefully examine the following designs:
 - ❖ What locations can you identify in the set designs? How do specific parts of the set suggest this?
 - ❖ What atmosphere or mood do they each create?
 - ❖ Are they familiar / realistic, unfamiliar / non realistic, or both? Provide a reason.
 - ❖ Do they have the ability to show different locations and different times? What things remain fixed on the stage and what things change?
 - ❖ What features of the set might support the changing of time from past to present?
 - ❖ Look closely at the size, shape, line and colour used in the designs. What visual statement is being made to the responder/ audience about the world of the play?



Two of Jo Mielziner's renderings for the set of the 1949 production of *Death of a Salesman*.





Photos from the 1949 production of *Death of a Salesman*, showing Jo Mielziner's set

Compare the 1949 photos above to the production photo below showing staging of the scene before the Ibbot's field game in the Belvoir production – how is domesticity depicted in each?



Luke Mullins, Hamish Michael

Photo: Heidrun Löhner

2. Read Arthur Miller's set description for *Death of a Salesman*:

Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream dings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens onto the apartment house at the side.

Behind the kitchen, on a level raised six and a half feet, is the boys' bedroom, at present barely visible. Two beds are dimly seen, and at the back of the room a dormer window. (This bedroom is above the unseen living room.) At the left a stairway curves up to it from the kitchen.

The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent. The roof-line of the house is one-dimensional; under and over it we see the apartment buildings. Before the house lies an apron, curving beyond the forestage into the orchestra. This forward area serves as the back yard as well as the locale of all Willy's imaginings and of his city scenes. Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping 'through' a wall onto the forestage.

(Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Act One)

- **How is it similar to the set that you saw at Belvoir Street?**
- **What differences can you see?**
- **What effect might these differences have?**
- **How does the Belvoir set illuminate the themes of the play despite staging it in a different era?**



Colin Friels

Photo: Heidrun Löhre

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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Martin Gottfried, *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work*, Cambridge Mass, Da Capo Press, 2003

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Christopher Isherwood, '*Salesman* Comes Calling, Right on Time', *The New York Times*, 23rd February 2012

'*Death of a Salesman*: A Conversation with Charles Isherwood and Joe Nocera', *The New York Times*, 1st March 2012

Robert A Martin, 'The Nature of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's '*Death of a Salesman*', *South Atlantic Review*, Vol.61 No. 4 (Autumn 1996), 97-106

Jo Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre: A Memoir and a Portfolio*, New York, Atheneum Books, 1965

Brenda Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

Arthur Miller, 'Tragedy of the Common Man', *The New York Times*, 27 February 1949

Arthur Miller, 'Introduction the Collected Plays', *Arthur Miller: Plays One*, London, Methuen, 2007, 3-55

Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life*, New York, Grove Press, 1987

William J Newman, 'The Role of the Family in Miller's Plays, in Thomas Siebold [ed.], *Readings on Arthur Miller*, San Diego, Greenhaven Press, 1997, 90-94

Matthew C Roudané, '*Death of a Salesman* and the poetics of Arthur Miller', in Christopher Bigsby [ed.]. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, Cambridge University Press, 1997

Murray Schumach, 'Arthur Miller Grew in Brooklyn'. *New York Times*, 6 February 1949

Thomas Siebold [ed.], *Readings on Arthur Miller*, San Diego, Greenhaven Press, 1997

After the Show: MAKING THE MOST OF THE Q & A AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

After each school's performance there is a Question & Answer session with cast. To make the most of this opportunity, you might like to think about the *sorts* of questions you might ask before seeing the show.

Schools Show Question & Answer sessions: A Guide

- Ask questions about the production you have just seen, rather than other plays, film or television programs in which you have seen the same actors.
- Think of the Q & A session as a chance to get to grips with and understand more deeply the production you have just experienced, rather than an opportunity to learn about other work the actors may have done or about the profession of acting.

Activity to prepare the class

Use a play everyone has seen recently when composing questions for this activity, or think of some general questions from your reading about the production which can be filled in more detail after seeing the play.

1. Students list 3 questions an actor could be asked by a student audience after a performance.
2. Students rank these questions from most useful (1) to least useful (3) according to:
 - Level of sophistication
 - Interest to the student
 - Clichéd or what they imagine an actor would always be asked (eg. How do you learn your lines?)
3. Students then share their best questions with the class – most sophisticated, of most interest and the one they won't ask because it is very clichéd or obvious.
4. Ask students to think about the idea that the Q & A session is an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the production
5. List areas in which students could deepen their understanding of the production such as: themes and ideas, message, the setting, costume and set design, characters, acting style.
6. Choose a play the whole class has seen.

In pairs, students are to select 2 areas of the production they would have liked to have known more about and compose 2 specific questions for each one.

7. One pair swaps their questions with another pair and composes answers for their questions.
8. Share questions and answers with the class.