

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) MAJOR HANDOUT

Death of a Salesman (1949; opening night Feb 10 at Morosco Theatre in NYC)

"Tragedy is the consequence of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself." – Miller

Biographical Facts:

- 1) When a friend said that Miller had "arrived" with DOAS, Miller protested: "You never really arrive, really. There's always the next one... Anybody in this business (dramatic theatre) who thinks he's an expert is kidding himself."
- 2) After *The Crucible*, the state department refused to issue him a passport to visit Europe on the grounds that "he might be lured into making anti-American-way-of-life statements abroad"
- 3) Married Marilyn Monroe (1956); married to Inge Morath until her death in 2002
- 4) Testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (1956)
- 5) In 1983, Miller directed a successful production of *Death of a Salesman* with a Chinese cast in Beijing, China (first play to be directed by an American in that country).
- 6) Miller has acknowledged the influence of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen on his own writing as well as on modern drama of our century.
- 7) Miller was interested in the "moral dilemma of society" more than politics, but he was criticized because of his criticism of "The System" and was labeled "a red"
- 8) known for direct engagements with political issues of the day; is a moralist
- 9) *Miller uses moral conflict as the source of his dramatic tension; to Miller irresponsibility is the root of sin*
- 10) understands his characters through his sympathy for them
- 11) *Plays known for probing the individual's tenuous hold on their place in society [in terms of personal identity and human dignity] (felt that conflicts within individuals often coincides with larger conflicts in society)*
- 12) Plays measure the gap between America's promise of inevitable success and the devastating reality of one's concrete failure
- 13) Professed himself as fascinated by the "agony of someone who has some driving, implacable wish in him" (apply to Willy)
- 14) *once said, "in a sense all my plays are autobiographical"*
- 15) *the essential unity of his plays stress – "we are all part of one another; all responsible to one another." [the responsibility starts with the family OR "the feeling comes from two instances: a sense of responsibility for our fellow creatures and a belief in the need for a common goal which validates the act of responsibility."]*
- 16) His origins and his experience of the Depression were very important influences in shaping his writing.
- 17) Loved swimming and building with his hands (wood furniture).
- 18) *Miller's early success was in a genre of play labeled social drama.*

Death of a Salesman Facts:

- 19) *The Inside of His Head* was the initial title of the play. Also considered *A Period of Grace*. In 1949, the play cost \$65,000 to put on. The initial Broadway run was 742 performances.
- 20) He completed writing the first half of the play in a single night and the whole work in a further six weeks. He began the play knowing only first two lines and the fact that it would end with a death.
- 21) DOAS begins with the sound of a flute (and there were some 22 minutes of music in the original production), a sound which takes Willy back to his childhood when he traveled with his father and brother in a wagon as his father made and sold flutes.
- 22) The set is offered as a metaphor, a visual marker of social and psychological change in Willy between 1928 and 1943.
- 23) The story is told through a complex montage of scenes interlocking the present with past events – memories, imagined moments, and flashbacks from the life of Willy Loman. In ways the past memories are not flashbacks but constructions of Willy's mind that may be only partially truthful. Willy embraces fantasies, elaborate excuses, develops strategies to neutralize his disappointment.
- 24) *Few American plays of the 20th century hold as prominent a place in our collective imagination as Death of a Salesman. A triumphant success on Broadway, the play won both the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1949.*
- 25) *Willy Loman was kin to Miller's salesman uncle, Manny Newman, a man who was (according to Miller) "a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment. My brother and I, he saw running neck and neck with his two sons in some race that never stopped in his mind." The Newman household was one in which you "dared not lose hope, and I would later think of it as a perfection of America for that reason." Ultimately, Miller has a position similar to Bernard in this view.*
- 26) was what Miller called "a dream rising out of reality." – "a salesman has got to dream" is a larger statement about all of America
- 27) *was: "a time bomb under American capitalism" (an initial reaction in 1949)*
- 28) A successful blend of social and personal tragedy within one dramatic framework
- 29) A play that was timely because America was experiencing explosive consumerism and a shift toward conformity

- 30) In his later plays, such as *DOAS*, he would mix realistic setting and speech with expressionist techniques, using various theatrical devices to move away from a style of strict realism.
- 31) Miller's stage directions for the play describe an expressionist set – a "shell-like" and transparent Loman family home with no walls. When the action is set in the present, the characters behave as though they are in rooms with walls; when the action is set in the past, they walk through the empty space into another space on the stage. Whereas *All My Sons* had been essentially realist in its structure and language, *Salesman* uses an 'everyday' setting transformed by such theatrical means as sets, lighting, sound effects, music, props and the use of stage space to evoke past and present time.
- 32) Miller's humanist values shine through the thematic content. *Salesman* has been called a 'tragedy of the little man'.

QUOTES BY ARTHUR MILLER

- 33) I'm interested in tragedy. I want to discover the ordinary man in the extreme of crisis.
- 34) The theatre is the sound and ring of the spirit of the people at any one time. It is where a collective mass of people, through the genius of some author, is able to project its terrors and its hopes and to symbolize them ... I personally feel that the theater has to confront the basic themes always. Those themes are a question of man's increasing awareness of himself and his environment, his quest for justice and for the right to be human.
- 35) In the theater you can sense the reaction of your fellow citizens along with your own reactions. You may learn something about yourself, but sharing it with others brings a certain relief – the feeling that you are not alone, you're part of the human race. I think that's what theater is about and why it will never be finished.
- 36) Life is not reassuring; if it were we would not need the consolations of religion, for one thing.
- 37) *What the name (Loman) really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come.*
- 38) I suppose that to me a play is the way I sum up where I am at any particular moment in my life.
- 39) My plays are always involved with society, but I'm writing about people, too, and it's clear over the years that audiences understand them and care about them.
- 40) To me, the tragedy of Willy Loman is that he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it. It is the tragedy of a man who did believe that he alone was not meeting the qualifications laid down for mankind by those clean-shaven frontiersmen who inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices. From those forests of canned goods high up near the sky, he heard the thundering command to succeed as it ricocheted down the newspaper-lined canyons of his city, heard not a human voice, but a wind of a voice to which no human can reply in kind, except to stare into the mirror at a failure.
- 41) 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. It was conceived half in laughter, for the inside of his head was a mass of contradictions ... The *Salesman* image was from being absorbed with the concept in life that nothing in life comes "next" but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is not 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.
- 42) I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form, would literally be the process of Willy Loman's way of mind.
- 43) As I look at the play now (1957) its form seems the form of a confession, for that is how it is told, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then suddenly following some connection to a time 20 years ago, then leaping even further back and then returning to the present and even speculating about the future.
- 44) *Willy is foolish and even ridiculous sometimes. He tells the most transparent lies, exaggerates mercilessly, and so on. But I really want you to see that his impulses are not foolish at all. He cannot bear reality, and since he can't do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it.*
- 45) The form of *DOAS* was an attempt, as much as anything else, to convey the bending of time. There are two or three sorts of time in that play. One is social time; one is psychic time, the way we remember things; and the third one is the sense of time created by the play and shared by the audience. The play is taking place in the Greek unity of 24 hours; and yet it is dealing with material that goes back probably 25 years. And it almost goes forward through Ben, who is dead. So time was an obsession for me at the moment, and I wanted a way of presenting it so that it became the fiber of the play, rather than being something that somebody comments about. In fact, there is very little comment really in *Salesman* about time. I also wanted a form that could sustain itself the way we deal with crises, which is not to deal with them. After all, there is a lot of comedy in *Salesman*; people forget it because it is so dark by the end of the play. But if you stand behind the audience you hear a lot of laughter. It's a deadly ironical laughter most of the time, but it is a species of comedy. The comedy is really a way for Willy and others to put off the evil day, which is the thing we all do. I wanted that to happen and not be something talked about.
- 46) Above all, perhaps, the image of a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumb print somewhere on the world. A need for immortality, and by admitting, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day.
- 47) *Miller after the rehearsal with the first audience: "I think that was the first and only time I saw it as others see it. Then it seemed to me that we must be a terribly lonely people, cut off from each other by such massive pretense of self-sufficiency, machined down so fine we hardly touch any more. We are trying to save ourselves separately, and that is immoral, that is the corrosive among us."*

- 48) *Miller on his objective with the play*: “What I am working for is the gasp. I used to stand at the back of the theater when *Death of a Salesman* was playing and hear it.”
- 49) *On Willy Loman*: “There is a double significance to Willy’s being a salesman. He belongs to “the Salesman as a class” and “in the deeper, psychological sense, he is Everyman who finds he must create another personality in order to make his way in the world, and therefore has sold himself.”
- 50) *On Willy Loman*: “I was convinced only that if I could make him remember enough he would kill himself, and the structure of the play was determined by what was needed to draw up his memories like a mass of tangled roots without end or beginning.”
- 51) *On Willy*: “Willy is a baby ... naïve enough to believe in the goodness of his mission ... a victim ... he believes that selling is the greatest living thing anybody can do.”
- 52) “I was not Willy Loman, I was the writer, and Willy Loman is there because I could see beyond him.”
- 53) “The death of the salesman is symbolic of the breakdown of the whole concept of salesmanship inherent in our society.”
- 54) Miller: The trouble with Willy is that he has “tremendously powerful ideals”. He has values, but he can’t realize them, and that drives him mad. “The truly valueless man, the man without ideals, is always perfectly at home anywhere because there cannot be a conflict between nothing and something.”
- 55) *In the play, Willy is* “literally at the terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present.”
- 56) “Inevitably people are going to say that Willy Loman is not a typical salesman, or that Blanche DuBois is not a typical something else, but to tell you the truth, the writer himself couldn’t be less interested.”
- 57) “When the movie was made, the producing company got so frightened it produced a sort of trailer to be shown before the picture, a documentary short film which demonstrated how exceptional Willy Loman was; how necessary selling is to the economy; how secure the salesman’s life really is; how idiotic, in short, was the feature film they had just spend more than a million to produce. Fright does odd things to people.”
- 58) Miller’s own description of it as play which raises “questions ... whose answers define humanity”
- 59) I knew nothing of Brecht then or of any other theory of theatrical distancing; I simply felt that there was too much identification with Willy, too much weeping, and that the play’s ironies were being dimmed out by all this empathy. After all, I reminded myself, I had written it for three unadorned black platforms, with a single flute in the air and without softening transitions – a slashing structure, I had thought. But at the same time I could not deny my own tenderness toward these characters.
- 60) *A character is defined by the kinds of challenges he cannot walk away from. And by those he has walked away from that cause him remorse.*
- 61) Maybe (in retrospect) I had simply been a conformist and not a radical at all, fearful of the left’s opprobrium for those who failed to fail and proved thereby that a robust pulse remained in the body of America. For example, I had realized long ago what lay behind the Communists’ disapproval of *SALESMAN* and *ALL MY SONS*: their success and critical acceptance had thrown doubt on the belief that American theatre could not, and theoretically should not be able to, support socially truthful plays. A work that really told how it was could not succeed ... *As an artist, I knew that creation demanded a forward motion, an assault upon the world’s slothful sleep of sensibility*. My whole life had been a struggle between action and passivity, creation and detached observation.
- 62) *The quest for the total self* now seemed to define the search in *Hamlet*, in *Oedipus Rex*, in *Othello*: the drive to make life real by conquering denial, the secret thrust of tragedy.
- 63) When I looked back, it was obvious that aside from *DOAS* every one of my plays had originally met with a majority of bad, indifferent or sneering notices. Except for Brooks Atkinson or Harold Clurman, I exist as a playwright without a major reviewer in my corner. It has been primarily actors and directors who have kept my work before the public, which indeed has reciprocated with its support. Only abroad and in some American places outside New York has criticism embraced my plays. I have often rescued a sense of reality by recalling Chekhov’s remark: “If I had listened to the critics I’d have died drunk in the gutter.”
- 64) I don’t remember what they said, exactly, excepting that it had taken them deeply. But I can see my wife’s eyes as I read a – to me – hilarious scene, which I prefer not to identify. She was weeping. I confess that I had laughed more during the writing of *DOAS* than I have ever done, when alone, in my life. I laughed because moment after moment came when I felt I had rapped it right on the head – the non sequitur, the aberrant but meaningful idea racing through Willy’s head, the turn of story that kept surprising me every morning. And most of all the form, for which I have been searching since the beginning of my writing life. Writing in that form was like moving through a corridor in a dream, knowing instinctively that one would find every wriggle of it and, best of all, where the exit lay. There is something like a dream’s quality in my memory of the writing and the day or two that followed its completion.
- 65) *I am sorry the self-realization of the older son, Biff, is not a weightier counterbalance to Willy’s disaster in the audience’s mind.*
- 66) *There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present, and this, again, because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then, just as anyone would do who, on picking up his telephone, discovered that this perfectly harmless act had somehow set off an explosion in his basement ... The tension between past and present was the heart of the play’s particular construction.*

- 67) *I set out not to “write a tragedy” in this play, but to show the truth as I saw it.*
- 68) DOAS is a slippery play to categorize because nobody in it stops to make a speech objectively stating the great issues which I believe it embodies.
- 69) *I did not realize while writing the play that so many people in the world do not see as clearly, or would not admit, as I thought they must, how futile most lives are; so there could be no hope of consoling the audience for the death of this man. I did not realize either how few would be impressed by the fact that this man is actually a very brave spirit who cannot settle for half but must pursue his dream of himself to the end. Finally, I thought it must be clear, even obvious, that this was no dumb brute heading mindlessly to his catastrophe.*
- 70) *The most decent man in DOAS is a capitalist (Charley) whose aims are not different from Willy Loman’s. The great difference between them is that Charley is not a fanatic. Equally, however, he has learned how to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of spirit which Willy chased to his end. And even as Willy’s sons are unhappy men, Charley’s boy, Bernard, works hard, attends to his studies, and attains a worthwhile objective. These people are all of the same class, the same background, the same neighborhood. What theory lies behind this double view? None whatever. It is simply that I knew and know that I feel better when my work is reflecting a balance of the truth as it exists.*
- 71) At the end of his forty-odd scenes Miller says, “The scenic solution to this production will have to be an imaginative and simple one. I don’t know the answer, but the designer must work out something which makes the script flow easily.”
- 72) *Miller: The fact that Willy Loman is by trade a salesman is important, but secondary. Central is that he has taken on a new – a social – personality which is calculated to ensure his material success. In so doing he has lost his essential – his real – nature, which is contradictory to his assumed one, until he is no longer able to know what he truly wants, what he truly stands for. In that sense he has sold himself. Obviously, then, his being a salesman has a double significance. For me he represents the salesman as a class, because he does sell merchandise and his life is bound up in the facts of actual salesmanship. However, in the deeper, psychological sense, he is Everyman who finds he must create another personality in order to make his way in the world, and therefore had sold himself.*
- 73) The whole American people was an audience impatient with long speeches, ignorant of any literary allusions whatever, as merciless to losers as the prizefight crowd and as craven to winners, an audience that heard the word “culture” and reached for its hat. Of course there were people of great sensibility among them, but a play had to be fundamental enough to grab anybody, regardless. One healthy consequence of this audience’s makeup, both actual and fancied, was a shift toward full-blown plays with characters and story that asserted as little as possible verbally and dramatized as much as possible by action. This tended to keep speeches short and stage active rather than reflective. Different as we were as writers, Tennessee Williams and I both thrived on these stringent demands. The time was far, far off when a character could be permitted to sit in one place indulging in pages of monologue while surrounding actors stood absolutely still and mute awaiting the end of his aria. Even further off was the time when a certain span of sheer boredom was thought to be a signal that a culturally rare event was taking place on a stage. The revolutionary newness of *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, was in its poetic lift, but an underlying hard dramatic structure was what earned the play its right to sing poetically. Poetry in the theatre is not, or at least ought not be, a cause but a consequence, and that structure of storytelling and character made this very private play available to anyone capable of feeling at all.
- 74) One of the other winners was a fellow from St. Louis with the improbable name Tennessee Williams, whom I envisioned in buckskins, carrying a rifle.
- 75) *Tennessee Williams sometime showed a weakness for verbal adornment for its own sake.*
- 76) *I think Tennessee Williams is primarily interested in passion, in ecstasy, in creating a synthesis of his conflicting feelings. It is perfectly all right, of course, for an anthropologist to make an observation that William’s picture of the South is unrepresentative. It probably is, but at the same time, the intensity with which he feels whatever he does feel is so deep, is so great, that we do end up with a glimpse of another kind of reality; that is, the reality in the spirit rather than in the society... I am reasonably sure that Williams’ interest in the sociology of the South is only from the point of view of a man who doesn’t like to see brutality, unfairness, a kind of victory of the Philistine. He is looking at it emotionally, and essentially I am, too.*
- 77) The true condition of man, it seemed, was the complete opposite of the competitive system I had assumed was normal, with all its mutual hatreds and conniving. Life could be a comradely embrace, people helping one another rather than looking for ways to trip each other up.
- 78) Nothing is as visionary and as blinding as moral indignation.
- 79) Biff loves his father enough to fight him and his lethal beliefs.
- 80) The Chinese reaction to *Salesman* confirms my belief: Willy was representative everywhere, in every kind of system, of ourselves in this time.
- 81) I theorize a universality of human emotions; I hope that the production here (in China in 1983) of this very American play will simply assert the idea of a single humanity once again.
- 82) In rehearsal, I yell Willy’s climactic line “Big shot!” and Biff’s furious response, and Happy’s “Wait a minute! I got a feasible idea!” throwing my arms out and belting at the top of my lungs. The shock in their faces (the Chinese actors) tells me that they had never dreamed *it went so loud and so far*, that the threat in my tone was closer to danger than they had ever anticipated.

- 83) *DOAS* is “a difficult, psychologically complex play”
- 84) Willy is not Good, and yet one is supposed to feel pity for him and perhaps even fear that he will die.
- 85) The vision of Lee Cobb, the original and I think the best Willy, keeps returning. I hear his baritone voice occasionally, I see his mass and his so moving, depressive slump – a man who was born old, whose very laughter was sad and somehow *filled with a bottomless kind of wanting for love, admiration, friendship*.
- 86) Biff sees the West in a way Americans have traditionally seen it, as both an escape from the mean city and the commercial civilization and as a place of great opportunity. It is our romantic arena where you have to prove yourself as a man rather than where you dominate by controlling pieces of paper. This was never wholly true, of course, but I am speaking of the mythology now, which can be even more important than the reality.
- 87) Ben lives in Willy’s mind as the free man, the wealth-creator, all that has strength and range and the joy of the adventurer. And unwittingly he has primed his own son Biff for his revolt against what he himself has done with his life and against what he has come to worship: material success.
- 88) **The play does not have the solution to this problem** – the alienation brought by technological advance – because I don’t have the solution. What I present is the price we pay for our progress.
- 89) Willy’s role is a monster role, as exhausting as Hamlet, with so much of it demanding to be done at a high pitch. The play is without transitional scenes, when an actor can coast along for a while. Each scene begins at its latest possible moment, which means that Willy almost always enters in a high gear.

REACTIONS TO THE PLAY

- 90) “I saw your play. I’ve just quit my job. What do I do now?”
- 91) One salesman overhead while leaving the theater: “I always said that New England territory was no damned good.”
- 92) Consider America as broken by the Depression and this play sifts through that aftermath where confidence, optimism, and the American dream have all been broken
- 93) in connecting to Oedipus/Greek tragedy, consider how the faults of the father (Laius or Oedipus) are delivered upon the sons
- 94) a Japanese theatergoer is reported to have commented that “if a salesman fails to make sales, he deserves to lose face.” (how would this outlook alter one’s impression of Willy’s downfall and thus the play?)

AUDIENCE REACTION IN 1949:

- 95) Robert Garland: As a theatre reporter I’m telling you how that first-night congregation remained in its seats beyond the final curtain-call. For a period somewhat shorter than it seemed, an expectant silence hung over the crowded auditorium. Then, believe, me, tumultuous appreciation shattered the hushed expectancy. It was, and will remain, one of the lasting rewards that I, as a professional theatergoer, have received in a long full life of professional theatergoing. In *DOAS*, Miller had given that first night congregation no ordinary new play to praise, to damn, or to ignore. In *DOAS*, the present and the past of Willy exist concurrently – the “stream of consciousness” idea – until they collide in climax. *Isn’t it true that the Willy Lomans of this world are their own worst tragedy? At the Morosco, only Linda Loman can foresee the end. And she, as wife and mother, is powerless to prevent it. This, to me, is the play’s most tragic tragedy. She, too, is the play’s most poignant figure. Not soon shall I forget her!*”
- 96) Miller: At the end of the play, “there was no applause at the final curtain of the first performance. Strange things began to go on in the audience. With the curtain down, some people stood to put on their coats 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 overage.

CRITICS QUOTES ABOUT MILLER OR THE PLAY

- 97) Elia Kazan (director of original *DOAS* stage production): “Everyone should see *Death of a Salesman* every five years.”
- 98) Jo Mielziner (creator of 1949 Broadway set): “I had to create something visually that would make these constant transitions in time immediately clear to the audience. I was able to design some mechanism for handling the large number of individual scenes, the most important visual symbol in the play – the real background of the story – was the salesman’s house. Therefore, why should that house not be the main set, with all the other scenes – the corner of a graveyard, a hotel room in Boston, the corner of a business office and so on – played on a forestage? If I designed these little scenes in segments and fragments, with easily moved props and fluid lighting effects, I might be able, without ever lowering the curtain, to achieve the easy flow that the author clearly wanted.”
- 99) *Jo Mielziner* (stage designer for *DOAS*): “I had previously had a fine time designing Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* for Kazan, so I knew that if *DOAS* proved to be a tough job, I would have the support of a director with a strong visual imagination and a mind of his own. *With DOAS, I couldn’t stick to my rules; the stage action was too complicated, and to follow the story line demanded an understanding of the sequence of scenes.*”
- 100) *Lee Cobb*: “You know – or do you? – that this play is a watershed. The American theatre will never be the same.”
- 101) Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theater.

- 102) Whether in America or Germany or Russia or China or Mexico, Willy Loman's tragic struggle for dignity has echoed with the essential truth of the human condition in any society where dreams can be shattered by adversity.
- 103) This is an inspired play about a friendly but slightly bumptious little man who has foolishly founded his life on windy slogans and petty opportunism, desperately deceiving himself with the humbug of his times. He grows old in years, but he never reaches adulthood. By some instinct Mr. Miller has laid hold of a common theme and written about it with the insight of a poet. His play gets painfully close to the basic truth.
- 104) Something has indeed gone wrong with at least a part of the American dream, and Willy Loman is the victim of the detour. Willy has to be overwhelmed on the stage as, in fact, his prototypes are in everyday life. His predicament in a New World where there just aren't any more forests to clear or virgin railroads to lay or Native American empires to first steal and then build upon, left him with nothing but some left-over values which had forgotten how to prize industriousness over cunning, usefulness over mere acquisition, and, above all, humanism over "success." The potency of the great tale of a salesman's death was in our familiar recognition of his entrapment which, suicide or not, is DEATHLY.
- 105) In a series of beautifully welded interlocking flashbacks we pursue Willy's thoughts into the past, back to the germinal moment of calamity when he was surprised by Biff in a hotel room with a half-dressed tart. This encounter stunted Biff's career and left Willy with a load of remorse redoubled by the fact that he, too, was the unsuccessful one of two brothers.
- 106) The play is Miller's triumph in the plain style; it rings with phrases which have entered into the contemporary subconscious. Miller's prose sometimes slips into a sentimental rhythm of despair which could be convicted of glibness.
- 107) DOAS is the most mature example of a myth of contemporary life. The chief value of this drama in its attempt to reveal those ultimate meanings which are resident in modern experience. Perhaps the most significant comment on this play is not its literary achievement, as such, but is, rather, the impact which it has on spectators, both in America and abroad. The play articulates, in language which can be appreciated by popular audiences, certain new dimensions of the human dilemma.
- 108) The sense of the victim is very deep in Miller. Individuals suffer for what they are and naturally desire, rather than for what they try to do, and the innocent are swept up with the guilty, with epidemic force. The social consciousness has now changed, decisively. Society is not merely a false system, which the liberator can challenge. It is actively destructive and evil, claiming its victims merely because they are alive. It is still seen as a false and alterable society, but merely to live in it, now, is enough to become its victim. In DOAS, the victim is not the nonconformist, the heroic but defeated liberator; he is, rather, the conformist, the type of the society itself. Willy Loman is a man who from selling things has passed to selling himself, and has become, in effect, a commodity which like other commodities will at a certain point be discarded by the laws of the economy. He brings tragedy down on himself, not by opposing the lie, but by living it.
- 109) America has to take her theatrical masterworks where she finds them. DOAS has always made the highbrow critics uncomfortable. It's not a real tragedy, some say. It's diluted Marxism, say others. It's an abstraction with cardboard figures, still others gripe. Such criticism of this hugely popular play have a good deal of justice, but they miss the point. Salesman is a flawed play, but all American playwrights are deeply flawed. In American theater imperfection goes with the territory.
- 110) The power of Miller's inspiration sears the audience into a shocked and chastened honesty. Tragedy, Marxism, abstraction – forget it. The audience recognizes this play. It knows Willy Loman, the poor slob who bought the phony dream of success and who is now spending his last day on earth refusing to awaken from it.
- 111) Willy's failure is our failure.
- 112) Surely part of the undeniable power Miller's play exerts is rooted into the author's audacity in breaking this conspiracy of silence, in revealing to us a failure almost too painful for audiences to bear. How many times has one heard contemporaries exclaim that Willy reminds them of their own fathers. (1979)
- 113) GENDER: "Contrary to the common feminist argument that Death of a Salesman paves the way for the displacement of women in contemporary plays, I think it cries out for a renewed image of the American woman. Feminists who claim that the play does not attempt to redefine women but instead contributes to the perpetuation of female stereotypes forget that Miller is accurately depicting a postwar American culture that subordinated women. He thus depicts America through the male gaze. We see everything from Willy's perspective and never from a female point of view. His mind becomes a vehicle through which Miller unveils the flaws of postwar American society. When we explore the play as Miller's requiem for an America with all the wrong dreams, it becomes clear that this flawed America is a male world, a locker room where women are voiceless, marginalized, or perplexed; they are either wives who mediate between fathers and sons, or objects of sexual exploitation.
- 114) DOAS has an immortal cry for attention for the failures in a country that worships success. To return to the play is to discover how much richer and bigger the play is than you remembered it.
- 115) *As recent Miller scholarship has suggested again and again, the play's images and rhythms have the patterns of poetry. Miller has said that Willy is best understood as "a figure in a poem".*
- 116) So here it is, a play for our time, and, as everyone must recognize, a play neatly bisecting our century – ironically, but prophetically, characterizing the second half even more incisively than the first. (1999)

- 117) 24 hours in Willy's life were compressed into subjective action which jumps fluidly from the present to the past, real and the imagined. It's a uniquely theatrical notion that exploits the theatre's poetic capacity to move between place and time, to make the present and the past co-exist in a compound metaphor.
- 118) *Death of a Salesman* is unarguably an indictment of a society which repressively puts financial success at the heart of the American Dream and presumes that there is nothing of value which cannot be quantified.
- 119) Miller's heroes – salesman, dockers, policemen, farmers – all seek a sort of salvation in asserting their singularity, their self, their "name". They redeem their dignity, even if it's by suicide. Willy Loman cries out, "I am not a dime a dozen, I am Willy Loman!", Eddie Carbone in *A View From the Bridge*, broken and destroyed by sexual guilt and public shame, bellows: "I want my name," and John Proctor in *The Crucible*, declaims "How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" In nothing does Miller show his Americanism more than in the assertion of the right and necessity of the individual to own his own life...
- 120) *What is original about DOAS is that Loman's memory is unreliable, and that we are invited to witness the way these unreliable memories provoke his present actions. The most dramatic example of this technique is Willy's highly mythologized memory of his brother Ben, whom he recalls entering the African jungle a pauper and coming out the owner of a diamond mine, and who becomes Willy's confidant as he decides to kill himself so that his favorite son Biff can build a business career (or rather, Willy's dream of Biff's career) with the life insurance money.*
- 121) The best thing you can do for an audience is not say, "This is the problem, this is the answer," but rather, "This is the problem, here's how these people are dealing with it. Do you think you would deal with it this way?" He involves each audience in a way that challenges them and makes them think.
- 122) The 26 music cues are used for transitions and underscoring during the performance.
- 123) A set designer: "We wanted to teeter on the borderline of reality the way Willy moves in and out of real moments while experiencing growing delusional memory. There are real chairs, there are real stockings that Linda mends; we are in a stage space that allows the action to drift from a faded kitchen reality to a dream-like void. The play takes place in Willy's mind so it travels through different definitions of reality, it keeps shifting."
- 124) *A lighting director: "As the action of DOAS takes place mostly within Willy's mind and play shifts back and forth through time and space, one essential aspect of the lighting design is the need to develop a visual consistency that can mark for the audience where and when a given scene is playing out. For example, the "present" action of the play might have all the scrim wall opaque, while they become transparent during the scenes that take place in the past. This is particularly crucial when Willy's mind begins to unravel and we start to see moments of overlapping realities."*
- 125) Many critics argued with themselves and Miller about *DOAS* being a bona fide tragedy. It does have many aspects of a Shakespearean tragedy – the insatiable movement to a demise, a single story, the heightened awareness of the protagonist – but Willy is not a King Lear or a Prince Hamlet, he is a father and husband and salesman who has, like us, great hope that obstacles can be overcome and life can be made good. What binds us to this play is that we are the American family and the Lomans play out many of the familial relationships that make us who we are. The play, for me, is not sad or about death. It brings a catharsis that leads us to consider living out lives authentically, leaving the best of who we are rather than what others wanted us to be."
- 126) To show us Willy's self evaluation, Miller creates an entirely new sense of time onstage. The movement between "past" and "now" does not use flashbacks; rather the times coexist.
- 127) If you're Hume Cronyn or Dustin Hoffman, it becomes sort of petulant. Because Brian Dennehy is such a big man, when he gets angry, you tend to feel it. He's violent, and I think Willy Loman is violently falling apart.
- 128) *Miller likened the structure of DOAS to geological strata, in which different times are present in the same instant. He has also compared it to a CAT scan, which simultaneously reveals inside and outside, and the time scale in the play is, indeed, complex. The events onstage take place over 24 hours, a period which begins with a timid, dispirited, and bewildered man entering a house once an expression of his hopes for the future. But this 24 period is only one form of time. There is also what Miller has called "social time" (actual time in real world) and "psychic time" (memories; the inside of Willy's head). By social time he seems to mean the unfolding truth of the public world which provides the context for Willy's life, while psychic time is evident in memories which crash into his present, creating ironies, sounding echoes, taunting him with a past which can offer him nothing but reproach. All these different notions of time blend and interact, that interaction being a key to the play's effect.*
- 129) *Fusing social drama with techniques drawn from expressionist theatre (the mingling of present dramatic time with events from the past and the memories of those events as seen from the viewpoint of the main characters, a non-naturalistic use of stage space, non-realistic sets, evocative use of voice and music), Miller created a modern tragedy about a representative American, an 'everyman' in the dramatic figure of a salesman, Willy Loman.*
- 130) Miller time after time explores the lives of those who fail to acknowledge their freedom to act. *Human fallibility* is Miller's central subject.
- 131) Miller was trying to define a tradition that would encompass both the psychological and the social and the concept of the 'whole' man – psyche and citizen, individual subject and social actor – has driven Miller's own play writing from very early on.
- 132) Miller's critical reception, particularly in his native America, has been mixed, at times downright hostile. America finally does not want to be told that innocence can ever be lost, that a condition of after the fall exists and so cannot

accept Miller's world-view; in America Miller's vision is thus incompatible with the individualistic (yet mass-oriented) American dream.

- 133) *Miller in this play has joined his school of American playwrights (Saroyan, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams) who are trying to break out of the constrictions of the naturalistic play form while at the same time retaining the realist contemporary subject. It is an attempt to make a poetic approach to every day life without using poetry – or even heightened speech. The characters are to remain as inarticulate as they are in real life; the “poetry” is to be supplied by symbols, by the handling, the time switches, the lighting; the production, in short, is expected to do most of the work of evoking the heightened mood. Thus the Salesman of this play is living in a three-roomed Brooklyn house with his wife and two gone-to-the-bad sons. The stage design for this is skeletal; we see all three rooms at once, and we see, even more important, looming up behind, the great lowering claustrophobic cliff of concrete skyscraper in which their living space is embedded. A highly effective design this, by Jo Miezner. He is also responsible for the lighting which focuses our attention on one room or another as the little scenes shift to and fro. Or he may bring us to the front of the stage for the “flashbacks” into the idealized past when the boys were young and loved their father and he could still hope for himself and for them; and this is symbolized by the leafy fringe projected in these scenes by a lantern onto the backcloth, shutting out the barren city landscapes to which their lives have now been reduced.*
- 134) *Miller produced a challenging drama in DOAS, and it is a provocative, moving, occasionally eloquent play which makes pertinent comment on the decadent values in our society. The play's structure drives its narrative home with emotional impact since Miller uses the familiar screen and radio technique. The play begins and ends in one basic setting, the Loman home, and flashbacks in the popular stream-of-consciousness style clarify the present dilemma in terms of past relevancies. Musical bridges between the scenes dovetail them neatly together, for the music, being used thematically, is mood provoking and blends perfectly with the structure, which is organically valid and an artistic triumph.*
- 135) The play, it strikes us, is essentially the mother's tragedy, not Willy Loman's.
- 136) A character whose portrayal is more crucially troublesome is Charley. For nearly the whole play he and Linda are the only ones who realize the seriousness of Willy's condition.
- 137) *The point of attack in DOAS comes very near the turning point of the play. Miller's method is, moreover, not merely effectively vertical but at the same time circular – in the sense that the action starts with an already trapped individual and merely snaps the ring round him. The paramount question we are forced to ask of the play is not the usual “What is going to happen next?”, “Will the hero win or lose?” or “How will his plan work out?” – questions to which a commonplace life in a commonplace situation can give only uninteresting answers. The important question, since the hero's fate is sealed from the beginning, is rather “What is really the matter and why?” – a question that points to basic realities.*
- 138) *Willy Loman, exhausted salesman, does not go back to the past. The past, as in hallucination, comes back to him; not chronologically as in flashback, but dynamically with the inner logic of his erupting volcanic unconsciousness.*
- 139) Miller said recently in conversation, “Writing a play is so damned tough that, when I finish one, I swear I'll never write anything again, not even a letter.”

QUOTES FROM 1949 CRITICS

- 140) There is always pertinence to this tale of a defeated old drummer coming to the end of his career. A terrible documentation has been leavened with bursts of wild humor and more than one moment of touching grandeur, while the fluent scenes build inexorably to the climax.
- 141) In Miller's *Salesman* there's much of *Everyman*. Bothered, bewildered, but mostly bedeviled, as Willy Loman is, he's not a great deal different from the majority of his contemporaries. He, even as you and I, build himself a shaky shelter of illusion. Willy created an image of himself which fails to correspond with Willy Loman as he is.
- 142) From every point of view, *DOAS* is a rich and memorable drama. It is so simple in style and so inevitable in theme that it scarcely seems like a thing that has been written and acted. For Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theater.
- 143) Writing like a man who understands people, Miller has no moral precepts to offer and no solutions to the salesman's problems.
- 144) Miller has been praised before for the “naturalness” of his dialogue. His writing in *DOAS* is splendid – terse, always in character and always aimed toward the furtherance of his drama.
- 145) Willy's misfortune is that he has gone through life as an eternal adolescent, as someone who has not dared to take stock, as someone who never knew who he was.
- 146) The death of Arthur Miller's salesman is symbolic of the breakdown of the whole concept of salesmanship inherent in our society.

VIEWS ON SALESMAN (in general)

- 147) “selling may be the defining activity of American society”
- 148) The man on the road is an army officer. His soldiers are his samples. His enemy is his competitor. He fights battles every day. The “spoils of war” is business. The traveling man must use tactics just the same as does the general. --- *Tales of the Road*, 1904
- 149) “It amazes me that so many salespeople are seized by inertia and act as if they can continue to cling to their jobs without having to exert themselves.” – *Swim With The Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive* by Harvey Mackay

ALL remaining quotes from Tips for the Traveling Salesman by Herbert Casson. New York: B.C. Forbes Publishing, 1927.:

- 150) In the whole world of trade and commerce probably no one has so hard and baffling a job as a traveling salesman. He has to deal with other people, over whom he has no authority. He has to depend absolutely upon his own skill, likeableness, quickness and information.
- 151) It is a strange fact that among traveling salesman the oldest will bring in the fewest new accounts. When a traveler has been nine or ten years with a company he has become well acquainted with its customers... They listen to his stories; his business has become largely a matter of visiting friends. Consequently, he does not like to dig up new customers. A young chap, on the contrary, who has no friends ... will usually bring in more new accounts than anybody else.
- 152) If a traveling salesman's heart is not stout, it will very soon be broken ... He perseveres, but he shortens his life. He becomes an old man at 50. Often, a heartbroken salesman keeps on with his work and trudges about as a mere order-taker. He is no longer a salesman ... A salesman's job is a very lonely and depressing one, unless he takes himself in hand and uses a great deal of self-control.
- 153) *To the wives who read this book, I would say, "If you are married to a traveling salesman, for Heaven's sake BUCK HIM UP. He has troubles you know nothing about, and unless you cheer him along, HE'LL FAIL and you will be the cause of it.*

Additional readings:

The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller (1978) Conversations with Arthur Miller (1987) Timebends (1987) – his autobiography
Check Volusia libraries for the DVD or VHS for Death of a Salesman from 1960s/70s with Lee Cobb – WATCH IT!
ALSO – Listen to *Desparaceidos – Read Music/Speak Spanish (2002, Saddle Creek)* as though it were written by a 21st century Arthur Miller....

ALSO - Consider the social argument of the movie Office Space (1999) in relation to DOAS

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Willy Loman

63 yr old traveling salesman (nearing retirement); has worked for the Wagner firm for 34 years, started at 18 or 19 (the math doesn't work)
name is a pun on "low-man" but Miller felt there was more to it
has an overactive mind; he is not a pure victim; he has built his life on denial
wish – "someday I'll own my own business" (18)
desperately wants to believe he has succeeded, that he is "well-liked" as a salesman, father, and husband [consider him in relation to each personal role]
his lies and deceptions dominate in both past and present
note – the past memories do not provide solace, answers, absolution, they (like Ben) only haunt him
Past vs. Present; what hasn't changed? 1) always owe money 2) not liked or respected
ultimately, what any salesman sells is hope, a dream of tomorrow
his real creative energy goes into his house; could have been a carpenter, but became a salesman because it promises a brighter future of ease and affluence {** he turns away from himself (in an attempt to buy into the ideology of America) and by turning away he becomes an utterly confused person
was a man who pursued the seductive but unreal "bitch goddesses" of popularity and success
What is Willy's greatest problem ?????? Perhaps - he can not recognize his own reality
IRONY – as a salesman, he has bought the pitch given to him by his society
Values/admires/accepts: the over-publicized ideals of material success and blatant optimism, and this creates his tragedy. His downfall and eventual defeat illustrate not only the failure of man but also the failure of a way of life.
Willy's belief in American culture (ad culture): Gene Tunney's signature on punching bag (17); Refrigerator with the biggest ads (23); America is the "greatest country in the world" (6); Vitamins (28/29); Definitions of this country (65/66)
Worries: He talks too much; He is fat and unattractive, foolish to look at; Suicide might be a cowardly thing Biff would hate him for (as voiced by Ben); contrast with his question: "Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?" (100)
Brags about: His persuasive abilities; His knack for knowing how to please people
Evidence of Willy as a misguided/ineffective father: Don't make any promises (16); "Be liked and you will never want" (21) [the importance of personal attractiveness]; Stealing football reactions (18), stealing sand (35); Treatment of Bernard (20); "You'll give him the answers" (26)
Signs Willy is losing touch with reality: Can't drive his car; Thought he opened his windshield; Entrances into past / Conversations with Ben; whistling in the elevator
can't be easily categorized – both very simple and complex – his contradictions:
[ultimate contradiction: he believes his is "always being contradicted"]
[he is "a bleeding mass of contradictions"]
1) he wants to avoid being labeled, but wants the right labels attached to him (fridge)

- 2) thinks Biff is a bum, then thinks he has greatness
- 3) automobile is both the finest of its kind and a piece of junk

Willy's father

an absent father (Willy has not seen him since he was 3 yrs 11 months); went to Alaska was a flute maker and flute salesman (34) -- note that he had a personal stake in his job, made what he sold (unlike Willy)

Biff Loman

34 yr old son; a high-school athlete, "lost" after graduation (connect with Alfred III end Act 2) steals a fountain pen; both curses his father as a fool and dreamer, but loves him as well major problem -- he has taken on his father's values and not developed any of his own (until the end) "you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anyone"

ironic -- his awareness is in his own nothingness

drawn to earth and working with his hands (is aware that life is more than the dollars you make)

like Hamlet, returns home to resolve his conflict with his father (despite his stated reasons)

in essence, they (Willy and Biff) are fighting each other for their own existence

Miller -- "your love for him binds you; but you want it to free you to be your own man" -- is this his ultimate problem

major image: his breaking down, crying, holding onto Willy saying "I'm nothing" -- the son renounces the father's ridiculous belief in the son's superiority even as the son clings to the father for support. While Biff rejects Willy, he embraces him, confusing Willy who has metaphorically fumbled the relationship just as he fumbles for his son literally significant line: "Help me.." to Happy (looking for a way out, absolution)

Happy Loman

Younger son, 32 (like Willy vs. Ben the older brother); ironic then he is tremendously overshadowed as a son Happy denies his father as just some guy (91); note irony in that it has been Willy who has rejected him his entire life likely meant irony in his name (Happy) though original name is Harold

constantly lowering his ideals (ironic) (end 12); Woman chaser; says he went to West Point (a lie)

ironic -- it is the rejected son who rejects the father in the restaurant scene

"I'm losing weight" -- stated 3 times in Act 1, his past credo; "I'm gonna get married" -- stated at end of Act 1 + 2, his present credo

Happy's views of women:

- 1) Women = pig, forgets first time (9)
- 2) I get that anytime I want; it is like bowling, women = bowling pins (negative), wants someone like his mother (positive) (13)
- 3) (Positive) They broke the mold when they made her(mom) (48)
- 4) women as strudel/binoculars (78)
- 5) There's not a good woman in a thousand (80)
- 6) I'm gonna get married (end act 1, 2)

Linda calls him women -- "rotten lousy whores" (98)

Linda Loman

Fearful but patient; eternal wife figure; her speeches present Miller's social conscience

has very short lines when in presence of Willy; does she deserve part of the blame for Willy's tragedy?? Her flaw is bolstering his ego and perpetuating the illusions

OR is tough, is a fighter

A committed observer, unable to stop Willy's march to oblivion

"I thought you'd like a change" -- does she at certain moments urge him towards change?

Note her perpetuation of Willy's delusions

Charley

How is he similar to Uncle Ben? {he is called Ben by mistake once}; is the practical success

how is he antithesis to Willy? Ben?

Referred to as uncle, but certainly isn't

Is not "well-liked"; but he doesn't care because it doesn't matter; Is a realist (disagrees with the idea of personal attractiveness)

Does he have Willy's best interests in mind? Is he the most admirable character in the play?

Realize he provides a model of how to effectively maneuver and survive in a possibly cruel American business world

Bernard - represents natural success through hard work, etc (like his father); voice of reason (on UVA sneakers)

Dave Singleman - at 84 died, was loved by all (pg 60/61); sets up the ideal image of the salesman

Uncle Ben - (does he exist or is his existence (and thus the audience's) corrupted by Willy's memory/delusion?)

A man utterly certain of his destiny; the embodiment of the ease of the American dream (which has eluded Willy); has actually been dead some time (pg 31)

catch phrase (on pg 33, 37): went into jungle at 17, came out at 21 and by god I was rich; jungle = the jungle of life

how is he antithesis to Willy? (represents the missed opportunity)

Ben shows up: 30-37 as an interruption in conversation with Charley then in past memory; 64-66 in Howard's office; 99-101 in garden scene; 106-108 in the last moment in Act 2

Note/Comment on the significance of:

Dave Singleman

The rubber tube / The gas hot-water heater

The stockings

The flute music

The fountain pen

The refrigerator

Twenty thousand dollars

What Willy sells (no one knows)

How Ben made his success

Cars (as a symbol of masculine identity, Willy's car is now broken down and something he can't control, his suicide as one last ride to glory)

Metaphors

His life has gone off-track like the automobile he can't keep from going off the road

His mind wanders because he has lost control

He feels cornered like how the house has become physically cornered by the large apartment buildings

The processed American cheese (Willy likes) is a metaphor for processed American society

That things are all used up by the time they are paid for

He is always traveling, but never arriving

Charley – "When a deposit bottle is broken you don't get your nickel back" – as applied to Willy and Biff as broken people (30)

His desire to plant something in the ground as a desire to return to a state of innocence (1928), but also that his sons are not thriving in the "soil" he has planted them in

The set as a metaphor: It is a visual marker of social and psychological change; shows contrast from youthful hope vs. present bewilderment in staging (more than trees have withered away in the passage of time)

Play moves with the speed of Willy's mind: This is why there can be no scene divisions; Past and present must occur without blackouts

Motifs (from Cliffs notes)

he is "vital to New England"

the "woods are burning"

Debts (both monetary and personal) [that things are all used up by the time they are paid for]

the importance of "personal attractiveness" and being "well-liked"

the idea of being "boxed in" and how "nothing will grow here"

the seed motif – of having something in the ground

how Biff and Willy "can't get near" each other

Motif of stealing

Happy's motif of "I'm losing weight" or "I'm gonna get married" – what does it show?

Consider:

Loman = low man

Sample cases = his "burdens," filled with his empty dreams

The past = always in the present, influencing our actions/decisions/etc

Degeneration of the setting (1928-1940s) = degeneration of Willy (and his mind)

Dave Singleman = single man, the individual success

Happy does not = happy

1928 = end of hope & innocence

style (Willy, be well liked) vs. substance (Charley, be well liked with your pockets on) – who wins?

Stealing: Sand (for front stoop); Lumber [ironically by the same apartment complex that now boxes them in]; Football; Sporting goods; The pen (Bill Oliver) (steals simply so he has some tangible thing that is his in the world); Happy – metaphorically "steals" other men's wives (steals simply to prove he can do it)

Contrast the 2 dominant life views in the play: "Life is a casting off" (5, Linda) vs. "Some people accomplish something (5, Willy).

Note difference in views/perception of salesman:

Willy's Dave Singleman delusion (60/61)

Charley - realistic in requiem speech

Biff – "contemptuous, begging fool" (105) and initially (10/11) [consider audience reaction to these negative labels of salesman if that was your job/identity as an audience member in 1949]

Howard Wagner's view of the salesman he oversees

The Slayer of False Values

ARTHUR MILLER, 1915-2005

By RICHARD SCHICKEL

INSPIRATION IS A RARE AND FLIGHTY BIRD. MOST OF US NEVER catch a glimpse of it. Very occasionally it settles down helpfully in the corner, cawing advice to artists as they pile up those bodies of work on which their hopes of immortality rest. More usually—and this was the case with Arthur Miller—it touches down briefly, then darts away. The artist may catch tantalizing sight of the creature as he walks on through the woods, but it never again perches long on his shoulder.

It was in the spring of 1947 that the 31-year-old Arthur Miller heard the sweetest—and most profound—birdsong of his life. After a decade of struggle he had finally achieved a hit Broadway play, *All My Sons*, and with its proceeds bought a farm in Roxbury, Conn. Leaving his family behind in Brooklyn, he repaired to the country, built himself a cabin-studio (he was a great carpenter), settled down at a crude desk he had also fashioned and began writing. He had a first line for a new play in mind, and some thoughts about its tragic theme—a man selling his soul and eventually his life to the false values of materialist America. By the wee hours he had completed the first draft of the first act of the play that was eventually known as *Death of a Salesman*.

The rest took a little longer—about six weeks—not counting production rewrites. But Elia Kazan, then his best friend, and perhaps always his best director, was correct when he wrote that Miller “didn’t write *Death of a Salesman*; he released it.” Not a week has passed since the play premiered on Broadway 56 years ago this month when it was not playing somewhere in the world, playing too on our instinctive response to an instinctive work.

On opening night a woman told Miller his play was “a time bomb under American capitalism,” and he hoped she was right. But if it were just a matter of politics (Miller was at the time a committed Stalinist sympathizer), the play would not have lasted. His protagonist, Willy Loman, however, is an Everyman, someone who heedlessly believes all the lies that are fed to us—the ones about success and self-realization, the ones about consumerism, the ones about the necessity of being, as he puts it, “well liked.” At the time, the fancier critics thought Willy lacked the noble stature for tragedy. But that’s nonsense. We don’t live

in an Aristotelian age; we live in the age of Donald Trump. And Willy, trying to pass on his false values to his sons (and incidentally destroying them as a result), has become an ever more poignant, and prescient, figure.

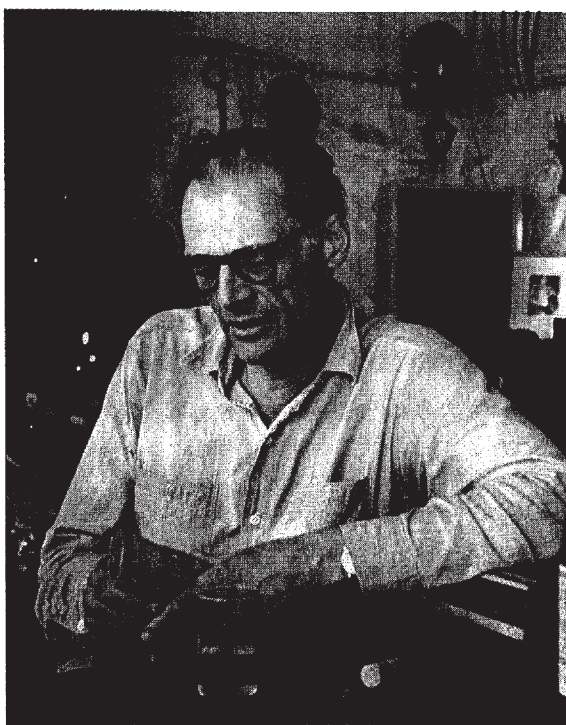
Miller, ever after, bore the weight of the heightened expectations, and the celebrity, that *Salesman* imposed on him. He wrote some good plays—*The Crucible*, a heavy-handed but still potent work in which the Salem witch trials stood in metaphorically for contemporary McCarthyism; *The Price*, wherein he returned to the world of lower-middle-class lying and striving—but never again a great one. He also, alas, wrote some pret-

ty bad ones, most notably *After the Fall*, about his disastrous marriage to Marilyn Monroe, which painted her as a monster, him as her improbably pious victim. He defended himself nobly when the House Un-American Activities Committee came calling in 1956. That made him a hero to the liberal community, and he used that position passionately to defend civil liberties in the U.S. Kazan, who notoriously cooperated with the committee, thought Miller was acting like “a high school boy.” Others did not.

As the years wore on, he became something of a paradigm to some of us: the octogenarian still writing, still thinking (and, incidentally, living happily with his 34-year-old girlfriend), still part of our political and moral discourse. And then, Chicago’s Goodman Theatre last fall mounted *Finishing the*

Picture. It was the play about Marilyn that almost sweetens the bad taste of *After the Fall*. She’s a silent, drugged-out, usually nude, presence in a drama about getting her sufficiently mobilized to complete a film. Obviously based on the situation surrounding her final appearance, in *The Misfits*, which Miller wrote for her, it is a dark, sharp comedy about desperate people trying to stay reasonable in the face of unreason. There’s another universal metaphor in there somewhere, but Miller didn’t ride it hard; he just enjoyed it. It’s dismaying that dim reviews derailed the play’s trip to Broadway, but it was heartening to see the old man sounding so spry.

Finishing the Picture is not *Death of a Salesman*. Nothing ever could be. Maybe history will finally judge Arthur Miller a one-masterpiece writer. But so what? Speaking to her sons, Willy Loman’s wife cried out, “Attention must be paid.” It was. One suspects it always will be. ■



INSE MORATH—MAGNUM

On how *A Streetcar Named Desire* influenced the writing of *Death of a Salesman*

The net of it all was that serious writers could reasonably assume they were addressing the whole American mix, and so their plays, whether successfully or not, stretched toward a wholeness of experience that would not require specialists or a coterie to be understood. As alienated a spirit as he was, O'Neill tried for the big audience, and Clifford Odets no less so, along with every other writer longing to prophesy to America, from Whitman and Melville to Dreiser and Hemingway and on.

For Europe's playwrights the situation was profoundly different, with society already split beyond healing between the working class and its allies, who were committed to a socialist destiny, and the bourgeois mentality that sought an art of reassurance and the pleasures of forgetting what was happening in the streets. (The first American plays I saw left me wondering where the characters came from. The people I knew were fanatics about surviving, but onstage everyone seemed to have mysteriously guaranteed incomes, and though every play had to have something about "love," there was nothing about sex, which was all there was in Brooklyn, at least that I ever noticed.) An American avant-garde, therefore, if only because the domination of society by the middle class was profoundly unchallenged, could not simply steal from Brecht or even Shaw and expect its voice to reach beyond the small alienated minority that had arrived in their seats already converted to its aims. That was not the way to change the world.

For a play to do that it had to reach precisely those who accepted everything as it was; great drama is great questions or it is nothing but technique. I could not imagine a theatre worth my time that did not want to change the world, any more than a creative scientist could wish to prove the validity of everything that is already known. I knew only one other writer with the same approach, even if he surrounded his work with a far different aura. This was Tennessee Williams.

If only because he came up at a time when homosexuality was absolutely unacknowledgeable in a public figure, Williams had to belong to a minority culture and understood in his bones what a brutal menace the majority could be if aroused against him. I lived with much the same sense of alienation, albeit for other reasons. Certainly I never regarded him as the sealed-off aesthete he was

thought to be. There is a radical politics of the soul as well as of the ballot box and the picket line. If he was not an activist, it was not for lack of a desire for justice, nor did he consider a theatre profoundly involved in society and politics, the venerable tradition reaching back to the Greeks, somehow unaesthetic or beyond his interest.

The real theatre—as opposed to the sequestered academic one—is always straining at the inbuilt inertia of a society that always wants to deny change and the pain it necessarily involves. But it is in this effort that the musculature of important work is developed. In a different age, perhaps even only fifteen years later, in the sixties, Williams might have had a more comfortably alienated audience to deal with, one that would have relieved the pressure upon him to extend himself beyond a supportive cult environment, and I think this might well have narrowed the breadth of his work and its intensity. In short, there was no renaissance in the American forties, but there was a certain balance within the audience—a balance, one might call it, between the alienated and the conformists—that gave sufficient support to the naked cry of the heart and, simultaneously, enough resistance to force it into a rhetoric that at one stroke could be broadly understandable and yet faithful to the pain that had pressed the author to speak.

When Kazan invited me up to New Haven to see the new Williams play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*—it seemed to me a rather too garishly attention-getting title—I was already feeling a certain amount of envious curiosity since I was still unable to commit myself to the salesman play, around which I kept suspiciously circling and sniffing. But at the same time I hoped that *Streetcar* would be good; it was not that I was high-minded but simply that I shared the common assumption of the time that the greater the number of exciting plays there were on Broadway the better for each of us. At least in our minds there was still something approximating a theatre culture to which we more or less proudly belonged, and the higher its achievement the greater the glory we all shared. The playwright then was king of the hill, not the star actor or director, and certainly not the producer or theatre owner, as would later be the case. (At a recently televised Tony Awards ceremony, recognizing achievement in the theatre, not a single playwright was presented to the public, while two lawyers who operated a chain of theatres were showered with the gratitude of all. It reminded me of Caligula making his horse a senator.)

Streetcar—especially when it was still so fresh and the actors

Start →
Reading

had the first news that he wanted to sell the place. In a year or two he would be on trial for publishing without authorization State Department reports from John Stewart Service, among a number of other China experts who recognized a Mao victory as inevitable and warned of the futility of America continuing to back her favorite, Chiang Kai-shek. *Amerasia* had been a vanity publication, in part born of Jaffe's desire for a place in history, but it nevertheless braved the mounting fury of the China lobby against any opinion questioning the virtues of the Chiang forces. At his trial, the government produced texts of conversations that Jaffe claimed could only have been picked up by long-range microphone as he and his friends walked the isolated backcountry roads near this house. Service was one of many who were purged from the State Department, leaving it blinded to Chinese reality but ideologically pure. But all that was far from my mind this day; what I was looking for on my land was a spot for a little shack I wanted to build, where I could block out the world and bring into focus what was still stuck in the corners of my eyes. I found a knoll in the nearby woods and returned to the city, where instead of working on the play I drew plans for the framing, of which I really had very vague knowledge and no experience. A pair of carpenters could have put up this ten-by-twelve-foot cabin in two days at most, but for reasons I still do not understand it had to be my own hands that gave it form, on this ground, with a floor that I had made, upon which to sit to begin the risky expedition into myself. In reality, all I had was the first two lines and a death—"Willy!" and "It's all right. I came back." Further than that I dared not, would not, venture until I could sit in the completed studio, four walls, two windows, a floor, a roof, and a door.

"It's all right. I came back" rolled over and over in my head as I tried to figure out how to join the roof rafters in air unaided, until I finally put them together on the ground and swung them into position all nailed together. When I closed in the roof it was a miracle, as though I had mastered the rain and cooled the sun. And all the while afraid I would never be able to penetrate past those two first lines. I started writing one morning—the tiny studio was still unpainted and smelled of raw wood and sawdust, and the bags of nails were still stashed in a corner with my tools. The sun of April had found my windows to pour through, and the apple buds were moving on the wild trees, showing their first pale blue petals. I wrote all day until dark, and then I had dinner and went back and wrote until some hour in the darkness between midnight and four.

1 8 4 A R T H U R M I L L E R

I had skipped a few areas that I knew would give me no trouble in the writing and gone for the parts that had to be muscled into position. By the next morning I had done the first half, the first act of two. When I lay down to sleep I realized I had been weeping—my eyes still burned and my throat was sore from talking it all out and shouting and laughing. I would be stiff when I woke, aching as if I had played four hours of football or tennis and now had to face the start of another game. It would take some six more weeks to complete Act II.

End

almost as amazed as the audience at the vitality of this theatrical experience—opened one specific door for me. Not the story or characters or the direction, but the words and their liberation, the joy of the writer in writing them, the radiant eloquence of its composition, moved me more than all its pathos. It formed a bridge to Europe for me, to Jouvet's performance in *Odin*, to the whole tradition of unashamed word-joy that, with the exception of Odets, we had either turned our backs on or, as with Maxwell Anderson, only used archaically, as though eloquence could only be justified by cloaking it in sentimental romanticism.

Returning to New York, I felt speeded up, in motion now. With *Streetcar*, Tennessee had printed a license to speak at full throat, and it helped strengthen me as I turned to Willy Loman, a salesman always full of words, and better yet, a man who could never cease trying, like Adam, to name himself and the world's wonders. I had known all along that this play could not be encompassed by conventional realism, and for one integral reason: in Willy the past was as alive as what was happening at the moment, sometimes even crashing in to completely overwhelm his mind. I wanted precisely the same fluidity in the form, and now it was clear to me that this must be primarily verbal. The language would of course have to be recognizably his to begin with, but it seemed possible now to infiltrate it with a kind of superconsciousness. The play, after all, involved the attempts of his sons and his wife and Willy himself to understand what was killing him. And to understand meant to lift the experience into emergency speech of an unashamedly open kind rather than to proceed by the crabbed dramatic hints and pretexts of the "natural." If the structure had to mirror the psychology as directly as could be done, it was still a business life Willy had lived and believed in. The play could reflect what I had always sensed as the unbroken tissue that was man and society, a single unit rather than two.

By April of 1948 I felt I could find such a form, but it would have to be done, I thought, in a single sitting, in a night or a day, I did not know why. I stopped making my notes in our Grace Court house in Brooklyn Heights and drove up alone one morning to the country house we had bought the previous year. We had spent one summer there in that old farmhouse, which had been modernized by its former owner, a greeting card manufacturer named Philip Jaffe, who as a sideline published a thin magazine for China specialists called *Amerasia*. Mary worked as one of his secretaries and so

areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center. For instance, in the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. This is also true of the supper scene, when her silent figure on the sofa should remain the visual center. The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas. A certain correspondence to light in religious paintings, such as El Greco's, where the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky, could be effectively used throughout the play. (It will also permit a more effective use of the screen.) A free, imaginative use of light can be of enormous value in giving a mobile, plastic quality to plays of a more or less static nature.

— The Author's Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*

★ Arthur Miller (b. 1915)

TRAGEDY AND THE COMMON MAN³

1949

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another, 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.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art is not at issue, we never hesitate to attribute to the well-placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as the lowly. And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, 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.

Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is

³A complete essay, originally published in *The New York Times*.

indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his "tragic flaw," a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing — and need be nothing — but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are "flawless." Most of us are in that category.

But there are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action, everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us — from this total examination of the "unchangeable" environment — comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy.

More important, from this total questioning of what has been previously unquestioned, we learn. And such a process is not beyond the common man. In revolutions around the world, these past thirty years, he has demonstrated again and again this inner dynamic of all tragedy.

Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy. If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king.

The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is as strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best.

Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. The discovery of the moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity.

The tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens — and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies. In no way is the common man debarred from such thoughts or such actions.

Seen in this light, our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of

life, or the purely sociological. If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our minds, then all action, let alone the heroic action, is obviously impossible.

And if society alone is responsible for the cramping of our lives, then the protagonist must needs be so pure and faultless as to force us to deny his validity as a character. From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither represents a balanced concept of life. Above all else, tragedy requires the finest appreciation by the writer of cause and effect.

No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any institution, habit or custom as being either everlasting, immutable or inevitable. In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination. Which is not to say that tragedy must preach revolution.

The Greeks could probe the very heavenly origin of their ways and return to confirm the rightness of laws. And Job could face God in anger, demanding, his right, and end in submission. But for a moment everything is in suspension, nothing is accepted, and in this stretching and tearing apart of the cosmos, in the very action of so doing, the character gains "size," the tragic stature which is spuriously attached to the royal or the high born in our minds. The commonest of men may take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world.

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal.

For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.

The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force.

Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist. But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief — optimistic, if you will — in the perfectibility of man.

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time — the heart and spirit of the average man.