



Royal
Lyceum
Theatre
Company

EDINBURGH

death of a salesman

by **Arthur Miller**

Resource Pack | **February 2004**

CONTENTS

Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Page 7

Page 8

Page 10

Page 11

Page 12

Page 13

Page 14

Page 16

Page 18

Page 19

Page 20

Introduction to the play

Biography of Arthur Miller

Writing *Death of a Salesman* / Jackie McGlone talks about meeting Miller

Synopsis of the play

Characters in the play

Lyceum Cast for *Death of a Salesman*

Famous Willy Lomans

Interview with Paul Jesson, playing Willy Loman

Willy as a Salesman and Miller's Uncle Manny

Interview with John Dove, Director

Themes

Motifs

Style, Structure and Language

Set Design including interview with Michael Taylor, designer

Drama Exercises

Performance Analysis Questions

Study Questions

**“Attention,
attention must
finally be paid to
such a person”**

Linda Loman: Death of a Salesman, Act One

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman



Arthur Miller in the studio where he wrote *Death of a Salesman* : Paul Berg / St Louis Post-Dispatch

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller was first performed in 1949 on Broadway and was an immediate success. This deceptively simple story of the tragic road to suicide of a travelling salesman struck an emotional chord with American audiences. It was critically acclaimed and won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the production ran for 742 performances before it closed. Since then *Death of a Salesman* has become one of the most performed and adapted plays in American theatrical history.

Its enduring appeal seems to lie in the fact that Miller tapped into the hopes and fears of not only an American but a global public. Universal human questions about the nature of happiness and success, of aging and of family responsibility are tackled. Willy Loman has the quality of an everyman, whose struggle to attain his dreams of success resonates within us all.

Miller also tackles the social question of the effect the capitalist American Dream myth has on an ordinary family. As our world becomes increasingly affected by American culture, this is a question that is becoming more and more relevant to a global audience.

But it is not just the themes of the play that ensured its success. Miller was so innovative with form and skilled with language that he created a style that was accessible to any audience yet produced a multi-layered piece of theatre.

These qualities have confirmed the play's place in the canon of 'classic literature' and ensured that since its premiere, there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world.

Biography

Arthur Aster Miller was born on October 17th 1915 in New York City, the son of Jewish Polish parents. He attended schools in Harlem and Brooklyn before entering the University of Michigan. During this time, Miller began writing plays and several of his dramatic efforts were rewarded with prizes.

His first success came in 1947 with the premiere of *All My Sons*, a play about a family coping with having a son listed as missing in action during World War II, which won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

In 1948 he built a small studio at the Millers' summer cottage in which he wrote his second major hit, *Death of a Salesman*. The play premiered in 1949 on Broadway, directed by the celebrated director Elia Kazan. The play was a huge popular success and won both the Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

At the time, Miller was married to Mary, with children Jane and Robert. But in 1950, he met and fell in love with Marilyn Monroe, whom he consequently married in 1956.

In 1953 he wrote *The Crucible* during the McCarthy period when Americans were accusing each other of pro-Communist beliefs. The Tony Award-winning play about the witch-hunts in colonial Salem implied a parallel with the McCarthy hearings. Many of Miller's friends were being attacked as Communists and in 1957, he himself was called to Congress and convicted of contempt for refusing to name names, a conviction which was overturned the following year.

Miller's criticism of the American establishment continued with *A View from the Bridge* (1955) which questioned the reasonableness of U.S. immigration laws in a story about the self discovery and fall of a Brooklyn dock worker.

In 1961, Miller divorced Marilyn Monroe and a year later married Inge Morath, who remained his wife until her death in 2002. They had a daughter, Rebecca. Sadly, Marilyn Monroe died soon after their divorce, in 1962. Miller's 1964 play *After the Fall* included a thinly disguised portrayal of their unhappy marriage.

Also in 1964, *Incident at Vichy*, a one-act play set in Nazi-occupied France, was premiered, followed in 1968 by another one-act, *The Price* about a Jewish New York furniture dealer negotiating a house clearance with two long-estranged brothers.

Miller's later dramatic works include *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972) and *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991), which opened to mixed reviews. However, by this time, he was also writing prolifically outside of the theatre. In 1969 he wrote *In Russia*, a travel piece with photographs by his wife. *Chinese Encounters* (1979) is another traveller's tale, while *Salesman in Beijing* (1984) is an account of the production of his play in Chinese. In 1987, Miller published *Timebends: A Life*, his autobiography.

Miller is 89 this year, and is still as influential a character as he was in the 1940s. His work forms a crucial part of the canon of twentieth century theatre, not just in America, but internationally.

He lives alone since the death of his wife in their house in Connecticut.

Writing *Death of a Salesman*

Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* in the spring of 1948. He had made notes for a play about a salesman when he was in college, inspired by his Uncle Manny. The idea had haunted him since then as he searched for a way to express the psychology and tragedy of his character. He decided that this was a play that had to be written in one sitting and in isolation to “bring in to focus what was still stuck in the corner of my eyes.”* He drove up to the family’s summer cottage and started to build a small studio in the woods there. Here he describes those days:

“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...

I started 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. 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. By the next morning I had done the first half, the first act of two. When I lay down to sleep I realized that I had been weeping – my eyes still burned and my throat was sore from talking it all out and shouting and laughing.” *

* From *Timebends: A Life* by Arthur Miller (Methuen, 1987)

Journalist Jackie McGlone went to meet Miller at his home in Connecticut in 2000.

Arthur Miller is a craftsman. He makes professional standard furniture at his unpretentious clapboard house with its views of infinite woodlands, where he insists coyotes lurk. It’s a good place for constructing cabinets, as well as plays and essays, he told me.

He lives alone since the death in 2002 of his third wife, the photographer Inge Morath, although he’s owned the 18th century farmhouse in Connecticut for more than 50 years. His troubled second wife, Marilyn Monroe, once shared it with him.

The July day that I visited the Millers, he was swinging in a hammock on the porch, which you reach after walking beneath old beams and past a thousand books on shelves he’s built. He had had laser surgery on his right eye that morning so he resembled a tall, distinguished pirate.

“Peaceful, isn’t it?” he said, telling me that he had made the porch furniture, a substantial-looking bench and chair, on which I was invited to sit.

I had taken a bus from New York to Southbury, where Inge Morath met me. When we got back to the house, Miller had been hunched over his lap-top. “I do not believe what I am seeing,” scolded Morath. “Two hours since he had surgery and he’s writing the next play!” Threats were issued to confiscate the computer, but Miller, looking as if he had just stepped down off Mount Rushmore, and I sat with our bagels and coffee while he tapped furtively away into the late afternoon and his wife prepared dinner.

The play he was writing was called *Resurrection Blues*. “Because I believe in the future,” he told me.

Synopsis

Act 1

Willy Loman is a travelling salesman at the end of his career. The beginning of the play sees him returning home to his wife Linda after nearly crashing his car. Biff and Happy, their adult sons, are on a rare trip home. The relationship between Biff and his father is strained. Willy thinks Biff is a “lazy bum”: he has not found himself a career at the age of 34. Upstairs in their bedroom, Biff talks to his brother Happy about his inability to settle and his anger at his father’s criticism of him.

Alone in the kitchen, Willy retreats into his memory, remembering the boys as teenagers, Biff being a top class footballer and his successful brother Ben. Within these memories are also hints of where things started to go wrong for Willy as he exaggerates his success, dismisses Biff’s stealing and lies to his wife. Another woman is seen in Willy’s past.

The past and present mingle in Willy’s mind throughout a visit by his friend Charley who offers him a job which Willy proudly rejects. The brothers and Linda discuss Willy – Linda defends him and attacks her sons for their treatment of him. She tells them that Willy is trying to kill himself.

Biff tries to placate Willy’s anger when he overhears them discussing him by telling Willy that he will go and see an old employer, Oliver, and ask for a job. This escalates in to a plan for the brothers to set up in business together. Willy is delighted and the whole family is sucked in to this daydream. At the end of the Act, however, Biff discovers the length of tubing that Willy has hidden so he can use it to commit suicide.

Act 2

The Act opens happily with Willy making plans to ask his boss for a desk job and then meet his sons for dinner. However, when Willy sees his boss he will not give him a different job and finally tells Willy he is fired. This triggers memories of his brother Ben offering him a job, which he turned down. Willy then goes to Charley’s office to borrow money and meets Charley’s son Bernard, whom Willy had ridiculed as a boy but who is now a successful lawyer. Charley again offers him a job and Willy is again furious at the ‘insult’.

In the restaurant that evening, Biff tells Happy that Oliver did not remember him – he realised he had been lying to himself about his importance in the company. As he was leaving the office he stole a fountain pen. Willy enters and Biff tries to tell him what has happened but Willy won’t listen. Biff and Happy leave Willy alone in the restroom. Willy remembers an incident in Boston where Biff discovers him with a woman which had devastated Biff.

On the boys’ return to the house, Linda is furious. Willy is talking to his brother Ben (in his mind) about his plan to commit suicide so his family can have the insurance money. Biff and Willy argue again and Biff tells his family that he has lost every job he ever had through stealing and that he has been in jail. However, Willy sees Biff’s admission as a sign that Biff likes him and decides that if he leaves him the money he will be ‘magnificent’. As the others go to bed, Willy leaves the house and crashes his car.

Requiem

The graveside. The family react in different ways – Happy is angry; Charley believes that the job has destroyed Willy. Biff knows that he has had the ‘wrong dreams’. The scene ends with Linda who cannot understand why he has done it when they have just made the final payment on the house and are ‘free and clear’

Characters

Willy Loman

Willy is a 63 year old travelling salesman at the end of his career. He is finding it increasingly difficult to do his job and is trying to come to terms with his sense of failure in his working and family life. He is especially saddened by his stormy relationship with Biff. Willy is an ambitious dreamer who is unable to face the truth of his real situation. He regularly lies to himself and those around him. He is contemplating suicide.

Linda Loman

Linda is Willy's devoted wife, the one person who always supports him. She feels he has been mistreated by his company and by his sons. She indulges Willy despite his poor treatment of her but she is very strong when dealing with her sons. She is desperately trying to save her husband who she knows is trying to commit suicide.

Biff Loman

Biff, the Lomans' eldest son, was a star high school athlete with a scholarship, but he did not attend college after failing maths and finding out about Willy's affair. Since then, he has been drifting, stealing from every job he has had and at the age of 34 is without a career, base or family. Biff is angry with Willy for betraying Linda and the family by having an affair, and because he refuses to face up to reality. However, he still worries about what his father thinks of him.

Happy Loman

Happy is the younger son. He works as a buyer in a department store and lives in his own apartment in the city. Outwardly a success, Happy is a womaniser, has accepted bribes and exaggerates his success at work. Happy seeks recognition from his parents but is overshadowed initially by Biff.

Bernard

Bernard is a childhood friend of Biff's whom Willy ridiculed as a child for being 'anaemic' and 'not well liked'. Bernard has become a successful lawyer and Willy respects his success, judging Biff against him as a failure.

The Woman

An assistant in a Boston company who Willy had an affair with. She is a shadowy memory in Willy's mind.

Charley

An old friend and neighbour of the Lomans', Charley is a successful businessman. Although Willy is resentful of his success and refuses to accept the job Charley offers him, Charley is a good friend to Willy and gives him money.

Uncle Ben

Ben is Willy's older brother who has recently died. He was a wealthy businessman and represents the success Willy wishes he could have had. He regularly appears to Willy in his hallucinations and memories of the past.

Howard Wagner

The son of Frank Wagner, Willy's old boss and now the head of the Wagner Company for whom Willy works. Howard fires Willy because of his erratic behaviour.

Minor Characters:

Jenny	Charley's secretary
Stanley	The waiter in Frank's Chop House.
Letta	A call girl Happy picks up in the Chop House
Miss Forsythe	Letta's friend, another call girl.

Death of a Salesman

Royal Lyceum Theatre Company Cast

6 February to 6 March 2004

CAST

Willy Loman	Paul Jesson
Linda	Joanna Tope
Biff	Steven Duffy
Happy	Alex Hassell
Bernard	Jim Webster
The Woman	Isabella Jarrett
Letta/Jenny	Katrina Bryan
Charley	Tony Boncza
Uncle Ben	Sandy Neilson
Howard/Stanley	Greg Powrie
Miss Forsythe	Lucy Paterson



COMPANY

Director	John Dove
Designer	Michael Taylor
LX Designer	Jeanine Davies

Famous Willy Lomans

The way an actor interprets the character of Willy Loman can re-define the character for an audience. Arthur Miller chose these three performances as his 'favourites'. Although Miller has never accepted the idea that Willy is a 'Jewish role', all three of the actors are Jewish.

Lee J Cobb; Broadway, 1949

Cobb was only thirty-seven when he was cast as the first Willy Loman. He was described by Miller as a 'mountainous hulk'; he had his doubts that Cobb was the Willy he had imagined. But Cobb displayed a gentle humanity that suited the part. His size and stature gave a sense of importance to the character that enhanced the tragedy of Willy's position. The audience felt as if Willy's suicide was of as great significance as that of a classical tragic hero. However, some critics felt he gave too much of this significance to the character and thought it took away from the idea of Willy as a pathetic failure, a victim.

"Because he plays with such emotional strength, he is somehow less deeply moving than he might otherwise have been, since the strength of his acting is transferred to the character he acts, and Willy Loman assumes a personal force that keeps him from being quite the pathetic failure the author made him." *The New York Post*, February 11, 1949. (See photo of Lee J Cobb on page 15)

Warren Mitchell; The National Theatre, London, 1979

Warren Mitchell in The National Theatre production of *Death of a Salesman* in 1979



Mitchell was a complete departure from all previous portrayals of Willy. Firstly, he was a small man, as was Dustin Hoffman after him. This was Miller's original vision of Willy:

"(He's) got a large world that's trying to kill (him) and a small man reacts with a kind of nervousity... Willy is leaping from one contradictory attitude to another very rapidly... and to me that was also the characteristic of a little man, a physically small man." *Arthur Miller*

Mitchell played Willy as a man who was already broken, not who breaks throughout the course of the play. He was a weary, dying man frantically searching for a way or reason to stay alive. He also played him as a 'not very nice guy', created so by America and its ruthless success ethic.

Dustin Hoffman; Broadway, 1984

Hoffman had a real love for the play and the character of Willy, so much so that he himself put up a huge amount of money to fund the production.

"The play is still an emotional experience for me. In a sense I can't talk about the play without mourning Willy Loman." *Dustin Hoffman*

He created the character's appearance meticulously, shaving his head to wear a hairpiece and losing weight. He created an even smaller man than Mitchell, a man who was just skin and bone because of his nervous state. He strained to look taller than he was by tilting his chin up. His suit was slightly too big for him, creating an almost comic image. His portrayal was of an old man, with age spots and a gravelly voice, raging in frenzy at the world.

Paul Jesson is playing Willy Loman in the Lyceum's production of *Death of a Salesman*. In the first week of rehearsals he discussed some of his ideas about the character.



Why did you say yes when you were asked if you would like to play Willy Loman? What draws you to the character of Willy?

Why wouldn't you do a part like this? What use would an actor be if he turned down an offer like that? It's the perfect grumpy old man part! Anyone of my age is probably a bit grumpy because as you get older, you see things change.

Actually, Willy's complaints about life aren't so much about the way things have changed. Although the life that he aspires to has changed. Willy's memory of Dave Singleman – his mentor, or certainly his inspiration – is 45 years prior. We're talking about a man who was born in 1820. Such a different world. And that's what Willy can't come to grips with.

Yes, Willy's a dreamer but he can't really face up to the fact that he probably has chosen the wrong course in life. He's not without talent. He's not mean spirited. He's a big, generous hearted man who has had the wrong dream. He's been inspired by a man whose funeral was attended by so many people, who was so loved and so respected, so highly regarded and that's what Willy seems to be obsessed by. Living a life that is validated by how many people respond to you and like you. If he had chosen the course of becoming a small time builder, a handyman... He's great at putting up ceilings and building stoops, never happier than when he's got a pile of cement in front of him. He just went for the wrong thing. He keeps clutching at straws and he misses the life raft when it's offered him.

Do think Willy is a timeless character?

Oh yes. I think what it's about is facing up to who you really are, being honest with yourself about yourself, which Willy isn't and hasn't been. The people who can do that are probably happier. It's not a question of settling for anything, settling for second best. It's about being true to yourself, and he isn't true to himself.

He has to make up stories, he has to believe things that aren't really true in order to survive, and relate to his wife and his boys. And when that breaks down in the terrible scene in the hotel room where Biff finds him with the woman, he's got no comeback from that. At every other dip in the play, even being fired by Howard Wagner, in his own mind he can go back to possibly the greatest day of his life and the greatest day of Biff's life, the Ebbet's Field football game, and he can recharge his enthusiasm, his zest for life by that. But once you get to the hotel, there is no comeback from that.

Do you think if he wasn't carrying the guilt of what happened with Biff he wouldn't have been so destroyed?

Absolutely. If that incident hadn't happened, if Biff hadn't shown up, he would still have felt guilty. The first encounter with the woman in the play, the first time we see him with the woman, as he comes out of that flashback the first thing he says to Linda is 'I'll make it up to you.' So he's guilty enough about it even without Biff finding out about it all. But it destroyed Biff; it destroyed his relationship with Biff and eventually destroys him.

Paul Jesson discusses some of his ideas about the character...

Do you think he is a tragic character in the classical sense? Are you approaching this play as a tragedy?

He is a classic tragic character. There is the fatal flaw in him, which is given in his character, of self-delusion. That is played out in a quite classic way. All the flashbacks lead inexorably to his suicide.

You approach all plays the same way. The universal always comes out of the specific and with *Death of a Salesman* you're talking about detail, such detail. It's not about the grand message, it's not about issues. It is about people, the minutiae of their lives. Wonderful little nuggets like the stockings and the way Willy is always turning on a sixpence.

His thinking is like a rollercoaster in danger of jumping off the tracks at all times; he goes here, there and everywhere with his thinking. There is an incredible energy, a pulse to it. He lives off adrenalin. That is the salesman in him and he must be a natural salesman in some ways even though I think he did miss his real calling. He didn't do the thing that would make him happy; he did the thing he thought he ought to do to make his life worthwhile. He went out and looked for happiness and you can't do that.

Are you changing your perception of the character as you're beginning to play him?

I haven't seen the play for years and before I read it in preparation for this, I had thought of him as a failure, suicidal, a depressive and although he is those things, there is such energy and joy and humour in him. He hasn't got much of a sense of humour but there is humour in what he does and says. His optimism at times beggars belief and that's glorious – and very funny and rather frightening.

Have you thought about the physicality of the character?

Anybody who studies the play knows that it was originally written for quite a small man. Dustin Hoffman was the image; someone of his size was what Miller had imagined. It wasn't walrus, it was shrimp to begin with and it was changed for Lee J Cobb. So I'm more of a Cobb man than a Hoffman! I see him as a big, ebullient, huggy man.

If, as an audience, we're going to take an idea of what Willy is away with us from your portrayal of the character what would you want it to be?

I can't possibly say yet. A man, as Linda says, who should be taken notice of, as anyone should, especially if they're in trouble. The thing about tragedy is that there's always something foolish at work, something that's just misguided. Everybody knows that you make mistakes in your life. It's just bigger and further reaching in its effect when you see it on stage. Basically, theatre and plays are about what it's like to be human, with its failings, and that that's okay because we're all, to varying degrees, like that.

So do you think that Miller wants to open our eyes to what people are like?

Of course. If there is a message, it's just 'be true to yourself'. Don't go off looking for some Utopia, some goal that may be accessible and attainable for other people. If it doesn't make you happy, don't go for it. You shouldn't really go looking for happiness. It's a transitory thing.

What I hope I will be avoiding is sentimentality. What I want to show in Willy is angry desperation but not self-pity – that would make him rather boring.

Willy as a Salesman

Key to Willy's downfall is his job as a salesman. It is frequently suggested that he was unsuited to his job and also that it has destroyed him. It is a profession that epitomises the 'American Dream' problem. The 'dream' suggests that if you work hard and are 'well liked' then you have the opportunity to be a 'success'. However, there are few who achieve the position of Dave Singleman, the mythical salesman who was able to sell from his room at the age of 83. This has led to Willy's destruction as he has to be a dreamer to be a salesman but is broken by his sense of failure when he cannot achieve his dreams. Two of Miller's uncles were salesmen and he describes them here:

'These men lived liked artists, like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether. But just often enough to keep the game going one of them makes it and swings to the moon on a thread of dreams unwinding out of himself.' *

In the final scene of the play, Charley blames Willy's demise on his job: "Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream boy. It comes with the territory."

Uncle Manny

Miller based the character of Willy on his Uncle Manny Newman who was, he writes 'a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment.' Manny was a salesman but Miller remembers him as always carrying a hammer or a screwdriver. He had moved his family to Brooklyn in the early twenties in to an area that at the time was largely empty of houses. His sons Buddy and Abby were models for Biff and Happy; Buddy was athletic, envied, and lacking the patience for study and Abby was an attractive womaniser with a tendency to turn his back on reality. Miller describes Manny here:

"... he was so absurd, so completely isolated from the ordinary laws of gravity, so elaborate in his fantastic inventions, and despite his ugliness so lyrically in love with fame and fortune and their inevitable descent on his family, that he possessed my imagination until I knew more or less precisely how he would react to any sign or word or idea... but always underneath was the river of his sadness" *

Manny's dream was to set up a family business – a business for the boys. He saw Miller and his older brother 'running neck and neck' with Buddy and Abby 'in some race that never stopped in his mind'. Miller recalls meeting him at a production of *All My Sons* where he understood that Manny felt that 'he had lost the contest between his sons and me'. Miller felt 'an enormous welling sorrow' for Manny despite his despair of him.

The character of Bernard could be understood to be Miller himself as when he visited the Newmans, he was made to feel inadequate: "I always had to expect some kind of insinuation of my entire life's probable failure, even before I was sixteen".*

* All quotes from *Timebends: A Life* by Arthur Miller (Methuen, 1987)

John Dove, director of the Lyceum production, shares some thoughts on *Death of a Salesman*.

What is it that draws you to *Death of a Salesman* as a piece of work?

In a nutshell, what I like about it and why I think it's so important is that it is dealing with, at the heart, the problem of a man, aged 60 and considered over the hill and not being allowed to work anymore and the impact of that on the family.

Miller's work has huge humanity. He tends to find the people who are vulnerable and who are weak and explain them to the rest of us in terms that are so clear, so strong that we can take time to find out what their world is about and understand it and sympathise with it enormously. It's an incredible achievement. To bring out the humanity of this family, this salesman who rides on a smile and a shoeshine. They're nobodies in a way, they're 'a dime a dozen' but he devotes a whole intense evening to them. A lot of it's funny and it's hugely varied but it's a fantastically humane insight into ordinary people, an ordinary family.

Would you call it a tragedy?

I don't know that I think of things in terms of a comedy or a tragedy anymore. There's a lot in it that's funny. It is a disastrous 24 hours but he throws both in. There's comedy and there's tragedy, and a huge amount of variety, of activity and movement in it. So not just a tragedy, no.

Do you think Willy could be seen as a tragic character in the classic sense?

He's called that isn't he? I'd have to do those plays to know what that means in definition, a tragic character. He's hugely written, incredibly detailed and vivid and very human and his life ends, in one sense, in a disaster. That's how I'd put it, rather than a tragic character.

It feels to me like a 'New York' play, and I know you've been working very carefully on the dialect. What relevance does it have for a modern Scottish audience?

I think its relevance is global. I think that in five years' time we're going to walk in to the most colossal demographic revolution where the baby boom, which started in 1944 and went on to 1962 is going to hit retirement age and an awful lot of people will be told they're over the hill, amplified by the youth culture that's going on at the moment. And oddly it's going to be the youth that are going to suffer most because they're going to have to try and support the aged who are going to number more and more. Willy Loman is a victim of that. He's just over the hill. He's out of the loop, he's out of touch.

Tell me about the style of the playwriting, particularly the flashback sequences. What do you see them as?

It's all written real. What happens is that Willy starts to have some kind of brain problem that trip switches in at the very beginning where he goes back in time to 1930 and sequentially goes through from the spring of '30, when his son was triumphant, to his son failing his exam and through to a terrible moment in a hotel in Boston in the summer of that year where Willy is discovered by his son with another woman. It was at that point really where Biff's life ended. So, the flashbacks are in sequence and very definitely part of a mental quest even though they are symptomatic of a mental illness, of exhaustion. A quest to find out what went wrong which he's in denial about.

What about Miller's dialogue? How are you directing your actors?

I don't honestly think that there's any secret about this. It's so strong and natural – the dialogue – that you just go for the moment, play it and bring out as much as you can of the levels of it. Quite a lot of it is being done with a slight whisper because it's described as a series of private conversations. But other than that we're just playing it as it stands in front of us. It's big enough to do that and more.

Themes

Reality and Illusion

The gap between reality and illusion is blurred in the play; in the structure, in Willy's mind and in the minds of the other characters. Willy is a dreamer and dreams of a success that it is not possible for him to achieve. He constantly exaggerates his success: ('I averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in the year of 1928') and is totally unrealistic about what Biff will be able to achieve too. Willy's inability to face the truth of his situation, that he is merely 'a dime a dozen', rubs off on his sons. Happy exaggerates how successful he is and Biff only realises in Oliver's office that he has been lying to himself for years about his position in the company: **"I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been. We've been talking in a dream for fifteen years. I was a shipping clerk."**

Biff is the only one who realises how this blurring of reality has destroyed them all. His aim becomes to make Willy and the family face the truth which they have been avoiding, the truth of who they are: **"The man don't know who we are!... We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house."**

The blurring of reality and illusion is carried through into the structure.

The American Dream

The American Dream is the capitalist belief that if you work hard enough you can be a success in America. However, the success that the dream aspires to is based on money and power. In Willy's mind it is also linked with being "well-liked". Biff realises that being true to yourself is a more important success.

Howard's treatment of Willy shows how destructive the pursuit of this dream can be. He lays Willy off when he can no longer generate money for the company which enrages Willy: **"You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit."**

Willy's adherence to the dream means that he buys status symbols on credit that he cannot afford to keep the payments up on. It is ironic then that Willy's funeral is on the day that the last mortgage payment is made.

Family

In the play, each generation has a responsibility to the other that they cannot fulfill. Biff and Happy are shaped by Willy's sins. In Happy's case, he is destined to perpetuate Willy's values and strive for material success, where Biff has been destroyed totally by Willy's betrayal of the family through the affair and the fact that Willy never discouraged him from stealing. On the other hand, Biff and Happy have the opportunity to save Willy by becoming "successful" in his eyes and supporting him and Linda in their old age. However they are not able to do this because of the way they have been raised. Biff is attempting to break this cycle of destruction in the family.

Nature and Physical Pursuits

In the play, the alternative to the corruption of urban capitalism is physical or natural pursuits. Biff talks about working with horses or cattle on ranches as his calling. Happy knows he can 'outbox, outrun and outlift anybody in that store' and Willy 'was a happy man with a batch of cement'. The 'Loman Brothers' would sell sporting goods and Willy should have gone to the wilds of Alaska. The suggestion is that the true nature of all three of these men would be in physical pursuits and in a rural setting. However, Willy's dependance on 'the dream' means they cannot follow their true calling.

Motifs

Motifs are elements (dialogue, symbols, situations, etc.) that keep reappearing throughout.

The jungle/woods

The woods or the jungle are a symbol of life, especially the risks of life. Uncle Ben is not afraid to take risks in life. He literally walked in to the jungle to achieve his dreams – he took control of his life. Willy is more fearful and is losing control of his life. He tells the boys that “the woods are burning” when he loses his job. But Ben tells Willy that “the jungle is dark” but that he must walk in to it – he is telling him he should take control by committing suicide.

Diamonds

Diamonds are a symbol of success. Ben find diamonds in the jungle and gives Willy a diamond watch fob. Willy has to pawn the watch fob to pay for a course for Biff – he is trying to pass the “success” on to Biff. He tries to do this again by committing suicide and leaving money to Biff; he must “fetch a diamond”. Willy has a vision of the success Biff can achieve with the insurance money – “I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand”.

The garden

The garden is a repeated motif that works as a symbol of Willy’s desire to create a good life for his family. Willy’s garden used to grow well before the apartment blocks were built. But now ‘The grass don’t grow anymore, you can’t raise a carrot in the backyard.’ Willy is trying to ‘grow’ something for his family i.e. he wants to become a success and support them. He used to be on his way to achieving that but he has ultimately failed. At the end of the play, one of his last acts in life is his futile attempt at planting seeds. Willy never achieves success in life, and he also never plants his garden.

Stockings

Stockings, for Willy, represent his affair with The Woman. Linda is seen several times mending stockings, while The Woman is given new stockings by Willy. In the same way, Willy gives love to The Woman which he should be giving to his wife. Willy always feels guilty when he sees Linda mending stockings and orders her not to do it. Stockings are also a symbol of material wealth and Willy feels like he cannot provide Linda with new stockings. She is more pragmatic however, and hides them instead of throwing them away – she understands that they cannot afford to be wasteful.

Falling / Down

The words **fall**, **falling** and **down** and the movements they suggest re-appear again and again and emphasise the fall of Willy and his family. Willy is described as ‘beaten down’ and he ‘lies back, exhausted’. Willy also ‘falls’ into bed with the woman and she shouts at him to ‘get up, get up’. When Biff leaves him in the hotel, Willy is on his knees. Biff is also going down – when he steals the pen from Oliver’s office he runs down 11 flights of stairs. Finally, when Willy has fallen down to his death, Linda lays flowers down at his grave.

Stealing

Biff and Happy both steal. Happy steals fiancées and Biff steals a football, basketballs, lumber and cement, a suit, a fountain pen and many other things not mentioned. Their stealing can be seen to represent the way their true identities have been stolen by lying and the pursuit of an unachievable dream

Brand Names

The use of brand names helps to heighten the realism of the play – Chevrolet, Simonize, Hastings, Studebaker. However, these “status symbols” also represent the material success that Willy strives for and how it is ultimately empty. He is so proud of the Chevy as “the greatest car ever built” but when it goes wrong he says “they ought to prohibit the manufacturer of that car”. He is duped by advertising in to thinking that owning these things equates to success.

Style, Structure and Language

In 1947 Miller saw *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, directed by Elia Kazan and designed by Joe Mielziner (the team that was to produce *Death of a Salesman* in 1949). He was impressed at how the non-realistic elements blended with the realistic ones. This production helped him to create a style for *Death of a Salesman* that encompassed both REALISM and EXPRESSIONISM in such a way as to truly represent Willy, his dilemma and also his state of mind.

REALISM

Realism was an artistic movement that began in 19th century France. The realists sought to accurately portray everyday characters, situations and dilemmas. Realist drama was a careful observation of human characteristics and the language attempted to be as close as possible to natural conversation. Contemporary costuming and three – dimensional sets were used so as to create a 'lifelike' stage picture. The plays were usually critiques of social problems.

Famous realist dramatists are: Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw.

EXPRESSIONISM

A reaction to Realism, the Expressionist movement began in the early 1900s. Expressionist dramatists were concerned with presenting the inner psychological reality of a character, a subjective vision of the world as opposed to an objective representation as Realism wanted to do. They were, as American Expressionist playwright Elmer Rice claimed, "... getting beneath reality, displaying more than reality, replacing reality with something more expressive."

They threw out dramatic convention – plot, structure and characterisation were abandoned, dialogue became poetic and lighting was used to create atmosphere. Expressionism was successful mainly in Germany and Scandinavia, but American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill and Thornton Wilder were also influenced by Expressionism.

Miller was interested in Expressionism but didn't want to abandon the conventions of realism. He used, like O'Neill, a dramatic form that combined THE SUBJECTIVITY OF EXPRESSIONISM with the ILLUSION OF OBJECTIVITY AFFORDED BY REALISM.

Flashbacks / Daydreams

In *Death of a Salesman*, this style is most obvious in the use of 'flashbacks' or 'dream sequences'.

At the beginning of the play, Miller first of all provides an anchor in reality. He presents a series of events that are accepted by the audience as the objective reality of the play i.e. those sections of the play that take place in the present. We understand them as objective reality because we see various different characters' perceptions of the events – for example, Willy's breakdown is discussed by the boys and Linda, Jenny the secretary talks to Bernard before Willy enters.

However, the play also shows the internal turmoil and psychological breakdown that Willy is experiencing by presenting what is going on in Willy's head. Sometimes this takes the form of the acting out of Willy's past experiences, sometimes in the appearance of Ben or The Woman in Willy's 'present'.

This style means that while the audience can share the nightmare experience of Willy's breakdown with him, we never lose touch with the real events even though Willy perceives reality in a distorted way.

Miller described Willy as 'literally at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present'. He did not see Willy's internal sequences as 'flashbacks'.

"There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present... because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between now and then." *Arthur Miller*

Style, Structure and Language

Tragedy

There is much discussion of whether *Death of a Salesman* can be considered a tragedy. 'Tragedy' as a form was defined by the Greek playwright Aristotle in 330 BCE. He defined a tragic character as being:

A person of noble stature who has a fatal flaw (often arrogance or over-confidence) that leads to his or her downfall. The suffering is not wholly deserved and through that suffering, the character gains some self-awareness that turns his or her defeat into a sort of triumph. The play should not leave the audience feeling depressed but rather with a sense of compassion and awe.

If we go by this definition, Willy fulfils most of the qualifications – except that he is not a man of high status. Miller answered this criticism by saying that

“I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were... 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”.

Arthur Miller, *Tragedy and the Common Man*, New York Times 27 Feb 1949

Certainly, the play follows much of the structure of a tragedy as Willy is inexorably drawn to his destruction by his inability to see the truth (his 'fatal flaw').

Language

The use of language in *Death of a Salesman* is entirely Realistic. Miller's dialogue is carefully constructed to follow the exact speech patterns of ordinary New Yorkers. It is very dense and fast, with repetitions, hesitations, and contradictions. The characters often use slang and clichés such as:

**“Biff is a lazy bum” “You make mountains out of molehills” “I’m a dime a dozen”
“You’re a pal” “He’s gonna flunk you” “I’m takin’ one play for Pop”**

But the impression of realism is created through careful construction.

“It is necessary to employ the artificial in order to arrive at the real. More than one actor has told me that it is surprisingly difficult to memorize their dialogue. The speeches sound like real, almost reported talk when in fact they are intensely composed, compressed into a sequential inevitability that seems natural but isn't.”

Arthur Miller, *Notes on Realism, Echoes Down the Corridor* (Methuen, 2000)



Mildred Dunnock, Lee J Cobb, Arthur Kennedy, and Cameron Mitchell on the original set of *Death of a Salesman* (Fred Fehl photograph, Theatre Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin)



Set Design

At the beginning of the *Death of a Salesman* text, Miller wrote a very careful description of the set for his play. In it he describes practical concerns:

Before us is the Salesman's house...we see a solid vault of apartment houses... the kitchen at centre... a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator etc.

He also makes very clear the style of the setting:

An air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality.

Miller's stage directions give a clear key to the play's style, that it uses elements of both REALISM and EXPRESSIONISM simultaneously.

Miller's directions are a description of the set for the original Broadway production in 1949. Originally he had imagined the set as being three simple black platforms to allow for fluid scene changes. However, designer Joe Mielziner took the design much further and incorporated elements that he thought were key to the play:

The House:

Mielziner realised the importance of emphasising the BUILDING, due to the play's constant emphasis on "windows and bricks" and on Willy's aspiration to owning the house. The fact it was now blocked in by other buildings, where once there had been space seemed vital to Mielziner.

"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... played on a forestage?" *Joe Mielziner*

The fluidity between past and present:

Mielziner used lighting, projections and backdrops to show the present (with the house surrounded by tower blocks) and the past (with the house surrounded by open space and trees) almost as two separate locations. But because he used lighting rather than set changes, the scenes could change much faster and without the curtain being lowered or the actors leaving the stage. This helped the audience understand Miller's idea of Willy living in the past and the present at the same time.

Class:

Although the set and props were very minimal, Mielziner was careful to use objects that were very obviously lower middle class. They were battered as if the Lomans actually owned and used them. The house too was easily recognisable as a style of house in New York at the time.

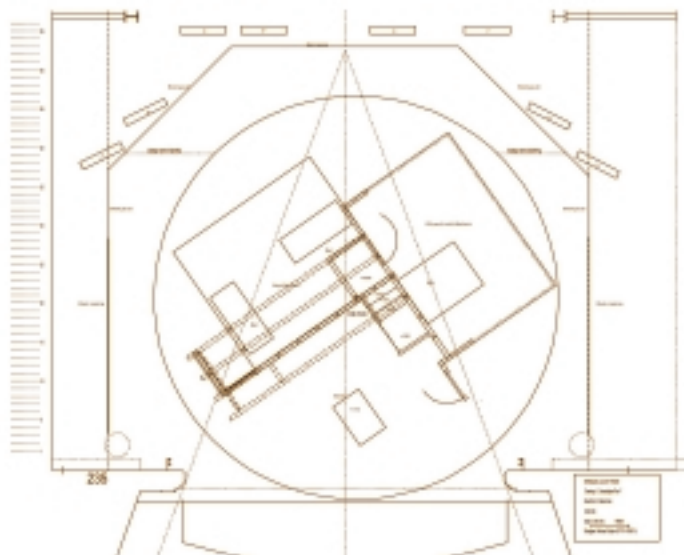
Miller was delighted: "His set, was an emblem of Willy's intense longing for the promises of the past, with which indeed the present state of his mind is always conflicting, and it was thus both a lyrical design and a dramatic one..." *Miller*

Set Design



Michael Taylor, designer of the Lyceum production, describes his set design:

“The set puts Willy Loman’s house on a revolve so that the kitchen and bedrooms can each in turn be brought into focus. Over it are the rafters of the kind of 19th century wooden Brooklyn house that Arthur Miller may have had in mind. The rafters tie the three rooms together visually, but also they suggest a farmhouse rather than a house in a city street, and this echoes the kind of pioneering outdoor lifestyle the Loman men dream of. The design was dictated by the architecture of the Lyceum. It’s an intimate play so we keep the actors right downstage. The Lyceum stage is 18 metres deep but all the acting is in the front 4 metres, plus an extension coming out into the auditorium. Also, if actors go to the edges of the Lyceum stage there will be parts of the audience who cannot see them: that’s why we need to use a revolve to bring each scene into the middle, rather than just laying out the rooms across the stage as the original production did. Once you’ve got a whole revolving house that makes other decisions for you: you can’t leave the rooms bare, so they need furniture and props appropriate for the class and date.”



Drama Exercises around the play

In pairs:

Improvise these scenarios

- Linda visits the Doctor for advice about Willy's deteriorating state
 - Biff is going for an interview with the Bank Manager to get a loan to start the 'Loman Brothers' business.
 - Willy has decided to accept Charley's offer of a job. It is his first day.
 - After Willy's death, the boys are clearing out some of his things and talking about him.
-

In a group of four or more:

- Using tableaux, create images of Willy's life as if they were photographs in an album. A tableau is a still or frozen image which is created by all the members of the group, each representing a character.
 - Choose first of all at least two happy occasions.
 - Then choose at least two occasions that he would rather forget.
 - Decide on a caption for each 'photograph' and present them in chronological order.
-

Extension

- Pick one of these photographs.
 - Each member of your group should play one of the characters from this photograph.
 - Tell the story of what happened on this occasion to the rest of the group. Imagine the character is looking at the photograph and remembering.
 - Each character should make sure they give a very personal perspective.
-

In the play, Biff tells the story of what happened in Bill Oliver's office.

- Act this scene out with the characters of Biff, Oliver, a secretary and another caller.
 - As Biff is about to steal the fountain pen, stop the scene.
 - Everyone should suggest what Biff is thinking at this moment.
 - Now 'hot seat' Biff i.e. the character sits in the centre of the group, is asked questions and must answer them in character.
-

As a class:

- Set up an inquest in to Willy's death. Set up the room as a court room.
- Cast members of the class as: lawyers, a judge, witnesses (i.e. characters from the play), journalists, representatives of the insurance company, a psychologist.
- The lawyers should interrogate the witnesses about what happened to Willy.
- Remember, if it is proven that Willy committed suicide, the insurance company won't pay out...

Performance Analysis

Some questions to help you write a review or evaluation of the Lyceum's production of *Death of a Salesman*.

- Briefly, what is the plot of *Death of a Salesman*?
- Describe the set. Was it true to the period that the play is set in? What kind of spaces did it represent? Was it Realist or Expressionist (or a blend)? What atmosphere did it give the production?
- Think about the props that were used. Were they realistic to the time period the play is set in? What did they tell you about the class of the family?
- What did the costumes tell you about the characters? For example, look at the differences between the dresses of Linda and The Woman.
- Describe Paul Jesson who plays Willy. Do you think he physically matched the character of Willy? How did he play the character (fast, angry, defeated etc?) What insight did his performance give to the character of Willy?
- Think about at least one of the other performances that you thought were strong. What was it about the actor's performance that you enjoyed? What did it tell you about their character? How did their performance enhance your understanding of the character of Willy?
- Was the lighting used to create atmosphere in any of the scenes? Do you think this atmosphere was appropriate to the themes of the play?
- What was the music like? What kind of atmosphere did it create? Compare this with Miller's original stage directions about music.
- Overall, what themes do you think the director was most interested in drawing out? How well do you think he did this?
- What did the production leave you feeling at the end?
- How did the audience react when watching the play? What were any comments you heard afterwards?

It would be useful to gather reviews from the newspapers to compare them with your own.

If you want to send us your reviews or evaluations, we'd like to read them.

Some questions for the study of *Death of a Salesman*

Is *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy and Willy Loman a tragic hero, or is his death merely the pathetic demise of a small man?

Who is to blame for Willy's destruction?

Why won't Willy take the job Charley offers him?

Why is Biff so angry about the incident in Boston?

Why does Biff steal? What effect does Willy have on his stealing?

In what ways is Happy like his father? How are they different?

Contrast Biff and Happy. How far do you consider they are victims of their father's indoctrination?

Is the character of Linda the same in reality and in Willy's memories of her? What are the differences and why are they there?

What does Willy's brother, Ben stand for in *Death of a Salesman*?

Define "The American Dream." In what way does *Death of a Salesman* point out the hopelessness of chasing this dream? Are there any rewards?

Biff claims that "we never told the truth for ten minutes in this house." Do you agree or disagree?

What does *Death of a Salesman* teach us about the treatment of the older generation in society today?

"Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground." Was Willy talking just about planting a garden?

Trace one of the motifs throughout the play and explain how and why Miller has used it.

How does the structure of the play mirror Willy's blurring of illusion and reality?

How does Miller use the style and structure of the play to give us an insight in to Willy's deteriorating psychological state?

The dialogue of the play relies heavily on common speech, full of cliches and slang. Does the language detract from or enhance the themes?

How does this play use the styles of Realism and Expressionism? To what effect?

Royal Lyceum Theatre Company

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