



Death of a Salesman

by John Aldous, DTC Intern

Among the short list of dramas that could be considered the Great American play, *Death of a Salesman* has taken root at the top of the list, along with the likes of *Our Town*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In the sixty years since it first opened, the show has firmly entered the national consciousness, becoming a staple of high school English classrooms and theaters across the country.

Opening on Broadway in 1949, the show instantly became a smash hit, making household names of both Arthur Miller, the play's author, and Willy Loman, the play's titular salesman. Directed by Elia Kazan

and starring Lee J. Cobb, the show went on to run for 742 performances, winning the Tony Award for Best Play, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the New York Drama Circle Critics' Award, becoming the first show to win all three.

Before the massive success of *Salesman*, Arthur Miller had already established a reputation as a socially-conscious dramatist in the tradition of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. Originally a journalism student at the University of Michigan, he eventually switched his major to English before graduating in 1938. Upon graduating, he joined the Federal Theatre Project, a branch of the New Deal's WPA, making \$22.77 a week writing plays. When the FTP was shut down for alleged Communist sympathies, Miller made his way writing radio plays. In 1944 he made his Broadway debut with *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, and in 1947 he earned a Tony Award for his play *All My Sons*. But it was in 1949 with *Salesman* that Miller launched himself into the pantheon of the great American dramatists. As Brooks Atkinson stated in his original review of the show for *The New York Times*, "Two seasons ago Mr. Miller's *All My Sons* looked like the work of an honest and able playwright. In comparison with the new drama, that seems like a contrived play now. For *Death of a Salesman* has the flow and spontaneity of a suburban epic that may not be intended as poetry but becomes poetry in spite of itself because Mr. Miller has drawn it out of so many intangible sources."

Those intangible sources from which Miller drew the play include the complexities of the life of the common American man and the grandeur of Greek tragedy. In *Salesman*, Miller democratizes the very notion of tragedy in an unapologetically American way. Where Aristotle, in his seminal characterization, defines tragedy as the fall of a great man, Miller presents the tragic fall of the ordinary man. Even the salesman's name, Willy Loman, condemns him to a life of commonness, forever a "low man" in direct opposition to the great kings and rulers of the ancient Greek tragedies. And it is Willy's wish of becoming great, of achieving the elusive American Dream, that ultimately leads to his downfall. His tragic flaw, what Aristotle would call his hamartia, is self-delusion and lack of self-awareness. Through time, Willy Loman has become the quintessential American tragic hero, an unfortunate byproduct of the darker side of the American Dream.

Though this seems easy to comprehend in today's America, some found the pessimistic underbelly of Miller's view of the American Dream hard to take in the 1950's, a time when the American Dream seemed to thrive among the conspicuous consumption of suburban America. When Columbia Pictures made the play into a film

in 1951, they refused to give Lee J. Cobb the opportunity to reprise his lauded performance as Willy Loman, largely due to Cobb's left-wing politics and support of liberal causes. Instead, they opted for Fredric March, a two-time Best Actor Oscar winner for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Continually hounded by the House Un-American Activities Committee and threatened with the blacklist, Cobb eventually testified before the HUAC and named twenty people as former Communists. Both Miller and Kazan, the original director of *Salesman*, were also called to testify before HUAC. In his testimony, Kazan named eight members of the Group Theatre, including the playwrights Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman. Miller's experience with HUAC led to his writing of *The Crucible*, his allegorical retelling of the Salem Witch Trials, which opened on Broadway in 1953.

Before the release of the film of *Salesman*, Miller threatened to sue the studio over a short preface film intended to be shown before screenings, titled *Career of a Salesman*. Afraid that Miller's play would be construed as anti-American, the producers shot the short film in order to portray the American salesman in a more optimistic light. Seeing the short film as a direct affront to his work, Miller asked the producers, "Why the hell did you make the picture if you're so ashamed of it? Why should anybody not get up and walk out of the theatre if *Death of a Salesman* is so outmoded and pointless?" In the end, the producers excised the short film. However, the same feelings that first led the producers to film the intro led to the eventual failure of the screen transfer. While a critical success, few Americans wished to view a film largely seen as an attack on the American way of life in the era of Truman and Eisenhower. Miller himself was not much a fan of the film either, believing Hungarian-born director Laszlo Benedek to have butchered the material. Miller claimed the actors all sounded like "Willy Loman with a diploma, fat with their successes." To Miller, the film portrayed Willy as a lunatic rather than a victim, perhaps another effect of the political climate of the 1950's.

However, in the years since, the play has seen several successful reincarnations, having been produced on every continent except for Antarctica. Since its premiere, there has never been a time when the play hasn't been performed somewhere in the world. The play has been revived three times on Broadway: in 1975 with George C. Scott as Willy Loman, in 1984 with Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff, and in 1999 with Brian Dennehy directed by Robert Falls. The productions starring Hoffman and Dennehy were both filmed for television, as was a 1966 production starring Lee J. Cobb, allowing Cobb's originating performance to be recorded for posterity, something Columbia Pictures denied him 15 years before.

In 1983, at a time when his work had already become a classic of American drama, Miller went to Beijing to direct a Chinese production of the play. Miller found himself delighted with actor Ying Ruocheng's performance as Willy, but he became displeased with the rest of the company. He did not feel as if they had discovered the poetic vision of the play, telling them, "The one red line connecting everyone in the play was a love for Willy; not admiration necessarily, but a kind of visceral recognition that in his fumbling and often ridiculous way he is trying to lift up a belief in immense redeeming possibilities. Willy is the walking believer, the bearer of a flame whose going-out would leave us flat."

And it has always been Willy that drives the heart of the play. After all, the play, like the plays of Tennessee Williams, utilized a subjective expressionism, then a new device among American drama and a direct departure from the well-made plays of Ibsen and Shaw which informed Miller's earlier plays. The play unapologetically portrays Willy's subjective point-of-view, both his present and his past, often blurring the line between the two in way that had not been seen on large scale in American drama. In 1949, there were tales of men, hardened by the Depression and WWII, breaking into tears at the end of the play. Recounting his experience playing Willy at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Brian Dennehy states, "I'd come out of the Goodman, and there'd be these guys waiting - successful guys, beautifully dressed, gray hair, tears streaming down their faces, their wives

standing behind them, really worried because they've never seen the guy like this before. I can't tell you how many times I heard, 'That's my father you've put up there. Or my uncle.'

As the acclaimed novelist and essayist Joyce Carol Oates puts it, "Willy Loman is all of us. Or, rather, we are Willy Loman, particularly those of us who are writers, poets, dreamers; the yearning soul 'way out there in the blue.' Dreaming is required of us, even if our dreams are very possibly self-willed delusions." And it is for this very reason that, for better or for worse, in the sixty years since Lee J. Cobb first uttered the words "I am not a dime a dozen!" on the Broadway stage, Willy Loman has become the quintessential American, an American, like all, to whom attention must be paid. □