insights
a study guide to the utah shakespeare festival

death of a salesman
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

Insights is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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Death of a Salesman

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Synopsis: *Death of a Salesman*

The story of *Death of a Salesman* is told partly through the mind and memory of Willy Loman, the protagonist. The times of the play’s action fluctuate between 1942 and 1928, making a simple narration of plot impossible and probably not very meaningful, thus a summary of the action, not necessarily in the order of the play, is much more helpful:

Willy Loman has been a traveling salesman for thirty-four years, and he likes to think of himself as being vital to the New England territory he works. He constantly compares himself to Dave Singleton, a salesman who would go into a town, pick up a phone, and place many orders without ever leaving his hotel room. When Dave died, people from all over the country came to his funeral.

But, as the play opens, Willy has just come back home after having left for New England that morning. He tells his wife, Linda, that he just can’t seem to keep his mind on driving anymore. He asks about his son, Biff, who has just come home for a visit after being away for a long time. Willy thinks about Biff when Biff was a senior in high school some fourteen years ago. Biff was playing in a great football game, and people were coming from all over the country to offer him scholarships. But then something happened to Biff. He never fulfilled the potential Willy felt he had. Later, Willy reveals through his disjointed memories that Biff had caught him with another woman in his motel room in Boston. After this episode, Biff seemed to hold a grudge against his father and could never again bring himself to trust him.

Now, after some fourteen years of wandering and working odd jobs, Biff returns home. He and his brother, Happy, decide to ask Bill Oliver, whom Biff used to work for, for a loan of $10,000 to begin a business of their own. The boys tell Willy about their plans, and Willy thinks that together the two could absolutely conquer the world. He goes on to explain that the important thing in life is to be well-liked.

The next day, Willy is to meet the boys for dinner in a restaurant. He is so pleased to have his boys with him that he decides to ask his boss for an office job in New York City, to get him off the road. But his boss tells him there is no room, and then fires him instead. Thus, suddenly, Willy’s day has reversed, and he has to go to an old friend, Charley, to borrow enough money to pay his insurance premium. We then find out that Willy has been borrowing fifty dollars a week from Charley for quite some time, and then pretending that this amount is his salary.

Trying to explain that he has been living an illusion, Biff meets Happy in the restaurant early, and claims he wants to make everyone (especially Willy) understand Biff is not the man Willy thinks he is. But when Willy arrives, he tells the boys that he has been fired and he refuses to listen to Biff’s story. Willy simply pretends that Biff has another appointment the following day. Willy gets furious and is about to make a scene. Suddenly, when Willy goes to the bathroom, Biff, out of frustration, leaves the restaurant. Happy, who has picked up two girls, follows him and leaves Willy alone.

Later that night, Biff comes home and finds Willy out in the backyard, apparently losing his wits planting seeds and talking to his brother, Ben, who has been dead for nine months. Biff explains to Willy that it would be best if they break with each other and never see one another again. He tries once again to explain that he is no leader of men and that he is a common person. But Willy refuses to believe him and tells Biff once again how great he could be. He then resolves on suicide, which he has hinted at before, because with $20,000 in insurance benefits, Biff could be such a magnificent person. Thus, Willy commits suicide. But he dies a forgotten man, and nobody but his family attends the funeral.
**Characters: Death of a Salesman**

WILLY LOMAN: a traveling salesman, father to Biff and Happy, who has worked for the Wagner firm for thirty-four years; now sixty-one years old and taken off salary and back on straight commission

LINDA LOMAN: Willy's wife, who loves him in spite of all his difficulties

BIFF LOMAN: oldest son of Willy and Linda, who was once a star football player in high school, but who for the last fourteen years has been “unable to find himself,” just returned home from somewhere in the West

HAPPY LOMAN: younger son of Willy and Linda, who works in a department store and has his own apartment in another section of town

CHARLEY: a life-long acquaintance of the Lomans who has loaned Willy money every month since Willy was put on straight commission

BERNARD: Charley's son and a very successful lawyer, once a childhood friend of Biff's

BEN: Willy's deceased brother who left home very early and became tremendously wealthy, appears only in Willy's daydreams or illusions

HOWARD WAGNER: Willy's boss, who put him on straight commission and eventually fires him, the son of the former owner of the Wagner Company

MISS FRANCES: A woman in Boston, with whom Willy has an affair

LETTA AND MISS FORSYTHE: Two girls that Happy picks up in a restaurant

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**About the Playwright: Arthur Miller**

*From Insights 1991*

Ever since he won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award in 1947 for his second-produced play, All My Sons, Arthur Miller has been counted one of the most gifted playwrights on the American scene. The promise he showed then was more than fulfilled two years later with his overwhelming American tragedy, Death of a Salesman—which made a clean sweep in 1949 by winning both another New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

Miller was born in New York City in 1915. The playwright-to-be was a high school football hero in Brooklyn (an experience he later incorporated into Death of a Salesman). When he graduated from high school during the depression of the early 1930s, he worked for two years at $15 a week in an auto parts warehouse to earn enough money to go to college. He entered the University of Michigan and at various times earned money as a truck-driver, waiter, and crewman on a tanker. For years after he attained play-writing fame and fortune he liked to spend a few weeks each year working in a factory because, by “standing eight hours a day at a machine in one place, you know what it's about.”

He soon began writing radio scripts, which brought him to the attention of Hollywood, where he was assigned to write several movies, among them the Academy Award winning How Green Was My Valley and The Story of G.I. Joe.

In 1944, Miller won a Theatre Guild prize of $1,250 awarded for the most promising unproduced playwright, and 1945 brought his first Broadway production, a play called The Man Who Had All the Luck, which had little luck, running barely a week. He was inevitably sought out again for movie writing in Hollywood, but he refused this time.

In 1956, Miller made international headlines when he and his first wife were divorced and he married Marilyn Monroe, the sex-goddess symbol of her time. It is significant that during this
marriage Miller wrote no plays, but did overcome his reluctance to write for films by turning out The Misfits, especially tailored as a screen-starring vehicle for Monroe.

Again Miller's private life made international headlines when he and Monroe were divorced, barely a year before she startled the world with her suicide. He returned to writing for the stage in 1964 with After the Fall, a play with so many parallels with his own life that it gained international attention.

Death of a Salesman was made into a notable television movie by CBS early in 1966, starring Lee J. Cobb (reprising his original Broadway role) in what is often referred to as “the ultimate Willy Loman” interpretation. In ensuing years, Miller wrote a book of short stories and wrote, directed, and produced the film The Reason Why, a treatise against war and violence.

In the fall of 1973, Miller was appointed professor-of-theatre-in-residence at the University of Michigan. Future years included some new works, revivals of older plays, and updates of previous scripts. In 1980,

Miller's made-for-television play, Playing for Time, was aired. The first Broadway production of A View from the Bridge as a full-length play opened on Broadway in 1983 to mixed critical responses. On March 29, 1984, a revival of Death of a Salesman, starring Dustin Hoffman, opened on Broadway to rave reviews, becoming one of the hit plays of the season.

Major Works
1945: The Man Who Had All the Luck
1947: All My Sons
1949: Death of a Salesman
1950: An Enemy of the People
1953: The Crucible
1955: A Memory of Two Mondays, A View from the Bridge
1960: The Misfits, the movie starring Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe.
1964: After the Fall
1964: Incident at Vichy
1968: The Price
1972: The Creation of the World and Other Business
1973: The American Clock
1980: Playing For Time, a television play.
1987: I Can't Remember Anything and Clara, two one-act plays performed under the collective title, Danger: Memory!
Death of a Salesman: A Landmark Date in Theatre
By Jerry L. Crawford
From Insights, 1991

February 10, 1949: a landmark date in the history of the American theatre. Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller opened on Broadway. It won the Drama Critic Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Later an international success, the play has been translated into nearly every language and produced in nearly every country on the globe. A universality in character, language, and theme make the play continually pertinent and valued. It ranks with Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night, Thornton Wilder’s Our Town, and Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie as true “classics” from the arena of American plays. Additionally, each of these plays focuses upon the family and the relationship of parents and children.

The central character (protagonist) role of Willy Loman has joined the ranks of major acting challenges. Similar to wanting to play Hamlet or Oedipus, most good actors want to perform Willy Loman. Originally portrayed by the late Lee J. Cobb, the gallery of great actors in the role of Willy Loman include, among others, Thomas Mitchell, Frederic March, Hume Cronyn, George C. Scott, and, most recently, Dustin Hoffman. Remarkably, one of the reasons Willy attracts actors is not the tragic dimension of the role, but the comic dimension. Willy is often laughable in his inconsistencies; in fact, he is so consistently inconsistent, he is comic. That complexity of persona also makes Willy at once likeable and unlikeable. His values are at best, corrupt; yet, his passion for life, family, and his dreams are pure. He is indeed common, yet somehow magnificent. All great actors will always seek this role as a crowning career challenge.

Death of a Salesman successfully weaves time present and time past. Willy Loman naively capitulates to the worship of success, to the substitution of likeable personality in place of solid accomplishment.

However, it is a mistake to view the play as social criticism. In fact, it is a great character drama, so well drawn from life that many people, from every walk of life, identify themselves or their relatives with Willy and have been touched by his common, yet grand, passion of recapturing the lost love between him and his eldest son, Biff. Seen as the “tragedy of a common man,” as Miller labeled the form of the play, few people can remain unmoved by Willy’s fight for his family, carrying on a struggle for sales long after he has lost his skills and his welcome, holding desperately to an impossible dream for his son.

At the least, Willy is tragically impassioned as a father. Perhaps he is a suburban King Lear, with sons rather than daughters breaking his heart. With his reliable, loving, but helpless wife (Linda) by his side, haunted by a ghost in the form of an uncle (Ben), who promised success, and supported by an ordinary, practical neighbor and friend (Charley), Willy engages in an intense conflict with his son and dies in order to realize his hopes for Biff, refusing to concede defeat. Since he gave his life after discovering his own responsibility for Biff’s failures, perhaps Willy enables himself, or, as critic John Gassner once noted, Willy’s final act is sort of an expiation Willy dies as a father, not as a salesman. Willy is a man who might easily have been dismissed as a cheat and a fool; regardless, he transfigures himself and is endowed with some of the magnitude expected in tragedy, be it “classical” or “modern” (“common”).

There may be a bit of Willy in all our fathers, a bit of Biff in all our sons.
Death of a Salesman:
A Tragedy of a Common Man
From Midsummer Magazine, 1991

Oedipus, Macbeth, Lear, Hamlet, Othello or Willy Loman. Must classic tragedy embrace just the Aristotelian “fall of princes,” or may it also include the modern common man? Playwright Arthur Miller believes that the common man can be a center of dramatic interest, and he demonstrated this belief in Death of a Salesman, a tragedy about a very common common-man: a salesman from Brooklyn.

Winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for 1949, Death of a Salesman combines realism and surrealism in the story of a small man swallowed up in a world of sham and shoddy values. Willy Loman is bewildered, well-intentioned, and unsuccessful: “Suddenly I realize I’m going sixty miles an hour, and I don’t remember the last five minutes.”

His sons are upset by his peculiar behavior and his hallucinatory conversations with the figures from a happier past, and they worry about the effect on their compassionate mother, who loves her husband and recognizes that his actions stem from the brutal difference between fact and fancy.

This story of a common man, victimized by his own fake values and those of modern America, caught the imagination of theatre audiences immediately. Months prior to its premier Feb. 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theatre on Broadway, the word was out and the public was storming the box office. This time the public was right. Critics acclaimed Death of a Salesman as “a great play of our day,” and lavished upon it such accolades as “superb,” “rich,” and “memorable.” John Chapman’s review called it “a very fine work in the American Theatre, with script, staging, setting, and acting all in perfect combination.” John Glassner proclaimed the play “one of the most powerful and moving plays of our time, representing a culmination of American playwrights’ efforts to create a significant American drama.” (Arthur Miller, incidentally, was barred from an after-opening-night supper held on the set. The waiters didn’t recognize him.)

Death of a Salesman was forceful enough to warrant superlatives and the honors it received, but what a year on Broadway! The 1949 competition was fierce. Opening that season were The Madwoman of Challiot, Anne of a Thousand Days, Summer and Smoke, South Pacific, a revival of Private Lives, Light Up the Sky, and Kiss Me Kate. Lee J. Cobb was the original Willy Loman. Dustin Hoffman, long an admirer of the play, played the leading role in a greatly acclaimed production in 1984.

So, we must ask what is behind the honors. If this modern story is destined to challenge classic tragedy, or perhaps to take its place alongside, we must look behind the glitz and glitter to find a message.

If for instance, as Miller suggests in his autobiography, Timebends, the struggle in Death of a Salesman was simply between father and son for recognition and forgiveness, it would diminish in importance.

However, he continues, when the struggle extends itself out of the particular family circle and into the lives of each of us, it broaches the questions that trouble all of us: social status, social honor and recognition, success. When we are brought to feel what Willy Loman feels, the play expands its vision and moves from the specific toward the fate of man. We become Willy Loman, and his struggle becomes our struggle.

In an essay titled “The Family in Modern Drama,” Miller expands this concept: “We
are all part of one another, all responsible to one another. The responsibility originates on the simplest level, our immediate kin. But this vital attachment is germinal and with the maturing of the person extends beyond its initial source.”

The family is pivotal, he suggests, but beyond the immediate family is the family of mankind. Connection with others, the need to feel others as a part of ourselves and ourselves as a part of them is an impulse native to all of us. We call people without this connectedness “sick.” Yet we see this prime impulse constantly being impeded and crippled. Miller’s work dramatizes and depicts the forces that induce these impediments.

“All plays we call great,” he continues, “let alone all those we call serious, are ultimately involved with some aspect of a single problem: how may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome if he is to find safety, love, ease of soul, identity, and honor?”

Miller repeatedly searches in his writing for answers to these questions. In Situation Normal, Watson, a soldier training to be an officer is afraid his backwardness in mathematics may lead to his rejection for commission as an officer, which would seem to him like a betrayal of his company companions, to whom he has become deeply attached.

This expression of a bond among “brother” combatants in the army is echoed in All My Sons, the story of a manufacturer whose defective airplane parts cause the death of his son and other aviators in wartime. The “sinner” defends his malfeasance as being perpetrated on behalf of his family, and is brought to understand that to his son, Chris, there is indeed something bigger than the family: there is the family of mankind.

Proctor, in The Crucible, chooses to die rather than live and besmirch his “name,” and in The Price, one son gives up opportunities which might have led to success equal to that of his brother, and the son has done this on behalf of a father who was hardly worth the sacrifice.

“What is the matter with you people?” asks a character in The Victor. “Nothing in the world you believe, nothing you respect. How can you live? You think that’s the smart thing . . . that’s so hard what you’re doing. Let me give you a piece of advice. It’s not that you can’t believe nothing, that’s not so hard, it’s that you’ve still got to believe it. That’s hard. And if you can’t do that, my friend, you’re a dead man.”

Miller’s work has variety but also an essential, overriding unity. Willy Loman speaks not of “success,” so much as of being “well liked.” He has given up a small inclination toward carpentry in order to become a salesman because it promises a brighter future of ease and affluence, and by turning away from himself he has become an utterly confused person. He dreams the American legend: the brother who walked into the jungle and came out of it rich. “William when I walked into the jungle I was 17. When I walked out I was 21. And . . . I was rich.” Willy sees everything in this light: the good will of the boss, the business contact, glad-handing, being impressive. He can no longer recognize his own reality, or why he has failed. “Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there’s nobody to live in it.”

Thus he wreaks havoc on his own life and that of his family. Unaware of what warped his mind and behavior, he commits suicide in the conviction that a legacy of $20,000 is all that is needed to save his beloved but also damaged offspring all that is standing between them and success.

When Miller was asked in what way his plays were related to the events of his life, he replied that in a sense all his plays were autobiographical. He was born in Manhattan in
1915, middle class and Jewish. His grades were not high, and he apparently didn’t read a serious book before he was seventeen. Finally gaining entrance to the University of Michigan, he wrote a play which won several small prizes, and he realized he could indeed become a playwright.

Miller was married to Marilyn Monroe from 1956 to 1961. He wrote about her in Timebends: “Comics on the whole are deeper, are somehow closer to the crud of life and suffer more than do the tragedians, who are at least accorded professional credit for seriousness as people.”

He also tells us in Timebends about Manny Newman, his uncle, who was a salesman. Manny greeted the Broadway opening of All My Sons with the information that “Buddy (Manny’s son) is doing very well.”

“I thought I knew what he was thinking,” Miller writes, “that he had lost the contest in his mind between his sons and me. There in the lobby I still felt some of the boyhood need of his recognition. At the same time I knew that in reality he was not much more than a bragging and often vulgar little drummer. I had not the slightest idea of writing about a salesman then, but that was the genesis. I suppose, however, that if Willy Loman could be taken apart, five or six salesmen I have met would be found in him.”

Miller has captured the tragedy of the American common man. He knows our lower middle class as few others do, and Willy Loman is his supreme character creation. Loman is a pathetic fool, but he is totally recognizable to laugh at, to commiserate with, or to deplore. At his funeral a friend points out, “Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.”
The perennial popularity and respect given to Death of a Salesman are usually and justifiably attributed to the power of the play’s characters and emotive theatricality. Nonetheless, a close look at the dramatic structure at work in the play reveals how expertly Arthur Miller crafted his remarkable classic of the American theatre. This scrutiny can be assisted by the play-writing acronym PASTO, referring to Preparation, Attack, Struggle, Turn, and Outcome.

In Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman’s early return from a sales trip and his expressed plight constitute clear, excellent preparatory (P) material. The audience is made aware that Willy, an aging, previously successful salesman and father/husband living in Brooklyn, is lost in confusion and rejection.

Regardless of the economic and social connotations of Willy’s dilemma, the heart of the conflict in the play is struck when Willy asks his wife, Linda, “Why did he [Biff] come home?” The subsequent dialogue and the famous bedroom scene between the brothers (Biff and Hap) clarify that the central conflict of the play goes well beyond an economic or social one. The major dramatic question of the play is attacked (A): “What happened to destroy the love between father and son, and will Biff and Willy find that love again?” Thus, it is structurally clear that Willy is the protagonist or central character, and Biff is the antagonist, albeit one with considerable empathy/sympathy.

The lengthy struggle (S) portion of the play consists of an excellent series of events or complications (constituting “rising action,” that is, action moving the play upward in intensity). These complications contain both expositional information and heightened conflict. The major complications include the revelation of Willy’s infidelity, his bent toward suicide, and Biff’s ill-fated meeting with businessman Oliver.

The turn (T) or major crisis of the play, that event which is so powerful it turns the action toward a climax or resolution, is contained in the firing of Willy by his boss, Howard. That devastating incident renews the struggle (S) portion of the play, now as “falling” action (action moving toward an end). The two major complications in this sequence include the quarrel between Willy and his sons in the restaurant and the crucial “flashback” scene between Biff, Willy, and The Woman in the Boston hotel room.

The play moves to its climax or outcome (O) when Willy’s fragile state of mind moves him to plant his garden at night. The sons return and in the famous “dime a dozen” segment, Willy and Biff spend the remainder of their conflict. Love is established again between the father and his eldest son. This action so exhilarates Willy, he mistakenly turns to suicide as a gesture of restitution.

The denouement or final outcome of the play occurs in the Epilogue or Requiem at Willy’s grave. Linda is grief-stricken, though unburdened; Hap is as lost as ever; only Biff has gained insight into himself, the true gift from Willy. The practical neighbor and good friend, Charley, sums up Willy’s life, and the stirring drama ends.

Perhaps the strongest metaphor used in Death of a Salesman, its “commanding image,” is that of a burning woods a fire which consumes totally, leaving ashes and a void against the sky. Additionally, the play is like a sand foundation washed away by a sea of guilt and spite. Regardless, Biff’s stature at the end of the play may provide the one hope for the future in this devastated family. The excellent use of dramatic structure in Death of a Salesman leads us to this hope.