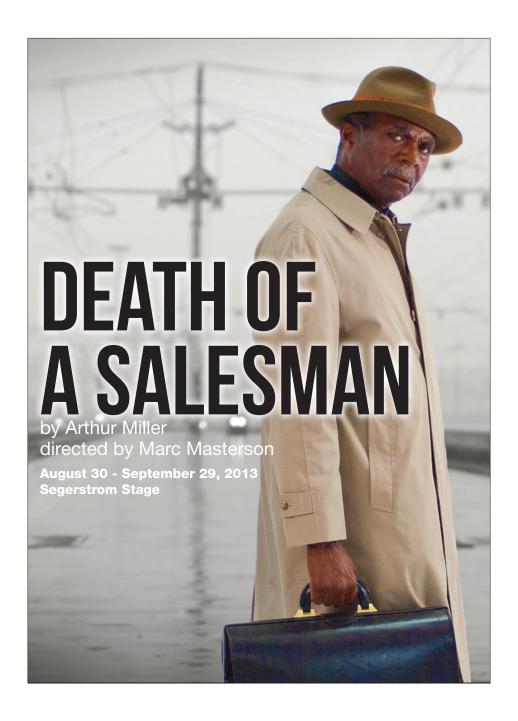
South Coast Repertory

PLAYGOER'S GUIDE



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: The Play

Characters

Synopsis

Style and Structure

Selected Production History

PART II: The Author

Biography

The Plays of Arthur Miller

PART III: The Production

Meet the Cast

World of the Play

Part IV: Context: Post-War America

Part V: Questions for Discussion

Part VI: Resources

Other Online Study Guides

Websites for Further Study of *Death of a Salesman* and Arthur Miller Books

Part I: THE PLAY

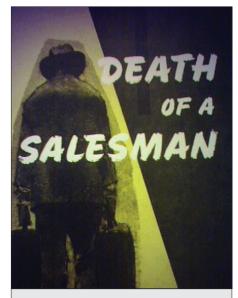
SYNOPSIS

Loman once considered himself to be the best traveling salesman in New England. But he's been on the job for over thirty years now, and he is tired. After he returns home to Brooklyn from a failed trip late one night, Linda, Willy's wife, urges him to talk to his boss, Howard, about a position that doesn't require travel. Willy agrees: the long drives have become grueling and dangerous; it's time to swallow his pride and slow down.

Willy wanders into the kitchen for a snack, and his muttering wakes up his two adult sons, Biff and Happy, who are home on a visit. Biff, the oldest, has returned to Brooklyn after a string of odd jobs out West; Happy works for a buyer in the city. They are both disenchanted with the workaday world and fantasize about living off the land and raising cattle.

Willy's ramblings grow louder. His memories are so vivid that he can't help but get lost in them. He relives the boys' high school years, when Biff was the star of the football team. They were a happy family then: Willy still brimming with optimism and dreaming of opening his own business

But the memories sour when Willy recalls the past's troubles. Business was never as good as he pretended; Biff struggled in school; and Willy betrayed Linda with another woman on numerous occasions. Willy also thinks of the success of his recently deceased brother, Ben, an adventurous man whose wealth came from taming unknown



The famous publicity image from the original 1949 production.

territories in Africa and Alaska.

Linda, Biff and Happy all recognize the seriousness of Willy's unraveling. Linda reprimands Biff for resenting his father so openly and reveals that Willy has attempted suicide on numerous occasions. In an attempt to hearten his father, Biff agrees to talk to his old employer, Bill Oliver, about a loan to start a sporting goods business with Happy. Willy is overjoyed at the news and, with a newfound optimism about the future, agrees to speak with Howard about getting a local job.

But neither meeting goes as expected: Bill Oliver doesn't remember Biff, and Howard fires Willy. Later, over dinner at a steakhouse, Biff erupts at his father for not facing reality. The episode forces Willy to relive his most painful memory—the day Biff, failing math and looking for his father's support, caught Willy in a hotel room with another woman.

Back at home, Biff decides to leave and cut off contact with the family. He then breaks down in his father's arms—a gesture that touches Willy and affirms for him that his son's love never truly went away. After

THE CHARACTERS

Willy Loman, a traveling salesman who clings to the American dream of success, wealth and legacy

Linda Loman, Willy's faithful wife whose support of her husband masks her own perceptive nature

Biff Loman, Willy's adult son who, after his glory days in high school, cannot seem to find success

Happy Loman, Willy's adult son who spent his childhood in his older brother Biff's shadow

Charley,

a successful business owner and Willy's neighbor

Bernard,

Charley's son and Biff's former classmate

Uncle Ben,

Willy's older brother and a self-made man of success and wealth

The Woman, Willy's mistress

Howard Wagner, Willy's boss

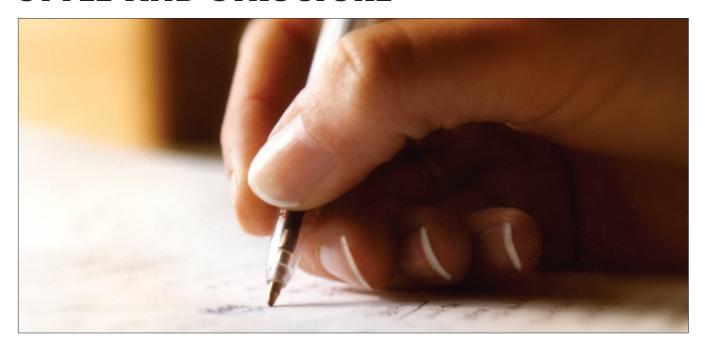
Jenny, Charley's secretary

Stanley, a waiter

Miss Forsythe and Letta, two young women

everyone has gone to bed, Willy—aware that his family can collect his \$20,000 life insurance policy when he's gone—crashes his car and kills himself. But despite his belief that he was "well liked," very few mourners come to Willy's funeral.

STYLE AND STRUCTURE



Death of a Salesman is no doubt Willy Loman's play. He is, after all, the Salesman; he is rarely ever off stage; and his 1949 debut gave dramatic literature a new kind of tragic hero. But Salesman is Willy's play not just because it is about him but also because much of it is told through him.

In his essay, "Memory: Miller," literary scholar Peter Szondi compares Salesman's style and structure with the playwright's first success, All My Sons. Both plays look into the past, but Miller deviates from strict realism in Salesman. Instead of having the characters come to terms with their history by discussing it in the present—as they do in All My Sons-Miller brings the past to life on stage through the use of memory.

This technique accentuates Willy's deterioration, and it makes *Salesman* all the more heartbreaking. While the play's reality only recounts the last days of his life, the audience learns a great deal about Willy through his memories. They permeate reality, and Willy can't control when they surface. But they are not necessarily

"With A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams had printed a license to speak at full throat, and it helped strengthen me as I turned to Willy Loman...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."

—Arthur Miller from his 1987 autobiography, Timebends: A Life

true; they are his alone and filtered through his perspective. And while they might give the audience a deeper understanding of his condition, they ultimately alienate Willy from the other characters, and so his family never understands his truth. Szondi observes that Miller gives "...credence to Balzac's comment....'We all die unknown."

These structural elements are often identified as touches of dramatic expressionism, an artistic movement that developed in Europe in the early 20th century. Expressionism examines and defines reality through the perspective of the expressionist-or, in the case of drama, the protagonist. The examination is vigorous, with the protagonist usually recognizing his or her place in the world after a difficult journey of self-discovery. Early dramatic expressionism is found in the plays of August Strindberg, but playwrights like Eugene O'Neill (The Hairy Ape) and Sophie Treadwell (Machinal) brought the movement into the American theatre.

Similar to the characters found in other expressionistic works, Willy is ultimately destroyed by his reality. But his death is not in vain: Miller tells Willy's story with ardor and compassion—and gives voice to the middle class "dime a dozen."



From left to right: Lynn Milgrim, Don Took, Allan Miller, Michael Reilly Burke and Simon Billig. 1997 South Coast Repertory Production of Death of a Salesman. Directed by Martin Benson.



Charles S. Dutton, Billy Eugene Jones, and Ato Essandoh in Death of Salesman. Photo © Joan Marcus, 2009.



2010 Weston Playhouse Production Directed by Steve Stettler, with Christopher Lloyd as Willy Loman.

NOTABLE PRODUCTIONS OF DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Death of a Salesman has enjoyed numerous productions since its 1949 premiere, including successful stagings in Germany, Italy, Mexico and Korea. In 1983 Arthur Miller directed a production of his play in The People's Republic of China—an experience that inspired him to write the book. Salesman in China.

1949 Original Broadway Production

Directed by Elia Kazan, with Lee J. Cobb as Willy and Mildred Dunnock as Linda

1949 Original London Production

Directed by Elia Kazan, with Paul Muni as Willy Loman

1969 South Coast Repertory Production

Directed by Martin Benson, with Jack Davis as Willy Loman

1975 Broadway Revival

Directed by and starring George C. Scott as Willy Loman

1983 Beijing Production

Directed by Arthur Miller, with Ying Ruocheng as Willy Loman

1984 Broadway Revival

Directed by Michael Rudman, with Dustin Hoffman as Willy, Kate Reid as Linda and John Malkovich as Biff

1997 South Coast Repertory Production

Directed by Martin Benson, with Allan Miller as Willy Loman

Although the play has been adapted for the screen on a few occasions—including a the first film adaptation in 1951—the play's enduring success is mostly due to its frequent stage revivals. Here is a look at some notable productions:

1999 Broadway Revival

Directed by Robert Falls, with Brian Dennehy as Willy and Elizabeth Franz as Linda

2005 London Revival

Directed by Robert Falls, with Brian Dennehy as Willy and Claire Higgins as Linda

2009 Yale Repertory Theatre production

Directed by James Bundy, with Charles S. Dutton as Willy Loman

2010 Weston Playhouse Theatre Company Production

Directed by Steve Stettler, with Christopher Lloyd as Willy Loman

2012 Broadway Revival

Directed by Mike Nichols, with Philip Seymour Hoffman as Willy, Linda Emond as Linda and Andrew Garfield as Biff

Part II: THE PLAYWRIGHT

BIOGRAPHY



Arthur Miller's (1915-2005) sevendecade career left the theatre changed forever. His dramatic writing exhibits an astonishing ability to capture a quiet but powerful poetry in everyday life and exposes a man deeply concerned with social conscience. Much of his work investigates the responsibilities of society—an interest that stemmed from coming into adulthood the Great Depression. during

Miller's early childhood was one of luxury. His father was a successful coat manufacturer in New York City, and the family enjoyed a comfortable existence until the stock market crash derailed the business. Miller worked a series of jobs during and after high school and eventually saved enough money to attend the University of Michigan, where he began writing plays. After graduation, he joined the United States' ill-fated Federal Theater Project shortly before it was shut down in 1939. Miller's Broadway debut, 1944's *The Man Who Had All the*

Luck, was a failure and closed after only four performances. But the young playwright quickly bounced back, and in 1947 his first critical success, All My Sons, established Miller as a fresh voice in the American theatre.

"....and then the whole audience exploded....They cheered, hollered...and would not stop."

— Alan Hewitt

He cemented this reputation with the 1949 premiere of *Death of a Salesman*, a play that won him the Tony Award, the New York Drama Circle Critics' Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama—making the 33-year-old playwright the first to win all three awards for one play. The production was not only a critical success, but a moving experience for audiences, as well. "There was a long deathly silence," cast member Alan Hewitt said of the opening night curtain call, "....and then the whole

audience exploded....They cheered, hollered...and would not stop." *Death of a Salesman* ran for 742 performances.

Miller's allegorical play, The Crucible, although now his most performed work, did not enjoy the same critical or commercial success as Salesman when it opened in 1953. But the political boldness with which Miller wrote his plays (The Crucible is a thinly veiled criticism of McCarthyism and the treatment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg) did eventually get him subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956. Miller refused to reveal the names of those he knew to be Communists, and he was cited for contempt of Congress. His conviction was overturned two years later, but his personal life remained in the public eve during his brief but infamous marriage to Marilyn Monroe—a relationship that Miller chronicled in two of his plays: 1964's After the Fall and 2004's Finishing the Picture (his final play).



Above: Simon Billig, Linda Gehringer, Peter Michael Goetz and Nancy Bell in the 2000 SCR Production of All My Sons. Right: Daisy Eagan and David Barry Gray in the 2005 SCR production of A View from the Bridge.

Miller's other plays include A View from the Bridge (1955), Incident at Vichy (1964), The Price (1968) and Broken Glass (1993); but he is also known for his screenplays, nonfiction work, insightful essays and the 1987 autobiography, Timebends: A Life. Miller's plays are consistently revived around the world and taught in both universities and high schools across the nation. Miller himself articulated best what makes his work so timeless and universal: "...I personally feel that the theatre has to confront the basic themes always. And the faces change from generation to generation to generation, but their roots are generally the same, and that is the question of man's increasing awareness of himself and his environment, his quest for justice and for the right to be human."



THE PLAYS OF ARTHUR MILLER

The Man Who Had All the Luck (1944) All My Sons (1947) Death of a Salesman (1949) *An Enemy of the People* (1950) The Crucible (1953) A View from the Bridge (1955) After the Fall (1964) Incident at Vichy (1964) The Price (1968) The Creation of the World and Other Business (1972) The Archbishop's Ceiling (1977) The American Clock (1980) Elegy for a Lady/Some Kind of Love Story (Two-Way Mirror) (1982) Clara/I Can't Remember Anything (Danger: Memory!) (1987) The Ride Down Mt. Morgan (1991) The Last Yankee (1993) Broken Glass (1994) Mrs. Peters' Connections (1998) Resurrection Blues (2002)

Finishing the Picture (2004)

Part III: THE PRODUCTION MEET THE CAST



Charlie Robinson (Willy Loman) returns to SCR after appearing in 2012's production of *Jitney* and 2010's *Fences*. A notable film and television actor, Robinson is best known for his role on the 1980's hit series, *Night Court*.



Kim Staunton (Linda Loman) is a veteran stage actor who has worked on Broadway, off-Broadway, and at regional theatres across the country. She last appeared at SCR in 1999's *The Piano Lesson*.



Chris Butler (Biff Loman) has extensive stage credits, including 2007's Broadway revival of *110 in the Shade*. He is also a series regular on TNT's new drama, *King & Maxwell*.



Larry Bates (Happy Loman) is a familiar face on the SCR stage. His many credits include *Jitney*, *Topdog/Underdog*, *Mr. Marmalade* and last season's hit production of *The Motherf**ker with the Hat.*



Gregg Daniel (Ben) appeared in SCR's productions of *Jitney*, *Fences*, *A Christmas Carol* and *James and the Giant Peach*. His other regional credits include Shakespeare L.A., Hartford Stage and Actors Theatre of Louisville.



James A. Watson (Charley) made his SCR debut in 2012's production of *Jitney*. He has worked on numerous television shows and films, and his extensive stage resume includes work at Center Theatre Group and American Conservatory Theater.



Tracey A. Leigh (The Woman) returns to SCR after appearing in *In the Next Room or the vibrator play* and *Safe in Hell*. She has also appeared in productions at The Old Globe, La Jolla Playhouse and Arena Stage.



Tyler Pierce (Howard Wagner) appeared in last season's *How to Write a New Book for the Bible*. Pierce has worked at theaters all over the country, including productions at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Guthrie Theater and Actors Theatre of Louisville.



Tobie Windham (Bernard) has worked with SCR on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Junie B. in Jingle Bells, Batman Smells!*. His other credits include productions at American Conservatory Theater, Marin Theatre Company and Magic Theatre.



Christopher Rivas (Stanley) first worked with SCR on *Songs of Bilitis*, a Studio SCR Series production. His other credits include work with Theatre @ Boston Court and the Getty Villa.



Celeste Den (Miss Forsythe) made her SCR debut during last season's hit production of *Chinglish*. She has also worked with American Conservatory Theater, East West Players and Theatre @ Boston Court.



Georgina E. Okon (Jenny) is a graduate of SCR's Acting Intensive Program and is making her debut on our stage in *Death* of a Salesman.



Becca Lustgarten (Letta) is a graduate of SCR's Acting Intensive Program and is making her SCR debut. Her other credits include productions at Williamstown Theatre Festival and the Hangar Theatre.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLIE ROBINSON

Charlie Robinson, veteran of stage and screen—you might remember him from last season's production of *Jitney*—stars as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. We asked him a few questions about playing this iconic character.

Artistic Director Marc Masterson approached you last year to see if there was a project that the two of you might find to work together again. Marc says that you zeroed in on playing Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* right away. Why this role and this play?

Marc and I have been friends and colleagues since Houston's Studio 7, over 45 years ago. At a luncheon we had also discussed doing *King Lear*, but I gravitated to *Death of a Salesman*. I had never done an Arthur Miller play before, so I was eager to tackle this exceptional, renowned American legend's dialogue. Who could resist rehearsing, and finally performing, a play written by this country's most quintessential playwright?

How are you approaching the character of Willy?

Willy Loman is one of the most well written, tragic figures of our time—and for that matter, probably of all time. Death of a Salesman is considered a "perfect" play if anything can be labeled as such. Many a playwright has tried capturing this enigma called Willy, but they have been only tributes to Arthur Miller's writing. I consider it an honor to have the opportunity to play this tragic figure. It is an adventure in true character study. The idea of an ever-changing reality for this man—who doesn't like his reflection in the mirror, nor in others, so much so that death would be convenient speaks volumes to the layers within one's soul when life becomes too much to bear.

Why does this play endure? Why is it so universal?

Death of a Salesman resonates globally, regardless of ethnicity, because it speaks to the question of success, the ability to achieve it, maintain it lose it, and be deceived by it. The struggle of a man to judge his worth by the coins in his pocket, and a further struggle with himself as age and death creep upon his doorstep. Pressure for a man to leave his mark on the world is universal, and if not by success, how? The question transcends time.

If you could have lunch with Arthur Miller and talk about *Death of a Salesman*, what would that conversation entail?

If I had been fortunate to have known the great Arthur Miller, I would ask: "At what moment in your life, the time, the day, etc., did ink masterfully find paper and Willy and his world suddenly appear?"

What do you want audience members to come away with after having seen this production?

I hope that an audience will enjoy our production; I hope it will also move them to hold life a little dearer. To release themselves of the pitfalls of expecting their loved ones, especially their children, to follow in their footsteps, as well as teaching not to live vicariously through their children's lives. To be true to oneself, accepting defeat graciously, and courageously, to equally embrace any and all success humbly; in other words to learn a lesson from the tragedies of all Willy Lomans, and their enabling, dysfunctional families.

Some of our audience members will be high school and college students. If you could talk with them prior to a performance, what advice would you have for them about getting the most out of the play?

In preparing a young audience for this production or any production of *Death of a Salesman*, I would ask that they look beyond the time and space with which the dialogue manifests itself upon a stage, but rather hear the words in the context of their own lives. We all know people like the Lomans. It is never too late to pick yourself up and brush yourself off because the alternative is fatal. Listen mindfully and act accordingly.

WORLD OF THE PLAY



irector Marc Masterson has assembled a top notch of designers to team tackle Miller's classic play. While the play generally takes place in the late 1940s when Miller wrote it, Masterson was interested in the overall production emphasizing the universality of the play's themes rather than absolutely faithful historical reproduction. He and set designer Michael Raiford were inspired by the Brooklyn neighborhood setting and its increasing urban density as it encroaches upon the Loman's diminutive home. Raiford abstracted the overlapping buildings, skylines, and fences of the city into the many linear angles and slats you can see in the set.

Raiford was also inspired by the African-American casting choices, which led him to the work of muralist Aaron Douglas. Douglas painted murals in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s, and some of his murals can be found at Fisk University and the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture).





skirt is softe

His work is modernist and typically abstracted from West African and Ancient Egyptian art, featuring flat forms and repeated geometric shapes.

Lighting designer Brian Lillenthal will set the mood and tone, working with rich light and the shadows cast by the set. Costume designer Holly Poe Durbin is challenged with evoking the sense of the late 1940s and early

designer and composer Jim Ragland will be creating a jazz infused score for the production.

See above for a few of the initial ideas and renderings from set designer Michael Raiford and costume designer Holly Poe Durbin. Like all theatrical process, these drawings represent the starting point and may evolve over time as they are fully realized.

Part IV: CONTEXT: POST-WAR AMERICA

Death of a Salesman premiered in 1949, at the end of a decade in which the United States underwent striking social, economic and political changes. The play's setting—a victorious, postwar America enjoying a strong economy and insatiable consumers—was quite different from the America of ten years before: a country still wounded by the scars of the Great Depression.

Despite 1939's weak economy and staggering 17.9 percent unemployment rate, the World's Fair in New York that year—with its theme of "Building the World of Tomorrow"—suggested that the American population refused to be anything but optimistic about the future. Industries demonstrated that technology and innovation would lead to progress and a robust economy; it was a celebration of capitalism's promise. However, the heyday of the consumer was derailed by global politics and the subsequent outbreak of war.

The United States entered World War II on December 8, 1941, one day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When American companies switched manufacturing to supplies, domestic productivity skyrocketed, and the national unemployment rate plummeted (falling to a remarkably low 1.9 percent in 1943). President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which barred discrimination in the national defense industry. women and minorities previously underemployed groups—the opportunity to temporarily populate the factories left behind while the men went off to war. In 1948, President Truman desegregated the military, partly in recognition for the patriotism and valor shown by people of color serving in the United States Armed Services.

After the war's end in 1945, the triumphant United States (despite the shame many of its citizens felt about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) remained a prominent international figure as the chief defender against the spread of



Grand Central Terminal in New York City, 1947.

communism. Building tensions with the Soviet Union inspired widespread domestic paranoia, and the population's disdain for communism was matched only by its reverence for capitalism.

... the hardships of the past were finally over, and life for many Americans was no longer about muddling through—it was about having it all.

Companies returned to manufacturing their normal products after the war, and Americans were eager to buy. Technology, no longer a thing of the future, was available for purchase: the number of Americans who owned televisions, for example, rose from around eight thousand in 1946 to one million in 1949. But seemingly limitless resources made bigger purchases possible, as well, and the middle class could now afford to be homeowners. As the suburbs expanded, the growing demand for homes gave birth to the mass-produced housing development.

Unlike the economy, the movement toward social equality waned during this

period. People of color returned to being viewed as second-class citizens and the postwar woman's duty was to leave the job front and return to the "home front," particularly in newly-minted suburbia.

Despite the rapid suburbanization, America's cities remained a driving economic force. By the late 1940s, New York City was not only the world's largest manufacturer and wholesaler but also an international hub for art and fashion. At that time Brooklyn, the city's most populated borough, was known for its diverse, working-class neighborhoods. It is in one of these neighborhoods during that postwar boom that Arthur Miller sets this play about the American dream.

The end of the decade seemed to be the heyday of this dream: the hardships of the past were finally over, and life for many Americans was no longer about muddling through—it was about having it all. Yet Miller writes about a salesman from whom no one is buying. He writes about a man unable to keep up with the changing times and the insatiable consumer—and so the salesman and his American dream fade away, destroyed by a country whose people are defined by what they have.

Part V: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. In *Death of a Salesman* memory is used to illuminate Willy's current condition. What plays or works of literature can you name that also use this technique?
- 2. Many call *Death of Salesman* a criticism of the American dream. What is the American dream? Is the American dream of 1949 different from the American dream of 2013?
- 3. Death of a Salesman has been translated into many languages and been performed in countless cities and countries. How do you think the themes of the play translate into other cultures? What elements of the play are universal? Do you think Willy is still an everyman?
- 4. Willy's memories feature many other characters in the play. Does Willy's vision of them in the past line up with how they act in the present? Did you find any differences in how they were portrayed in reality and how they were portrayed in memory?
- 5. Uncle Ben only appears in Willy's memory, but he's a very important character in the play. Describe his function and what he might represent for Willy and the world of the play.
- 6. How does Linda's behavior add to Willy's successes and failures? Is her treatment of Willy partly responsible for his unraveling?
- 7. Why does Miller never identify what Willy sells?
- 8. Who or what is the antagonist in *Death of a Salesman*? Is Willy a victim of society or a victim of his own hubris? Discuss Willy's culpability in the outcome of his life.
- 9. How do the scenic, lighting and sound designs inform the show? How did they influence your perception of Willy's experience?
- 10. Every character in the play lies to themselves and to each other. Discuss how this leads to the outcome of the play.
- 11. Is Willy's death a noble act or an act of cowardice? Could things have ended any differently?

PART V: RESOURCES

Other Study Guides and Programs

OTHER DEATH OF A SALESMAN ONLINE STUDY GUIDES

Weston Playhouse Theatre Company (2010 production) http://tinyurl.com/le5xqqc

Yale Repertory Theatre (2009 production) http://tinyurl.com/m66odan

Guthrie Theater (2004 production) http://tinyurl.com/m7e6a2b

WEBSITES FOR FURTHER STUDY OF DEATH OF A SALESMAN

The New York Times review of the original 1949 production. http://tinyurl.com/mw44f8j

Arthur Miller's 1949 essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in which Arthur Miller defends Willy Loman's place as a tragic hero. http://tinyurl.com/kwqulw7

Arthur Miller on the first anniversary of the play. http://tinyurl.com/lo3x2wm

"Teaching Death of a Salesman with The New York Times" http://tinyurl.com/lmnmndc

An article about the timeliness of the 2012 production of *Death of a Salesman* http://tinyurl.com/ksvcnj3

WEBSITES FOR FURTHER STUDY OF ARTHUR MILLER

A biography of Arthur Miller written in 2005 after his death. http://tinyurl.com/lx95wlg

The official website of The Arthur Miller Society. http://tinyurl.com/ljsh7nl

BOOKS

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Foertsch, Jacqueline. American Culture in the 1940s. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Gottfried, Martin. Arthur Miller: His Life and Work. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2003.

Sickels, Robert. The 1940s. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004.

