FANFARE FOR THE COMMON MAN

by Michael Walkup
PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

"Tragedy is if I get a paper cut…. Comedy is if you fall into an open sewer and die."

MEL BROOKS, 1975

"Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy."

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, 1945

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

ARTHUR MILLER, 1949

Definitions of tragedy throughout history often dictate that only socially elevated figures, such as heroes and rulers, make appropriate protagonists (think of Sophocles' King Oedipus, Racine's Queen Phaedra, Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet, and all the other doomed monarchs of the Western canon). For centuries, playwrights restricted the ranks of tragic characters to those with blue blood pumping through their veins.

Arthur Miller, writing a tragedy set in 1949 Brooklyn, alludes to and challenges this history in naming his play *Death of a Salesman*. In addition to containing a hefty plot spoiler, Miller's title announces that his hero rises from less lofty stock than his tragic brethren and sets his play in opposition to theatrical traditions of tragedy which date back to ancient Athens.

Around 330 BCE, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote *The Poetics* in which he sought to define two genres of plays: comedy and tragedy. In comedy, he says, we laugh at a character's defects, while in tragedy we feel pity as we watch a character's fortune change from good to bad. Aristotle further distinguishes between the genres by noting that comedy concerns itself with men who are "lower" than we, while tragedy deals in figures who are "higher."

During the High Italian Renaissance (ca. 1450–1530 CE), Aristotle's writings on tragedy, along with the plays he cites in *The Poetics*, were enthusiastically reread, and his observations took on the weight of hard-and-fast rules for playwriting for centuries to follow. In 1749, over 250 years after the rediscovery of Aristotle, the popular French satirist and playwright Voltaire easily dismissed the notion of writing a successful tragedy about a "low" character: "Indeed, what could a tragic plot between common men even be?"

But Voltaire was writing against the times. In the 1700s, shifting economic power in Europe brought to the theatre new middle-class audiences who wished to see their own sensibilities reflected on-stage, rather than those of the increasingly impotent monarchs and nobles, whose demise was accelerated by the American and French Revolutions. It was the dawn of the bourgeois drama, comedies and tragedies that dealt in middle-class pleasures and problems. But the conversation between "high" and "low" tragedies didn't end there.

In the same year Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, he claimed a stake in the debate, defending Willy Loman's tragic status in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man." Some say that Miller created a modern-day Everyman in Willy, an average citizen whose story stands in for our own sometimes harrowing journey through the mechanisms of capitalism and the American Dream. Those who find this reading of the play pessimistic contend that in *Death of a Salesman* Miller intentionally reaches back to the classics and elevates his "low" character (as the pun on "Loman" might indicate) to the status of a tragic hero of old, asserting, like Linda Loman, that "attention must be paid" to the fall of a common man.

INSIDE WILLY'S HEAD: ARTHUR MILLER AND AMERICAN EXPRESSIONISM

by Jeff Rogers

In 1949, Arthur Miller's friends convinced him that *The Inside of His Head* wasn't a very good title for his new play about the weary life and unfortunate death of a salesman. This title was, for Miller, a literal description of how he envisioned the play: a glimpse into the troubled mind of Willy Loman. The style of the play descended from previous American experiments with expressionism—an artistic style that developed in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. Expressionist painters rejected the airiness and passive subjectivity of Impressionism (e.g. Degas, Renoir, and Monet) and argued instead for an aggressive style bursting with psychic vibrancy (a style apparent in works by Van Gogh, Beckmann, and Kokoschka). European playwrights, such as August Strindberg and Frank Wedekind, translated that style into their writing. Their plays often featured a protagonist's frightening journey to discover his true self and his place in the spiritual cosmos.

More adventurous American playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice used this expressionist style in dramas that criticized the domination of modern man by an increasingly mechanized and impersonal world. O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) features the journey of a poor coal stoker from the hot belly of a steamship to his death at the hands of an ape in a zoo, while Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) follows Mr. Zero, a bookkeeper, on his path to find purpose in his life after he is replaced by an adding machine. These plays, like their European forebears, used all the means of the theatre—sound, lighting, scenery, and even smells—to evoke the mood and emotional tenor of the protagonist's struggle. Decades later, Miller deployed this expressionist dramaturgy in a new American context—the struggle of the middle class to defend its moral integrity in the face of harsh economic realities.

In keeping with his original idea for the play's title, Miller thought the scenery should look like a cross-section of Willy Loman's brain. Designer Jo Mielziner (1901–1976) had his own ideas about how to convey Willy's interior struggle. Mielziner abstracted Miller's idea to create a cross-section of Willy Loman's life. His design featured the wire-frame suggestion of a small house surrounded by towering apartment buildings. Green leaf patterns were projected onto thin gauze curtains, called scrims, allowing the towering apartments to dissolve away, as if in a dream or faint memory. This scenic picture was the very essence of the expressionist idea—its fluidity and emotional intensity lured the audience deep into Willy Loman's psychic struggle. The design for the original production of *Death of a Salesman* represents a remarkable collaboration between a dramatist (Miller) and visual artist (Mielziner), and it crystallized the visual influence of expressionism on the American theatre.

opposite page: Joseph Hirsch's rendering of Lee J. Cobb as Willy Loman in the original 1949 Broadway production.

TRAVELING SALESMAN

by Donesh Olyaie
PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

It's often taken for granted that *Death of a Salesman* has earned a place in the American canon, with countless productions in our nation's theatres. But the appeal of *Death of Salesman* is not solely an American phenomenon; the play has found its way onto stages across the world including productions in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Russia, and England—among others. The tragedy of Willy Loman affects audiences regardless of cultural background, a discovery confirmed in 1983 when the play, directed by Miller himself, premiered in the People's Republic of China. How would communist Chinese audiences react to a play that dealt with a capitalist society? When asked how this American play would translate for a Chinese audience, Miller stated, "It depends on the father and the mother and the children. That's what it's about. The salesman part is what he does to stay alive. But he could be a peasant, he could be, whatever." The production, performed in Chinese, played to packed houses in Beijing. What became clear through the performances was that the relationships among the Loman family needed no cultural translation. The Chinese actor playing Happy wrote, "One thing about the play that is very Chinese is the way Willy tries to make his sons successful. The Chinese father always wants his sons to be 'dragons.'"

But can these relationships continue to resonate with audiences as we enter the 21st century? The play's presence onstage is as strong as ever today, with many productions that assume the task of re-examining it. Can new themes and elements be discovered through these fresh re-imaginings of *Death of a Salesman*? A recent production at the Schauspielhaus Bochum in Germany grappled with this issue, exploring the play in contemporary terms. The director Jürgen Kruse created a set design that packed as much American kitsch onto the stage as possible. Images of Native American Indians,1950s milk men, and Uncle Sam dominated the space. A Bob Dylan quote was pasted next to a Shell Oil sign, in front of which Biff and Happy parodied classic films including *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver*. The question at the center of the production: has *Death of a Salesman* become a piece of Americana like everything else on stage? Kruse took this a step further transforming the elegiac end of the play into a grotesque pageant complete with Marilyn Monroe, her white

skirt billowing up, and a Statue of Liberty carrying a toothbrush instead of a torch. While this production attempted to critique American culture, reviews still focused on the powerful story at the play's center. The Loman family and their relationships superceded the jabs at pop culture and remained stronger than ever. It seems Linda Loman has had it right all along, "Attention must be paid to such a person," or in this case, such a play.

Arthur Miller and members of the *Death of a Salesman* cast at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in Beijing, China (Inge Morath/ Magnum Photos).