

HAROLD CLURMAN

Harold Clurman, regular drama critic of *The Nation*, is also well known as a director. He has lectured at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, was drama critic for *The New Republic* and *Tomorrow*, and was executive consultant of the Repertory Theater, Lincoln Center. He is the author of, among other books, *The Fervent Years* and *The Naked Image*, and the editor of *Famous American Plays of the 1930's* and *Seven Plays of the Modern Theater*.

[THE SUCCESS DREAM ON THE AMERICAN STAGE]

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of the outstanding plays in the repertory of the American theatre. That its theme is not, strictly speaking, new to our stage—Arthur Richman's *Ambush* (1921), J. P. McEvoy's *The Pottery* (1923), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), George Kelly's *The Show-Off* (1924), Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* and *Paradise Lost* (1935) being in this respect its antecedents—does not in any way lessen its effect or significance. The value of *Death of a Salesman* lies in the fact that it states its theme with penetrating clarity in our era of troubled complacency.

Death of a Salesman is a challenge to the American dream. Lest this be misunderstood, I hasten to add that there are two versions of the American dream. The historical American dream is the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all. This dream needs no challenge, only fulfillment. But

From *Lies Like Truth* by Harold Clurman (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 68-72. Copyright 1949 by Harold Clurman. Reprinted by permission of the author and The Macmillan Co. The title used here comes from an article in *Tomorrow*, VIII (May 1949), 48-51, in which this review of "Salesman" first appeared (49-50) along with some general comments on the subject and a review of Clifford Odets' *The Big Knife* (reprinted, *Lies Like Truth*, pp. 49-51). For an earlier review of "Salesman" by Clurman, see "Attention! New Republic, CXX (February 28, 1949), 26-28.

since the Civil War, and particularly since 1900, the American dream has become distorted to the dream of business success. A distinction must be made even in this. The original premise of our dream of success—popularly represented in the original boy parables of Horatio Alger—was that enterprise, courage and hard work were the keys to success. Since the end of the First World War this too has changed. Instead of the ideals of hard work and courage, we have salesmanship. Salesmanship implies a certain element of fraud: the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness. The goal of salesmanship is to make a deal, to earn a profit—the accumulation of profit being an unquestioned end in itself.

This creates a new psychology. To place all value in the mechanical act of selling and in self-enrichment impoverishes the human beings who are rendered secondary to the deal. To possess himself fully, a man must have an intimate connection with that with which he deals as well as with the person with whom he deals. When the connection is no more than an exchange of commodities, the man himself ceases to be a man, becomes a commodity himself, a spiritual cipher.

This is a humanly untenable situation. The salesman realizes this. Since his function precludes a normal human relationship, he substitutes an imitation of himself for the real man. He sells his "personality." This "personality," now become only a means to an end—namely, the consummated sale—is a mask worn so long that it soon comes to be mistaken, even by the man who wears it, as his real face. But it is only his commercial face with a commercial smile and a commercial aura of the well-liked, smoothly adjusted, oily cog in the machine of the sales apparatus.

This leads to a behavior pattern which is ultimately doomed; not necessarily because of the economic system of which it is the human concomitant, but quite simply because a man is not a machine. The death of Arthur Miller's salesman is symbolic of the breakdown of the whole concept of salesmanship inherent in our society.

Miller does not say these things explicitly. But it is the

strength of his play that it is based on this understanding, and that he is able to make his audience realize it no matter whether or not they are able consciously to formulate it. When the audience weeps at *Death of a Salesman*, it is not so much over the fate of Willy Loman—Miller's pathetic hero—but over the millions of such men who are our brothers, uncles, cousins, neighbors. The lovable lower-middle-class mole Willy Loman represents is related to a type of living and thinking in which nearly all of us—"professionals" as well as salesmen—share.

Willy Loman never acknowledges or learns the error of his way. To the very end he is a devout believer in the ideology that destroys him. He believes that life's problems are all solved by making oneself "well liked" (in the salesman's sense) and by a little cash. His wife knows only that he is a good man and that she must continue to love him. His sons, who are his victims, as he has been of the false dream by which he has lived, draw different conclusions from his failure. The younger boy, Hap, believes only that his father was an incompetent (as do many of the play's commentators), but he does not reject his father's ideal. (It is to be noted that in a very important sense Willy Loman is sympathetic precisely because of his failure to make himself a successful machine.) The older boy, Biff, comes to understand the falsity of his father's ideal and determines to set out on a new path guided by a recovery of his true self.

There are minor flaws in *Death of a Salesman*, such as the constant pointing to a secret in the older brother's past which is presumed to be the immediate cause of his moral breakdown—the secret turning out to be the boy's discovery of his father's marital infidelity. There is validity in this scene as part of the over-all picture of the father-son relationship. A shock such as the boy sustains here often serves to propel people into the unexplored territory of their subconscious, and may thus become the springboard for further and more basic questioning. Miller's error here is to make the boy's horror at his father's "deceit" appear crucial rather than contributory to the play's main line. Some people have objected that the use of the stream-of-

consciousness technique—the play dramatizes Willy's recollection of the past, and at times switches from a literal presentation of his memory to imaginary and semisymbolic representation of his thought—is confusing, and a sign of weakness in the author's grasp of his material.

These objections do not impress me. The limitations of *Death of a Salesman* are part of its virtues. The merit in Miller's treatment of his material lies in a certain clean, moralistic rationalism. It is not easy to make the rational a poetic attribute, but Miller's growth since *All My Sons* consists in his ability to make his moral and rationalistic characteristics produce a kind of poetry.

The truth of *Death of a Salesman* is conveyed with what might be compared to a Living Newspaper, documentary accuracy. With this there is a grave probity and a sensitivity that raise the whole beyond the level of what might otherwise have seemed to be only agitation and propaganda. Other playwrights may be more colorful, lyrical and rich with the fleshed nerves and substance of life; Miller holds us with a sense of his soundness. His play has an ascetic, slate-like hue, as if he were eschewing all exaggeration and extravagance; and with a sobriety that is not without humor, yet entirely free of frivolity, he issues the forthright commandment, "Thou shalt not be a damn' fool!"

Elia Kazan's production is first rate. It is true to Miller's qualities, and adds to them a swift directness, muscularity and vehemence of conviction. If any further criticism is in order I should say the production might have gained a supplementary dimension if it had more of the aroma of individual characterization, more intimacy, more of the quiet music of specific humanity—small, as the people in the play are small, and yet suggestive of those larger truths their lives signify.

Mildred Dumnock as the mother embodies the production's best features: its precision, clarity, purity of motive. Someone has said that the part might have been more moving if it had been played by an actress like Pauline Lord with all the magic overtones and "quarter tones" of her subtle sensibility. Con-

cretely such a suggestion is, of course, irrelevant, but it points to a need I feel in the production as a whole more than to Miss Dunnoek's particular performance.

Lee Cobb as the salesman is massively powerful and a commanding actor every step of the way. Yet I cannot help feeling that Cobb's interpretation is more akin to the prototype of a King Lear than to Willy Loman. What differentiates Willy from some similarly abused figure is his utter unconsciousness—even where the author gives him conscious lines—his battered pride, querulous innocence, wan bewilderment even within the context of protest and angry vociferation.

Cameron Mitchell as the younger son is eminently likable, but for the play's thesis he ought also to be something of a comic stinker. Arthur Kennedy, who plays the older son, is a truly fine actor, who loses some of his edge because the general high pitch of the production forces him to blunt his natural delicacy.

Jo Mielziner's scene design seems to me too complex in shape and too diverse in style to be wholly satisfactory for a functional set or for beautiful decoration. Neither this nor any of the other faults that may have been found in *Death of a Salesman* prevented it from remaining a cardinal event not only of this season but of many a long year in the American theatre.

DANIEL E. SCHNEIDER, M. D.

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[PLAY OF DREAMS]

There are plays that remain with us a lifetime, like dreams that keep coming back again and again. Often one finds oneself saying: "I had a dream some time ago that I don't seem to be able to forget. And, what's more, I seem to be dreaming it over and over, each time a little different. But it's the same old familiar mysterious dream."

A powerful play has this same effect on us. It is perhaps the most compelling reason why we return many times to *Hamlet*. For a great work of art is as has already been indicated in this book, a dream turned inside out; a brilliant perception and portrayal of the impossible and impermissible ways in which we hurl ourselves against reality and, failing, dream out action and consequence as we sleep in our own inner universe of wishes.

From *The Psychoanalyst and the Artist* by Daniel Schneider (New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1950), pp. 246-355. Copyright 1950 by Daniel Schneider, republished by permission of International Universities Press. The analysis of "Salesman" forms part of Chapter Ten, "A Modern Playwright—Study of Two Plays by Arthur Miller," which devotes several pages (241-245) to *All My Sons*. Although Schneider's discussion of Miller is built on his examination of the two plays, the separate sections stand alone; the "Sons" references in the "Salesman" discussion are clear in context. The title used here is the one employed in *Theatre Arts*, XXXIII (October 1949), pp. 18-21, where the "Salesman" material appeared in a slightly modified form. When Miller was asked how he felt about Schneider's interpretation, he had the wit to say, "Impossible to 'agree' or 'disagree,' because I do not know my subconscious well enough." Quoted, W. David Stevens, *Freud on Broadway* (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), p. 395.

250

DANIEL E. SCHNEIDER, M. D.

251

Sometimes it is a pleasant dream, like being magically able to fly. More often it has the quality of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. More often it reveals the whole purpose of dreaming, night or day: to avoid pain, to repair the frustrations and humiliations of everyday life with which the common man is so familiar, and of which he is so frightened that he tries to glide over them, hoping that they won't add up into a seemingly ultimate, inevitable sum of exhaustion, despair and disillusionment.

It is like Willy Loman (low-man?) trying to keep up with the "maniac" of a refrigerator whose cost of operation eats up the very food it is designed to preserve, or like the twenty-five-year mortgage on the house which is empty of its sons by the time the father has paid for it literally with his life—and life insurance. The maniacal refrigerator, the life-sentencing mortgage, the ironic insurance: these things take on the aspect of sardonic gods of the mountain. They are symbols of one theme of the play—that describing a society in which man is a wandering peddler lured from reality by the pink clouds of magic sales talk; a world in which the burden of parenthood is enormous and where the common man has nothing to sell but himself, his pride, his youth.

The play begins with the classical requirement that its protagonist be at a turning-point in his life. And, as in the silver tree of Miller's earlier and excellent *All My Sons*, there is at the outset a cogent symbolization of the substance of the play: the Salesman comes home carrying wearily the two battered, black sample cases which are his cross. They are like the two sons he has carried through life; they are a burden we want him to set down with honor, but we sense almost at once that they are to be his coffin. It is obvious from his first words that he has lost command of them just as he has lost control of his sons, control of his car, control of his mind. The axe of final castration—insanity and suicide—has begun to fall. And, for a very definite reason, we learn at the beginning that his older brother Ben, the man who adventured and struck it rich, is dead. Ben becomes an increasingly obsessive vision to his disintegrating mind.

The form of his play is not that of "flashback" technique, though it has been described as such. It is rather the same technique as that of *Hamlet*: the technique of psychic projection, of hallucination, of the guilty expression of forbidden wishes dramatized.

Willy Loman, exhausted salesman, does not go back to the past. The past, as in hallucination, comes back to him; not chronologically as in flashback, but *dynamically with the inner logic of his erupting volcanic unconscious*. In psychiatry we call this "the return of the repressed," when a mind breaks under the invasion of primitive impulses no longer capable of compromise with reality.

To assess the extent to which the dramatization of the repressed makes the play, strip it of its hallucinatory exposition. Then the play is a dull picture of a broken-down, loud-mouthed, not too bright or presentable braggart of a salesman who comes home, irritable at his diminishing powers, disappointed in his sons, coddled by his wife who is full of solace but empty of excitement; a worn-out old man jealous of his relative's (next-door) success, and unable to obtain a more sedentary job better suited to his state of impending collapse. In the process of realization of his decay he quarrels with his badly brought-up sons, the older one (Biff) by now a petty thief and wanderer returned home, and the younger one (Hap) a rather dull, loud Babbitt who, very much like his father before him, has a deep sense of inferiority with respect to his older brother, and "knocks over the babes" and is "making good" as a salesman in a department store, but spends most of his money on the babes and his own apartment, a Lord-Salesman in embryo. Enough to make any father, even dimly aware of his faults, think of the futility of living and contemplate the gas-pipe.

But put back the hallucinatory experience and the play sings and shines. A lucidity is imparted to every gesture of the disintegrating Willy Loman. *It is visualized psychoanalytic interpretation woven into reality*. For example, near the end of the last act Willy comes out of the washroom of the restaurant, and is found on his knees by a waiter who cannot understand what

is beautifully clear to the audience. For the audience has just shared Willy's hallucination of a scene of years ago, in which his son Biff caught him in a hotel room with a woman. Willy on his knees, shouting "I gave you an order, Biff!" creates an effect of great power placed next to the fact that his sons have just walked out on him to pursue a couple of chance women. Pounding his fist on the floor as he re-enacts the repressed scene of pleading with his son to forgive him for sexual philandering, Willy hammers at the present on the anvil of the past.

It is in this way that the magnificent transitions in *Death of a Salesman* are achieved. The first act moves from despair to false hope—false because we know right from the beginning that there is too much hatred (and similarity) between father and sons for the hope to be fulfilled. The older son Biff is too twisted ever to help the father set down his burden with honor. So too, the second act moves from a vestige of love to an orgy of hate, pity, and death.

The question arises as to what premise, in common with that of *All My Sons*, requires this particular dramatic form. When we examine its material we become aware that the same deep psychologic conflict dominates both plays. In both plays the sons become disillusioned with the father.

We must pursue the inner psychological theme. Willy Loman is not in the eyes of his sons just a man, but a god in decay. To his first son Biff, Willy was a god who would protect him from all misdeedmanor, who could "fix" even a failure in mathematics; to his sons, Willy Loman was Salesman-Lord of New England. It is this illusion of sexless godhood that is shattered when Biff at seventeen comes to Boston on a surprise mission (to get his father to "fix" a math failure) and catches Willy with a lusty woman, then breaks down, weeps, and walks out on his father who is on his knees pleading for forgiveness, understanding, and lost godhood. This is the repressed scene of infidelity and smashed authority dramatized in the restaurant.

What theme is this? At what point does a son recognize finally and for all time that a father is not a sexless god but a

sexual man, prone to every human temptation? It is a variation of the Oedipus theme, a variation which says: *he who pretends to godhood over me must fulfill his godhood or be revealed as a madman.*

Follow the second act from this point of view, and it is sheer murder of a father by "all his sons"—an irrational Oedipal blood-bath given seeming rationalization by the converging social theme of the worn-out salesman. Willy Loman is really brought low in this second act. Blow after blow descends upon him until, symbolically castrated, shouting madly he is forced to his knees, to pounding on the floor.

He is told he is no good as a salesman and never was—by his dead boss's son to whom he was godfather, whom he named. He is told by his nephew that at seventeen something happened to Biff which destroyed the boy, a hint of Willy's infidelity. At the restaurant where the feast of celebration (totem-feast) was to have taken place, he is told by Biff that Biff has just compulsively stolen the fountain pen (genital) of a man who, Willy imagined, might have started Biff on his hoped-for rehabilitation. It is at this point that the father has to rush to the bathroom—a piece of dramatic action which tells us, as explicitly as we can be told, that the father is in castration-panic; and the panic in the father is matched by the younger son's promotion of a date with two "babes." The meaning of this episode can hardly be missed. It is the ultimate act of father-murder; instead of the totem-feast in which the sons recognize the father's authority and sexual rights, there is no dinner. There is only abandonment. Emerging from the bathroom, reliving his own sexual infidelity, Willy Loman—*ex-god*—has no recourse but to shout in rage at the sexual assertion of the sons. And it is followed immediately by the mother's accusation against her sons for their killing their father by their whoring. This is as close to the original battle fought sons ago by man and his sons as has ever been put upon the stage. It is this very thinly and yet very adroitly disguised Oedipal murder which gives the play its peculiar symbolic prehistoric power. It is not only modern man

exploited; it is also Neanderthal man raging against the restraint of civilization's dawn.

It is from this point on that the play in its last few minutes rises to critical intensity. The external contemporary social theme (announced by the mother near the end of the first act: "Attention—attention must finally be paid to such a man!") now converges and clashes with the eon-old psychological theme of the murdering, incestuous, whoring sons. Again, as in *All My Sons*, it is the mother fighting savagely for the father as she accuses the sons; it is the mother who sets off the older son's fury. It is she who has faced with the father the agonies of salesmanship, refrigerators, mortgages, life insurance, exhaustion and withering. Her rage at being old and dried-up is implicit as she fights like a she-tiger against the sons who have cast off the father for their own sexual philandering. It is thus she who is the protagonist of the external social theme: *a society that destroys fatherhood makes primitives (criminals) of its sons.*

In the last few minutes of the play, her confronting them ignites an explosive climax which is every dramatist's ambition. Biff, the protagonist of the Oedipal theme, goes into maniacal fury at the mother's defense of the father and exposes him as a philanderer and a fake, and is about to strike the tottering Willy. Then at the very last moment, because Biff, too, has lived by now and knows how tough civilization is against dreams and hopes, at the very last moment of conflict Biff is overtaken by pity and love and falls weeping into the stunned father's arms. This is an ultimate moment of climax rarely achieved in any theatre.

RAYMOND WILLIAMS

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THE REALISM OF ARTHUR MILLER

I

The most important single fact about the plays of Arthur Miller is that he has brought back into the theatre, in an important way, the drama of social questions. It has been fashionable, certainly in England, to reject such drama as necessarily superficial. In part, this rejection is in itself social, for it has shown itself in the context of a particular phase of consciousness: that widespread withdrawal from social thinking which came to its peak in the late nineteen-forties, at just the time when we were first getting to know Arthur Miller as a dramatist. Yet the rejection can be seen, also, as critically necessary, for there is little doubt that the dramatic forms in which social questions were ordinarily raised had become, in general, inadequate: a declined, low-pressure naturalism, or else the angularity of the self-conscious problem play, the knowingsness of the post-expressionist social revue. To break out from this deadlock needed three things, in any order: a critical perception of why the forms were inadequate; effective particular experiment; a revival, at depth and with passion, of the social thinking itself. Arthur Miller is unquestionably the most important agent of this break-out, which as yet, however, is still scattered and uncertain. His five plays to date show a wide and fascinating range of experiment, and the introduction he has written to the collected edition of them shows an exceptionally involved and

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perceptive critical mind, both self-conscious and self-critical of the directions of his creative effort. Yet, while he could not have written his plays without these qualities, it is probably true that the decisive factor, in his whole achievement, is a particular kind and intensity of social thinking, which in his case seems both to underlie and to determine the critical scrutiny and the restless experimentation. In seeking to define the magnificent realism of the great tradition of nineteenth-century fiction, I wrote of that kind of work which "seeks to create and judge the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons".¹

Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms.

I argued that this "social" tradition had broken down, in fiction, into the separate forms of the "personal" and the "sociological," and I would make the same analysis, with certain changes of detail, in the case of twentieth-century drama. The key to social realism, in these terms, lies in a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society, in which neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous and in real terms inseparable process. My interest in the work of Arthur Miller is that he seems to have come nearer than any other post-war writer (with the possible exceptions of Albert Camus and Albrecht Goes) to this substantial conception. Looking at it from one point of view, he has restored active social criticism to the drama, and has written on such contemporary themes as the social accountability of business, the forms of the success-ethic, intolerance and thought-control, the nature of modern work-relations. Yet he has written "about" these in such a way

¹ See Raymond Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel," *Partisan Review*, XXVI (Spring 1959), 200-213.

as to distinguish his work quite clearly from the ordinary sociological problem-play, for at his best he has seen these problems as living tissue, and his most successful characters are not merely "aspects of the way of life," but individuals who are ends and values in themselves:

He's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid . . . Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

It is from this centre—a new or newly-recovered way of social thinking, which is also powerfully available as direct experience—that any estimate of Arthur Miller as a dramatist must begin.