Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: A Celebration

By Joyce Carol Oates

Originally published in Michigan Quarterly Review, Fall 1998, and reprinted in Where I've Been, And Where I'm Going

Copyright © by Joyce Carol Oates

“He’s a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that’s an earthquake. and then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you’re finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.”

—Death of a Salesman

Was it our comforting belief that Willy Loman was “only” a salesman? That Death of a Salesman was about—well, an American salesman? And not about all of us?

When I first read this play at the age of fourteen or fifteen, I may have thought that Willy Loman was sufficiently “other”—”old.” He hardly resembled the men in my family, my father or grandfathers, for he was “in sales” and not a factory worker or small-time farmer, he wasn’t a manual laborer but a man of words, speech—what his son Biff bluntly calls “hot air.” His occupation, for all its adversities, was “white collar,” and his class not the one into which I’d been born; I could not recognize anyone I knew intimately in him, and certainly I could not have recognized myself, nor foreseen a time decades later when it would strike me forcibly that, for all his delusions and intellectual limitations, about which Arthur Miller is unromantically clear-eyed, Willy Loman is all of us. Or, rather, we are Willy Loman, particularly those of us who are writers, poets, dreamers; the yearning soul “way out there in the blue.” Dreaming is required of us, even if our dreams are very possibly self-willed delusions. And we recognize our desperate child’s voice assuring us, like Willy Loman pep-talking himself at the edge of a lighted stage as at the edge of eternity—”God Almighty, [I'll] be great yet! A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!”

Except of course, it can.

* * *

It would have been in the early 1950s that I first read Death of a Salesman, a few years after its Broadway premiere and enormous critical and popular success. I would have read it in an anthology of Best Plays of the Year. As a young teenager I’d begun avidly devouring drama; apart from Shakespeare, no plays were taught in the schools I attended in upstate New York (in the small city of Lockport and the Village of Williamsville, a suburb of Buffalo), and so I read plays with no sense of chronology, in no historic context, no doubt often without much comprehension. Reading late at night when the rest of the household was asleep was an intense activity for me, imbued with mystery, and reading drama was far more enigmatic than reading prose fiction. It
seemed to me a challenge that so little was explained in the stage directions; there was no helpful narrative voice; you were obliged to visualize, to “see” the stage in your imagination, the play’s characters always in present tense, vividly alive. In drama, people presented themselves primarily in speech, as they do in life. Yet there was an eerie, dreamlike melding of past and present in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman’s “present-action” dialogue and his conversations with the ghosts of his past like his revered brother Ben; there was a melting of the barriers between inner and outer worlds that gave to the play its disturbing, poetic quality. (Years later I would learn that Arthur Miller had originally conceived of the play as a monodrama with the title *The Inside of His Head*).

In the intervening years, Willy Loman has become our quintessential American tragic hero, our domestic Lear, spiraling toward suicide as toward an act of selfless grace, his mad scene on the heath a frantic seed-planting episode by flashlight in the midst of which the once-proud, now disintegrating man confesses, “I’ve got nobody to talk to.” His salesmanship, his family relations, his very life—all have been talk, optimistic and inflated sales rhetoric; yet, suddenly, in this powerful scene, Willy Loman realizes he has nobody to talk to; nobody to listen. Perhaps the most memorable single remark in the play is the quiet observation that Willy Loman is “liked . . . but not well-liked.” In America, this is not enough.

* * *

Nearly fifty years after its composition, *Death of a Salesman* strikes us as the most achingly contemporary of our classic American plays. It has proved to have been a brilliant strategy on the part of the thirty-four-year-old playwright to temper his gifts for social realism with the Expressionistic techniques of experimental drama like Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* and *The Hairy Ape*, Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, work by Chekhov, the later Ibsen, Strindberg, and Pirandello, for by these methods Willy Loman is raised from the parameters of regionalism and ethnic specificity to the level of the more purely, symbolically “American.” Even the claustrophobia of his private familial and sexual obsessions has a universal quality, in the plaintive-poetic language Miller has chosen for him. As we near the twenty-first century, it seems evident that America has become an ever more frantic, self-mesmerized world of salesmanship, image without substance, empty advertising rhetoric, and that peculiar product of our consumer culture “public relations”—a synonym for hypocrisy, deceit, fraud. Where Willy Loman is a salesman, his son Biff is a thief. Yet these are fellow Americans to whom “attention must be paid.” Arthur Miller has written the tragedy that Illuminates the dark side of American success—which is to say, the dark side of us.