

modern theatre guides

Arthur Miller's  
**Death of  
a Salesman**



PETER L. HAYS  
with KENT NICHOLSON

  
continuum

**Arthur Miller's**  
*Death of a Salesman*

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# General Preface

## *Continuum Modern Theatre Guides*

Volumes in the series *Continuum Modern Theatre Guides* offer concise and informed introductions to the key plays of modern times. Each book takes a close look at one particular play's dramaturgical qualities and then at its various theatrical manifestations. The books are carefully structured to offer a systematic study of the play in its biographical, historical, social and political context, followed by an in-depth study of the text and a chapter which outlines the work's production history, examining both the original productions of the play and subsequent major stage interpretations. Where relevant, screen adaptations will also be analyzed. There then follows a chapter dedicated to workshopping the play, based on suggested group exercises. Also included are a timeline and suggestions for further reading.

Each book covers:

- Background and context
- Analysis of the play
- Production history
- Workshopping exercises

The aim is to provide accessible introductions to modern plays for students in both Theatre/Performance Studies and English, as well as for informed general readers. The series includes up-to-date coverage of a broad range of key plays, with summaries of important critical approaches and the intellectual debates that have illuminated the meaning of the work and made a significant



contribution to our broader cultural life. They will enable readers to develop their understanding of playwrights and theatre-makers, as well as inspiring them to broaden their studies.

The Editors:  
Steve Barfield, Janelle Reinelt,  
Graham Saunders and Aleks Sierz

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For Myrna, as always.

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# 1 Background and Context

## Introduction

This chapter is an introduction to the study of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It explains why the play is important, gives a sketch of its author's life and discusses the social, economic, and political background to the play.

*Death of a Salesman* ran for 742 performances, won the Antoinette Perry Award [the Tony], the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Beyond that, it is undoubtedly one of the finest plays ever written by an American. (Biggsby, 1984: 186)

This valuation of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* by Christopher Biggsby, drama critic and recognized authority on Miller, is generally accepted. No discussion of American drama of the twentieth century can avoid Miller's play. Along with Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Salesman* is one of the triumvirate of America's greatest dramas. Professor Brenda Murphy records that,

Since its premiere, there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world.

*Death of a Salesman* has been produced on six continents, in every country that has a Western theatrical tradition, and in some that have not. It has been played in Yiddish in Argentina

## 2 Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

and in English by actors from the Yiddish theatre in South Africa. It has played before a native audience in a small Arctic village, with the same villagers returning night after night to witness a performance in a language they did not understand. There is no need at this point to demonstrate *Salesman's* universality, [or] the range of its appeal and the rapidity with which it has been established as one of the significant works in the world's theatrical repertoire. (Murphy, 1995: 70, 106)

Initially perceived as an attack on America's capitalistic system, which pursued profits alone and had no sympathy for the little man, the play's complexity has since been recognized, and different aspects have been emphasized in different productions: economics, misplaced ambition, parent-child relationships, delusional thinking, among others. The play made a celebrity of Miller and launched road company tours of the play in the United States, besides many productions abroad. It also changed to some extent American theater-going practice. Many theatergoers in 1949—as now—went to shows to be entertained, not to encounter thought-provoking drama. Then and now, Broadway depends heavily on groups buying advance tickets for shows that they expect to be entertaining, usually musicals or comedies. Often these are groups of women who attend the Wednesday or Saturday matinees, with a lunch before the show. *Death of a Salesman* was a show they felt their husbands would be interested in, and so after seeing the show themselves, they came back with their spouses. It was a tectonic shift in theater attendance: more middle-class, not-previous-theater-going males attended.

In a Playwrights' Forum published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, many contemporary playwrights commented on their fathers' reaction to *Salesman*. 'No play had the impact on audiences or on American culture as "Salesman" did . . . Watching "Salesman" is the most harrowing experience offered by the American theater.