HOT Season for Young People
2014-15
Teacher Guidebook

Death of a Salesman
by Arthur Miller

Nashville Repertory Theatre
For over 130 years Regions has been proud to be a part of the Middle Tennessee community, growing and thriving as our area has. From the opening of our doors on September 1, 1883, we have committed to this community and our customers.

One area that we are strongly committed to is the education of our students. We are proud to support TPAC’s Humanities Outreach in Tennessee Program. What an important sponsorship this is — reaching over 25,000 students and teachers — some students would never see a performing arts production without this program. Regions continues to reinforce its commitment to the communities it serves and in addition to supporting programs such as HOT, we have close to 200 associates teaching financial literacy in classrooms this year.

Thank you, teachers, for giving your students this wonderful opportunity. They will certainly enjoy the experience. You are creating memories of a lifetime, and Regions is proud to be able to help make this opportunity possible.

Jim Schmitz
Executive Vice President, Area Executive
Middle Tennessee Area
Dear Teachers,

Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* has been celebrated since its first performance on Broadway in 1949, and TPAC Education is delighted to present it as part of the HOT Season for Young People. There are many, many guidebooks, articles, and lesson plans available for study of Miller’s iconic work. This guidebook will focus primarily on Nashville Repertory Theatre’s specific production of *Death of a Salesman* and will provide activities for your students to appreciate the historical context while connecting themes to today’s culture.

We look forward to seeing you at the theater!

TPAC Education

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Special thanks to René Copeland and Gary Hoff of Nashville Repertory Theatre, and cast members Chip Arnold and Eric Pasto-Crosby for their contributions to this guidebook.

This guidebook was written, compiled, and edited by Kristin Dare-Horsley, TPAC Education.
From the Director

When Arthur Miller's new play *Death of a Salesman* was headed for the stage in 1949, the producers wanted him to change the name. No play with "death" in the title was going to sell tickets, and certainly not in a day and age when Broadway meant escapist entertainment. Miller actually considered doing it, too, but in the end the original name stuck. And ticket sales have been healthy ever since. But it's worth noting that, like a movie called *Titanic*, this is not something we watch to find out how it ends. It's a good guess that someone dies. And yet people have been enthralled by this play for 66 years now, and in countries all over the world. Most folks who express opinions on such things would go so far as to say that this is maybe America's finest play. What Miller created in this play is a unique, and, in its day, completely innovative way to explore the depths of the "why" of Willy Loman's last day on earth. As human beings, turns out we are really compelled by the question "But, why?" And that exploration reveals that Willy's struggle to be "successful," to be a good father and husband, and his family's struggle to respond by being a good wife and a good son, echoes in our own lives in varying, complex ways. Perhaps more now than ever

On the surface, the play is about the trials of one man, his job, and his family life. We see salesman Willy Loman's tragic reality compared to his daydream of perfection. We feel his pain. But as we look just a bit deeper, we see this play poses questions about larger themes of success and personal values and acceptance. What is the American Dream, how do you achieve it, and is it really for everyone? Does success mean smarts or money or being well liked? When this play debuted in 1949, these types of questions simply were not being asked. After World War II, Americans felt secure and confident in their status in their own lives and within the world. With this play Miller posited that this may not be the case for all, or that it may not be the case for long. And here we are 66 years later with even more hotly burning questions about how we identify success. Here we are, still struggling to understand our place in the world compared to the expectations set up by a culture focused on youth and rampant materialism. In some ways Willy Loman represents us all just doing the best we can, and this play, in Miller's words, suggests that mercy is in order as we examine these questions and ourselves.

Lastly, I draw to your attention the actual structure of the play and Miller's unique use of time. In this world, past and present overlap and happen at the same time. It has been likened to a slice of layer cake, or a geological feature where all the strata are visible at the same time. This fluidity of time, where what is currently happening is sometimes seen concurrently with what's going on in Willy's head (usually conversations with constructs of his own making from the past), results in a ground-shaking understanding of the wrestling match going on inside him. And this impact in particular is almost impossible to grasp from a reading of the page, truly requiring the embodiment by excellent actors on the stage for it to be realized. *Death of a Salesman* first and foremost is a piece of theatre, and our production of this masterpiece will endeavor to bring all who see it to a whole new level of understanding of this story which everyone thinks they know already, because, you know, the title.... a salesman dies. Think you're not like him? Wait and see.

- René Copeland, Producing Artistic Director of Nashville Repertory Theatre
From the
Set Designer

The director, René Copeland, challenged me to create a set for *Death of a Salesman* that was Abstract and Expressionistic rather than realistic. The way I decided to attack this challenge was to think about the world through Willy Loman’s mind. How does Willy see his world? What I realized is Willy did see the world in an abstract way. He desperately tries to not let reality ruin his imagined view of himself and his family, but he fails disastrously.

Willy’s world goes from past to present, imagined to real, happy to terrifying, light to dark in a moment. The play also moves in a similar manner. One moment the scene is in a happy memory from the past (looking through rose colored glass) to a scene where the world is falling apart in the present. To achieve this change, the wallpapered walls and “apartment buildings” are covered in screening with applied designs so they may be lit in a variety of ways (from the front, from the back, with breakup) to change the feel quickly.

I tried to avoid any 90-degree angles on the set. I wanted to keep the set off-kilter and asymmetrical to further show Willy’s view of his world. My goal is a set that will visually show Willy’s state of mind and give the audience a sense of his inner turmoil.

It is fun to take an American Classic and look at it in a different light. I truly hope you enjoy our attempt.

- Gary Hoff, Head of Design and Resident Scenic Designer for Nashville Repertory Theatre
Actors Chip Arnold (Willy Loman) and Eric Pasto-Crosby (Biff Loman) answer questions about upcoming rehearsals and performances of *Death of a Salesman*.

Chip, is Willy Loman a “bucket list” character for you? What is the appeal of playing the character?

Chip: Just look at the history of the actor’s who’ve played him! And I’m talking about the famous ones. *All* of the people that want to play him, it’s, I think, the same thing. It’s recognition of that common humanity that is so beautifully exposed in Willy. It’s something that everyone can look at and say, “Yes, I can identify with that.”

I love Willy Loman. And I make no judgment calls on his character. As actors, you do not make judgment calls about your characters. You play the truth of what those relationships are in the parameters of the story.

Eric, if Biff were a real person, would you be friends with him?

Eric: Yes. Good friends? No. Something I’ve always found interesting about Biff is that desire to make sure he’s enjoying life. That’s insatiable and inspiring all at the same time. And it comes at the detriment to all those around him. But, to me, is an interesting concept for someone. He goes after that with reckless abandon. To me that characteristic is alluring. That idea of someone who will just up and leave, in this case, if he’s not getting his way. Which is not an appropriate response. At which point I would say not a good friend.

How do you prepare for first rehearsal?

Chip: Right now, I’m stewing.

Eric: You’re constantly thinking about it. The hope is that I’ve almost done all the work that I can do before we get up and starting reading scripts, or at least that I’ve thought about it that much. Then I can take in what everyone else is giving.

Chip: It’s one of those things where each individual actor knows how he or she gets to the first day of rehearsal. After that, if you’ve done your homework, you’re *listening*. You come in as prepped as you can and you do whatever you can in the solitude of your world that you create, but we’re very dependent on each other, and then ultimately with the director to guide us.

Talk about what goes on from the first rehearsal to first performance. How long is that process?

Chip: Two and a half weeks. [Working 8-hour days or more.] It’s a wonderful challenge that all of us rise to.

What happens in those two and half weeks?

Eric: The first day we usually sign contracts, show and tell of set and some costumes that we’ll be wearing, if they have any made, ...introductions to new people, one table read, talk about it, usually read it again. And then over the next week, we go through what we think of blocking in each scene, talk through what’s going on in the scene, and running it if René [the director] has specific things she wants - visuals.
And then at some point there’s an off-book date when everyone has to be off book, and we run that. That’s usually a week to a week and a half before we start teching – adding props, costumes – and then we go into the space.

**Do you ever get to the point when you’re performing when you say to yourself, “That’s it. I’ve got it.”**

Chip: There is no arrival for an artist. In life or in pursuit of a specific creation that you’re working on.

Eric: There are moments that move closer in that direction, but my acting teacher used to say that the only time you will ever find perfection is when you’re dead.

**What do you think students of 2015 will get out of this play written in the 1940s? How can they relate to this?**

Eric: There’s nothing more interesting than watching people go after what they want. In this play, each character is doing that consistently. Whether it sets up their family members for tragedy, they are going after [what they want].

Chip: I would look at the four characters of the Loman family and say, “What kind of character do they have?” That gets you to the place of understanding of your talent, your opportunity, and your desire… to own your choices and to know that your choices have consequences. And these choices that you see the characters make reveal character. Action reveals character.

Since 1970, **Henry O. “Chip” Arnold** has been a professional actor, writer, and director in theatre, film, television, literature, and recordings. After graduating from Pepperdine University with a B.A. in acting, he completed a Master of Fine Arts degree at U.N.C. Chapel Hill. Nashville Rep credits include: *Noises Off, 1776, The Crucible, Darwin in Malibu, Proof, To Kill a Mockingbird, All My Sons*, and *Red*. He has worked with: Studio Tenn, Playmakers Rep, Advent Theatre, Mockingbird Theatre, Nashville Children’s Theatre, Nashville Shakespeare Festival, and Writer’s Stage. The play, *Stand*, by Writer’s Stage was named Best Play for 2013 by the Nashville Scene. He was given the award for Best Actor by The Tennessean in 2011 and the Best Actor honor by the Nashville Scene for 2012.

**Eric D. Pasto-Crosby** is proud a native of Nashville. He graduated from University of Colorado at Boulder with a B.F.A. in performance studies. Most Recent Nashville Rep credits include: *The Importance of Being Earnest, Clybourne Park, All My Sons, I Hate Hamlet, and Proof*. He has worked with: Studio Tenn, Nashville Shakespeare Festival, Nashville Children’s Theatre, Colorado Shakespeare Festival, Stage One, Tennessee Shakespeare Festival, and People’s Branch Theatre. A loyal member of the Society of American Fight Directors and a proud member of Actor’s Equity Association.
the American Dream

The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out.
– Arthur Miller, from 'An Interview with Arthur Miller’ by Matthew C. Roudané.

Objectives
Students will generate a modern definition of the American Dream.
Students will examine James Adams’ definition of the American Dream.
Students will consider the character Willy Loman and list ways he did or did not achieve the American Dream.

Warm-up
Step 1. Ask students what comes to mind when they hear the phrase the American Dream.
Step 2. Ask the students to generate a modern definition of the American Dream for the class and write that definition on the board.

Examine
James Truslow Adams coined the phrase in his book The Epic of America. Adams writes,

...that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

Step 1. Share Adams’ quote with your students, and, if needed, explain concepts like “social order,” “fullest stature,” “innately capable,” and “fortuitous circumstances,” so that they will have a complete understanding of the quote.

Step 2. Ask students to think of three people, with at least one of them being someone they personally know, that have achieved this definition of the American Dream. As a class, discuss the students’ choices, asking them to provide examples and defend their lists.

Step 3. Ask students to compare Adams’ definition to their modern class definition. Are they similar? What are the important things in each definition? Does Adams’ definition apply today?

Did Willy Loman achieve the American Dream?
Step 1. Ask students to list material things that are important to Willy. (Write answers on the board.)

Step 2. Ask students to find evidence of Willy’s income stability, growth, or decline.

Step 3. Ask students to consider Willy’s social standing. Is he respected by his boss or peers?

Step 4. Ask students to compare their lists for Willy Loman to Adam’s definition of The American Dream. Either as a class discussion or individual student essay, ask students, Did Willy Loman achieve the American Dream? Did he achieve some aspect of the American Dream? Why or why not?

Write/Journal
Step 1. Ask students to consider both definitions of the American Dream and to write a personal definition that includes details and goals they wish to achieve. This is a journaling activity that will remain private.

My American Dream
My life will be fuller when I ____________________.
I will know I have reached my potential when ____________________.
Three goals I have are ________________, ________________, ________________.
Act it Out

Improvisation is a form of theatre in which no script is used. Instead, the actors create the dialog and action themselves as they perform. - improvcomedy.org

Objective: Students will improvise short scenes to connect with subject matter within *Death of a Salesman*.

*Death of a Salesman* first appeared on Broadway in 1949, and Nashville Repertory Theatre’s production will be set in that time period. The following fun activity will help students realize the modern relevance of the play and connect to the underlying issues presented within. This activity is meant to be fun and fast. Encourage students to go for it.

Ask students if they are familiar with the term improv and if they have previously seen or participated in improv. Tell students that improv is not only comedic, but dramatic as well, and that today they will improv short scenes similar to scenarios within *Death of a Salesman*.

**Warm-up: “Yes, and” activity**

To help students warm-up to the idea and to practice the art of making up dialogue on the spot, share the following simple “rules” of improv and do the following “Yes, and” activity as a class. These rules are not all-inclusive by any means, but should help in getting students started in this activity.

- **Rule 1.** “Yes, and.” This rule of improv simply means to accept the situation you’re in as a performer and do not block your fellow actors. Agree to the scenario and move the story forward by adding to it.
- **Rule 2.** Make each other look good. You are a team even if the scene calls for you to be contentious. Again, support one another and add to the story.
- **Rule 3.** Listen. Listen to your partners so that your contribution makes sense with the story.

**“Yes, and” Activity:** With students in their seats, begin a class improv with the following statement, “This morning I…”. Students should take turns adding one sentence to the story (For simplicity, students should take turns in order of seating.) keeping the rules of improv in mind, specifically, moving the story forward until everyone has a chance to contribute.

**Improv: 90-second scenes**

Step 1. Tell students you will provide the characters and situations for the improv and that they will have 90 seconds to perform their scenes.

Step 2. Ask for volunteers of either 2 or 4 students. NOTE: It is okay if 2 groups perform the same scenario. It will be interesting to see similarities and differences within the student performances of the same situation. Choose from the following scenarios for your volunteers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Characters</th>
<th>The Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Neighbors</td>
<td>One asks to borrow money from the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Parent, 1 Adult son or daughter</td>
<td>Parent offers advice to son/daughter for job interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Parents</td>
<td>Discussion about not having enough money to pay bills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Parent, 1 Child</td>
<td>The child admits to stealing something from school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Parents, 2 Siblings</td>
<td>One parent is arguing with one child. The other parent and child are trying to calm the situation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Act it Out

Step 2. After the volunteers have been given their scenarios, give students 1 minute to decide who will play what character and how they will begin.

Step 3. Groups will take turns performing their scenes before the class.

After Each Group Has Performed

Step 1. Ask students what stood out to them while performing and while watching others. Ask students to compare versions of the same improv scenario if one scene was performed multiple times.

Step 2. Ask students to think about their scene and discuss as a class how each improv scene relates to Death of a Salesman. NOTE: This section assumes students have read the play. If they have not, do this section of the activity after the students have seen the play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Situation</th>
<th>Compared to the Play</th>
<th>Discussion Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One neighbor asks to borrow money from the other.</td>
<td>Willy asks Charley for money to pay his insurance. Charley ends up offering Willy a job again, which makes Willy angry.</td>
<td>Why does Willy get angry when he clearly needs the money? If you were Charley, would you give Willy the money after treating you that way? Why does he continue to support Willy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent gives the son/daughter advice for his/her upcoming job interview.</td>
<td>Biff plans to ask a former employer, Oliver, to loan him upstart money for a new business.</td>
<td>Willy tells Biff what to wear (a business suit), how to talk (don't say &quot;gee&quot;) and that &quot;personality wins the day.&quot; What do you think would be important advice for a job interview or asking for a business loan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion about not having enough money to pay bills.</td>
<td>Willy and Linda discuss what they owe in bills compared to Willy’s salary.</td>
<td>Are the Loman’s living beyond their means, or just going through a rough time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child admits to stealing something from school.</td>
<td>Biff tells Willy he stole a football from school. Willy first tells Biff to return it, but soon makes excuses for Biff's behavior. He decides that, because the coach likes Biff, he will commend Biff for his initiative in taking the ball.</td>
<td>What life lesson does Willy teach Biff in this scene? Will this help Biff in the long run?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent is arguing with one child. The other parent and child are trying to calm the situation.</td>
<td>Willy and Biff have a very heated argument during which Biff tries to reveal who he really is. Linda and Happy try to deny and defuse the situation.</td>
<td>In this scene, Biff tries to have an honest relationship with his family, but the family is resistant. Why do you think the truth is sometimes hard to tell or hear?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 3. Ask students what other important themes/scenes from the play could be used in this improv activity.

After the Play

Ask students to compare their scenes with similar scenes in Death of a Salesman. Ask students if the time period in the play, 1949, made a difference in how they related to the play. Ask students which character they most related to and why.
Additional Activities and Discussion Questions

- The Loman’s have an exaggerated view of themselves and others; downplaying Bernard, for example, and overstating their own achievements. Why is it important to be truthful with yourself and others? Can you be confident as well as realistic? Is how you portray yourself outwardly different from how you feel about yourself inwardly? What would your social media page look like and reveal if you were honest?

- Biff, so devastated by his father’s affair, gives up on his dreams in life. Have you ever been disappointed by your parents or a role model? What is a healthy way to move on from disappointment?

- Compare and contrast the two women of the play, Linda Loman and The Woman.

- Throughout the course of the play, we learn that Willy has an affinity and ability for carpentry, and that he may not be the great salesman he has bragged about. What kept Willy from working a job more suited to his likes or natural ability? Did he have a false idea of success? How does this effect Biff and Happy’s outlook on life and success?

- About the achievability of the American Dream, Arthur Miller states, “People elsewhere tend to accept, to a far greater degree anyway, that the conditions of life are hostile to man’s pretensions.” In what ways are the conditions of Willy’s life hostile to his pretensions? To Biff’s? To Happy’s?

- Read René Copeland’s director’s notes (page 2). If you were the marketing director for Nashville Repertory Theatre, how would you promote this show in which everyone knows the main character dies? What are some alternate titles for this play?

- Read the interview with lead actors Chip Arnold and Eric Pasto-Crosby (pages 4-5). How would you prepare for the role of Willy Loman? Biff Loman?

- Look at Gary Hoff’s set design for Nashville Repertory Theatre’s production of Death of a Salesman (page 3), and read his description. If you were to design a set for the play, what would your set look like? Would it be realistic or abstract and expressionistic like Gary’s?

After the Play

- What character did you most relate to in the play? Why?

- What surprised you most about the play? Why?

- How did Gary’s set design influence the way you felt about or watched the play? What details about the set did you notice?

- Was Chip Arnold’s characterization of Willy Loman what you expected? How did seeing it live affect the way you think about Willy Loman? Biff Loman?
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DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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* A fund of The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee