

## THE PLAYWRIGHT – Arthur Miller (1915 – 2005)

Arthur Miller was born in Manhattan, New York City, near the lower edge of Harlem in 1915. His father was a comfortably middle-class manufacturer of women's coats, and his mother was a schoolteacher. The Miller family moved to Brooklyn in the early 1930s because the Great Depression had plunged them into great financial difficulty. These years of poverty and struggle influenced many of his plays.

After he graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, Arthur Miller spent the next two and a half years working as a stock clerk in an automobile parts warehouse until he had saved enough money to attend college at the University of Michigan. He finished college with financial aid from the National Youth Administration and from the money he earned as night editor of the Michigan Daily newspaper. While there, Miller began to write plays, several of which were rewarded with prizes. Upon graduating from college in 1938, Miller returned home to New York where he married Mary Grace Slatter and had two children, Jane and Robert. While back home, Miller also joined the Federal Theatre Project, an arts program sponsored by the US government. However, before his first play could be produced, the project ended. A college football injury kept him from active service in the Second World War. He worked as a fitter at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and wrote radio scripts, he also wrote two novels during this time - *Situation Normal* (1944), a volume of material about army life, and *Focus* (1945) a novel about anti-Semitism.



Arthur Miller, 1949. The year he won the Pulitzer for *Death of a Salesman*.

Miller had not, however, given up on playwriting. In 1944, his play *The Man Who Had All the Luck* won a prize offered by New York City's Theatre Guild and received a Broadway production. The show, though, was not very lucky - it closed after only four performances.

It was not until three years later that Miller was able to find success on the stage. His play *All My Sons* debuted to positive critical reviews in 1947, and it was a big hit with audiences as well. This play established him as a significant voice in American theatre. In his review of Miller's play, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote, "The theatre has acquired a genuine new talent." The play also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Donaldson Award, voted upon by subscribers to *Billboard Magazine*.

Arthur Miller later described the impact of *All My Sons* on his life:

*"The success of a play, especially one's first success, is somewhat like pushing against a door which is suddenly opened that was always securely shut until then. For myself, the experience was invigorating. It suddenly seemed that the audience was a mass of blood relations, and I sensed a warmth in the world that had not been there before. It made it possible to dream of daring more and risking more."*

Two years later, with *Death of a Salesman*, Miller did indeed dare and risk more. Likewise, he gained more as well. With this play, Arthur Miller soared to new artistic heights and critics began to regard him as one of the greatest twentieth-century American playwrights. The play was a huge popular success, and ran for 742 performances at the Morosco Theatre, New York. The play also won a Pulitzer Prize.

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN Study Guide for Teachers

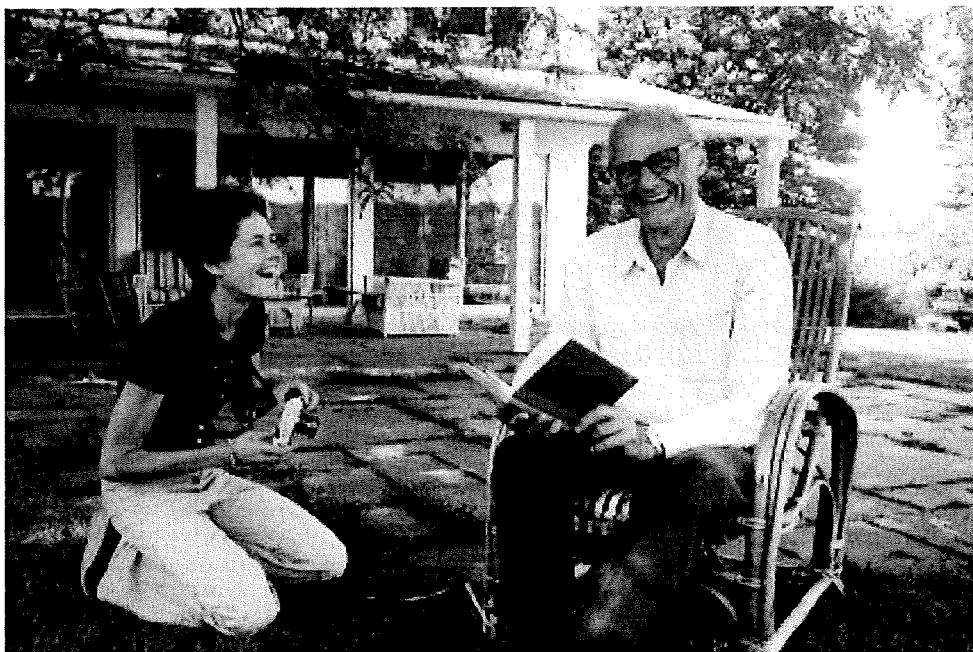
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The next several years were very good for Miller, during which time he had several hit plays, culminating with *The Crucible*, which debuted on Broadway in 1953, during the height of Senator Joe McCarthy's congressional investigations into "un-American" activities of US citizens (which mostly meant involvement with the Communist Party). The early 1950s were a very tense time in American history; the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union made many Americans extremely worried about the safety and future of their nation, and Miller reflected the paranoia and hysteria of the time in *The Crucible*. As a result, Miller was denied a passport to Belgium to attend the opening of *The Crucible* there. Later, he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and was asked to tell the committee members the names of US citizens who were involved in Communist activities. Miller refused, and was thus cited with contempt of Congress, a serious crime. This conviction, however, was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1958.



The mid-50s were also very turbulent times in Miller's personal life. In 1956 he divorced his wife and married actress and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, whom he had first met in Hollywood in the early 1950s. This event brought him great notoriety and caused a media sensation, but in 1961 it also ended in divorce. Miller married photographer Inge Morath in 1962. They had two children, Rebecca and Daniel, although Daniel had Down Syndrome and was placed in an institution soon after his birth. Miller still wrote up until his death in 2005, although from the mid-eighties his work was more highly valued in London, where critical and popular success was much warmer than in the United States. He is revered as one of America's greatest playwrights who helped to define American drama.

Miller was also the author of *The Misfits* (1961), a screenplay for his second wife, Marilyn Monroe; and *Timebends: A Life* (1987), an autobiography. His books of reportage with photographs by Inge Morath, his third wife, include *In Russia* (1969) and *Chinese Encounters* (1979). Among Miller's other plays are *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *After the Fall* (1964), *The Price* (1968), *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991), *Broken Glass* (1994), and *Resurrection Blues* (2002). Miller won seven Tony Awards, an Olivier Award, an Obie Award, the John F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award, the National Book Award 2001 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the Jerusalem Award.



Miller with his third wife, Inge Morath, at their Roxbury home, 1975 .  
(Alfred Eisenstaedt/LIFE Image Archive)

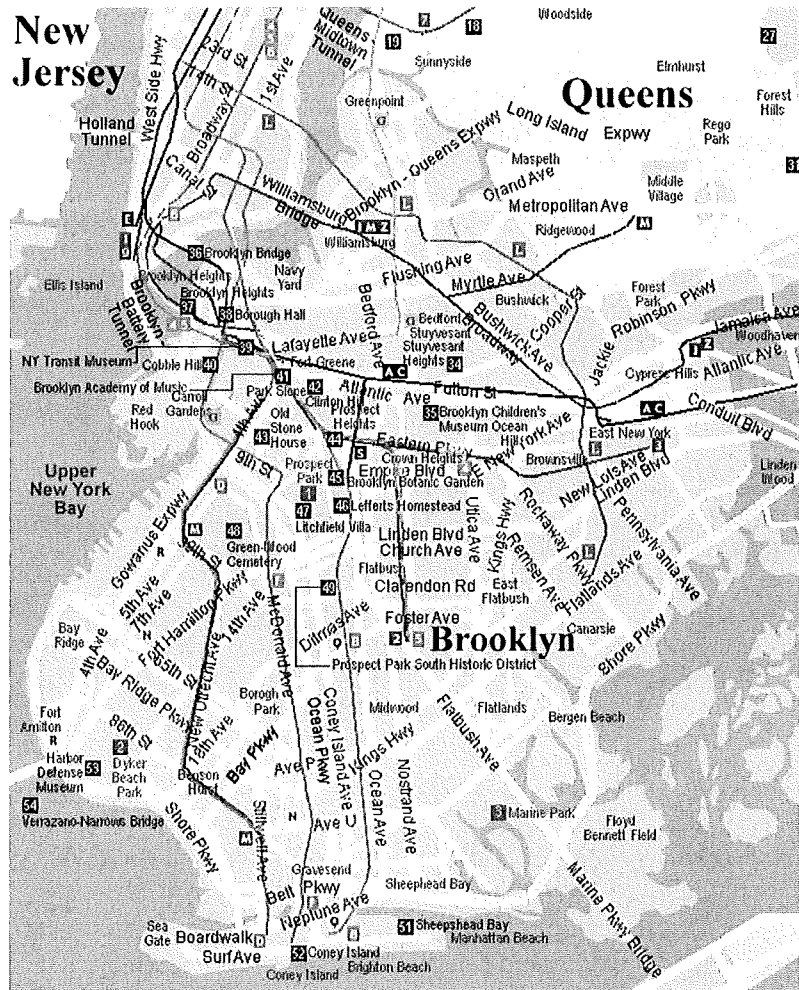
## THE SETTING

**THIS IS AMERICA** —Michael Walkup, Production Dramaturg, Yale Repertory Theatre  
[http://www.yalerep.org/on\\_stage/currentseason/salesman/articles\\_america.html](http://www.yalerep.org/on_stage/currentseason/salesman/articles_america.html)

Arthur Miller sets *Death of a Salesman*, his exploration of the elusiveness of the American Dream, in the quintessentially American city of Brooklyn. (Actually, the term “city” only properly applies to Brooklyn until 1898 when it officially became incorporated as one of New York City’s five boroughs.) Brooklyn occupies Kings County on eighty-one square miles at Long Island’s western tip and is connected to neighboring Manhattan by three bridges, one tunnel, fourteen subway lines, one ferry service, and a pugnacious wariness of being consumed by the cosmopolitan bully across the East River. We recognize Brooklyn from images of its high-stooped brownstones and eponymous bridge, as the setting for numerous sitcoms from *The Honeymooners* to *The Cosby Show*, and as the home of Brooklynese, a much-imitated accent popularized by Hollywood through surly WWII soldiers and down-on-their-luck street toughs.

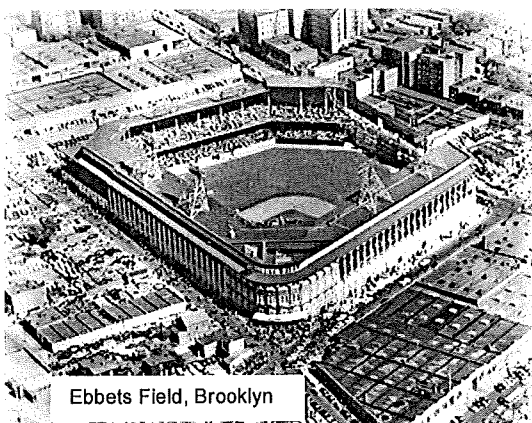
Brooklyn’s many distinct neighborhoods offer snapshots of the American melting pot. The ethnic communities of Brooklyn were for decades synonymous with their neighborhoods’ names—some still are. There have long been Jewish residents in Brighton Beach and Flatbush; African Americans moved into Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville after WWI; Italians still congregate in Bensonhurst; and Vinegar Hill near the Manhattan Bridge used to be known as Irish Town. Though the quiet of these Brooklyn neighborhoods is sometimes disturbed by intense parochialism, the borough is united in its resistance to being ranked second after the more genteel Manhattan. Such pride and doggedness have earned Brooklyn its reputation as the hardscrabble borough of striving families. There’s more space here, and it’s cheaper by the square foot. There are more family-friendly businesses, and fewer skyscrapers blotting out the blue.

The first half of the twentieth century saw Brooklyn in ascendance: the Brooklyn Navy Yard brought thousands of workers to the borough during the two World Wars, and new subway lines built in the 1930s made for an easy commute between Brooklyn and Manhattan. A spike in housing construction after WWI expanded the borough’s residences so that by the mid-1920s it surpassed Manhattan as the most populous borough of NYC, a predominance it maintains to this day. Kenneth T. Jackson, a NYC historian, claims that as many as one-quarter of all Americans can trace their heritage to one-time Brooklyn residents.



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Because of its role as a way station for such a large portion of the population, Brooklyn boasts a number of iconic American landmarks. Ebbets Field—home to the Brooklyn Dodgers from 1913 to 1957—bordered diverse neighborhoods in central Brooklyn until it was demolished to make way for high-rise apartments. Prospect Park, a 19th-century city-beautification project designed by the same architects as Manhattan's Central Park, spans 585 acres just blocks away (the architects considered Prospect Park the more successful project). Coney Island, at the south tip of the borough, was home to such classic amusements as the Cyclone roller coaster and the Steeplechase, and every summer visitors elbowed each other on the boardwalk waiting in line for a Nathan's hot dog.

*Death of a Salesman* opens in the Loman's home in Brooklyn in 1949. The small, single-family unit is described by Miller in a stage direction as crowded on all sides by the "towering, angular shapes" of new apartment buildings. Miller never specifies in which neighborhood the Lomans live, rather his play evokes an almost mythic Brooklyn.

The past Willy recalls is another important setting of Miller's play – the early 1930s, when Willy's two sons were in high school, Brooklyn was still green, and the neighboring structures did not impede the view from the yard. Through leaps in memory spurred by grief and confusion, Willy seems to live simultaneously in these two disparate Brooklyns.



Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff in the 1985 movie.

## The Characters: Who's who?

(In *Death of a Salesman*, the characters talk about themselves and each other. Can we always accept what they say at face value? What might be their motivation to embellish or distort the truth?)

### WILLY LOMAN

*a salesman, age 63*

"And they know me boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing boys: I have friends."

--WILLY

"I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again, that I won't make a living for you, or a business for the boys."

--WILLY

"I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to...pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people."

--WILLY

"...I still feel—kind of temporary about myself."

--WILLY



Rick Foucheux as Willy Loman and Nancy Robinette as Linda Loman in the 2008 production at Arena Stage.

### LINDA LOMAN

*Willy's wife*

"You're my foundation and my support, Linda."

--WILLY

"[It's} enough to be happy right here, right now. Why must everybody conquer the world?"

--LINDA

### BIFF

*Willy and Linda's older son, age 34*

"I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I've come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life."

--BIFF

"Like a young god. Hercules—something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him... God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!"

--WILLY

**HAPPY**

*Willy and Linda's younger son (age 32)*

"I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment – all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's always what I wanted. An apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely."

--HAPPY

"I gotta show some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade."

-- HAPPY



Arthur Kennedy as Biff, Lee J. Cobb as Willy & Cameron Mitchell as Happy in the 1949 production.



Thomas Chalmers as Uncle Ben, Lee J. Cobb as Willy, & Howard Smith as Charley in the original 1949 production.

**UNCLE BEN**

*Willy's older brother*

"Ben. That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate! The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into the jungle, and comes out, the age of 21, and he's rich!"

--WILLY

**CHARLEY**

*Willy's neighbor and friend*

"A man oughta come in with a few words. One thing about Charley. He's a man of few words, and they respect him."

--WILLY

**BERNARD**

*Charley's son and friend to Biff and Happy*

"Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him."

--WILLY, to BIFF

**OTHERS**

**THE WOMAN**

**HOWARD WAGNER**, *Willy's Boss*

**JENNY**, *Charley's Secretary*

**STANLEY**, *a waiter*

**MISS FORSYTHE**, *a call girl*

**LETTA**, *a call girl*