

WYPLAY  
HOUSE

30 April to 29 May  
Arthur Miller's

# Death of a Salesman

Director **Sarah Esdaile**  
Designer **Francis O'Connor**  
Lighting Designer **Chris Davey**  
Sound Designer **Mic Pool**  
Composer and Musical Director  
**Simon Slater**  
Voice Coach **Charmian Hoare**  
Fight Director **Terry King**  
Casting Director **Julia Horan**

## Cast

Marion Bailey, Sarah Ball,  
Nick Barber, Russell Bentley,  
Tomm Coles, Christopher Ettridge,  
Tom Hodgkins, Philip Jackson,  
Poppy Roe, Lex Shrapnel,  
Adam Venus and Maya Wasowicz

Photography by Chris Blott

# Teacher Resource Pack

# Introduction



Death of a Salesman is widely considered as one of the greatest plays of the 20th Century. It was pioneering in form and structure and fiercely critical of the society ideals in which it existed. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 and still has a startling relevancy over sixty years after its premiere.

Arthur Miller is the reason that I do what I do. His writing has a scope and a passion that moves me like no other playwright. His plays fuse the personal and political in a way that makes us both weep for his characters and inspires us to fight to change a world in which they are left with no other choices.

Salesman is widely considered to be the greatest of Miller's plays and one of the most important of the Twentieth century. Miller described Salesman as a love affair between a father and son and between them both and America. Willy Loman is a man who pursues his vision of a better life to the bitter end because insignificance is more frightening to him than death and because being "a dime a dozen" is simply not an option in a society that worships money and success.

If you are coming to the play fresh, I urge you to make the trip to the Playhouse and see what all the fuss is about; if you have read or studied it, I urge you to give yourself the unforgettable experience of watching it on stage; and finally, if you have seen it many times before, come to West Yorkshire Playhouse to see what this extraordinary cast and creative team can do to enrich your relationship with the play. Whatever you know or don't know about the play already, I feel confident that you will have an electrifying encounter with Arthur Miller and his harrowing yet uplifting masterpiece.

Sarah Esdaile

**Director of Death of a Salesman**

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Creative Education at West Yorkshire Playhouse is offering a whole host of activities in connection with our production of **Death of a Salesman**. To find out more please contact **Jessica Farmer** on **0113 213 7800** or **jessica.farmer@wyp.org.uk**.

**Encounter** – 11 May, 5.30pm-6.15pm

£3 per student

Pre-show question and answer session with the company

**Theatre Days** – 13 (Sold Out), 20 and 27 April

£19.50 per student to include matinee performance ticket

A practical insight into the making of this production.

**In-school Workshops**, By arrangement

£160 for a group of up to 30 students

Pre or post show workshops in your school focusing on this production.

# Synopsis

The play begins with Willy Loman returning to his Brooklyn home late one evening from his work as a travelling salesman. His wife Linda greets him and finds him exhausted. Linda suggests he talk to his boss Howard Wagner about getting a position in New York so that he would no longer have to travel so far.

Meanwhile Biff and Happy, Willy's grown-up sons who are staying with Linda and Willy, have woken. During the conversation that follows it is revealed that neither of the boys is content – Biff is struggling with his father's view of him as a failure and although Happy is seemingly success-ful he is lonely. They dream about setting up a business together and resolve that Biff will make an appointment to see Bill Oliver, a businessman for whom Biff once worked, and ask for a loan.

Exhausted, Willy reminisces about the boys when they were younger. As he slips from present to past we see Willy's hopes for himself and his family and the view that to be successful you need be well-liked and attractive.

Charley, the Loman's neighbour has heard the commotion of Willy returning home and comes over. He offers Willy a job but Willy is too proud to take it. Through his conversation with Charley we learn that Willy's brother Ben has recently passed away and he appears to Willy during the scene, taunting him with tales of the wealth he has acquired.

Linda confides in Biff and Happy that there is something seriously wrong with Willy and that his disappointment in his sons is causing him great pain. She begs them to help him. By the end of the evening, the boys have told Willy of their idea of setting up business together and Biff plans to go and see Bill Oliver the following day. Willy resolves to talk to Howard Wagner about getting a position in New York. They arrange to meet at Stanley's Chop House following their meetings.



# Synopsis

The following morning the house is full of expectation. Unfortunately Willy's meeting with Howard does not go well and the meeting ends with Howard firing him. Following this he visits Charley at his office and runs into Bernard, Charley's son, who has become a successful lawyer, causing Willy's further disappointment in his own son, Biff. Bernard tells Willy that Biff changed following a visit to see his father in Boston which angers Willy. Charley again offers Willy a job and again Willy turns it down. Charley loans Willy the money to pay his insurance.

Meanwhile Biff's meeting with Bill Oliver has also gone badly. Oliver kept Biff waiting all day and then hardly remembered who he was. This compounds Biff's view of himself as a failure. He resolves to clear the air with his father once and for all. The subsequent meeting at Stanley's Chop House does not go well, ending with Biff walking out, leaving Happy to look after Willy. Happy, however, is distracted by two girls, Lotta and Miss Forsythe, and rejects Willy, leaving with the girls.

Willy retreats into the past and through his memory it is revealed that the source of tension between he and Biff stems from Biff's discovery of one of his father's affairs in Boston.

Later that evening Linda is very angry with Biff and Happy for walking out on Willy and a huge argument ensues. Biff breaks down. Willy leaves the house and we hear the sound of his car speeding away.

The requiem is the final scene of the play and we see Biff, Linda, Happy and Charley at Willy's graveside. Linda is left alone to say goodbye.



# Characters



## **Willy Loman**

The salesman of the story, Willy Loman believes that to get on in life you need be well liked and attractive. Willy has spent his life aspiring to live the American dream. Now at sixty-one years old Willy is unable to reconcile the reality that he cannot achieve this success and wealth.

## **Linda Loman**

Willy's long-suffering wife who is the strength of the family, attempting to balance the fragile father-son relationships. Linda is supportive, loyal and wants to believe in Willy and his dreams but she is also realistic and desperately wants to find a way to help her husband.

## **Biff Loman**

Willy's eldest son. Biff was a high school football star and Willy has ever since had huge expectations of him. Biff, however, has never been able to hold down a job in the city and his instincts tell him to abandon Willy's dream and head West to work on the land. This conflict between father and son cannot be reconciled.

## **Happy Loman**

Willy's younger son who has lived in Biff's shadow all his life. Much like his father, Happy is in the pursuit of success, wealth and women. Happy tries to persuade Biff to play along with Willy's fantasies of success.

## **Bernard**

The son of the Loman's next door neighbour Charley, Bernard has always idolised Biff. Having always studied hard, Bernard is now a successful lawyer. Willy has derided Bernard in the past for not being "well-liked" and he now finds his success difficult to deal with.

## **Charley**

The Lomans' next door neighbour and Bernard's father. Charley is wealthy and supports Willy by giving him money to help pay his bills, even offering him a job. Willy always believed he could be more successful than Charley and is now jealous of his success.

## **Ben**

Willy's successful and wealthy older brother Ben has recently died and he appears to Willy in dream-like moments. Ben is the ultimate in success for Willy and adds to his feeling of inadequacy.

## **Howard Wagner**

Howard is Willy's boss. He has taken over from his father and has taken Willy off salary and onto straight commission. Howard is condescending towards Willy and sees him as insignificant.

## **The Woman**

A woman with whom Willy had an affair. When Biff discovers his father's affair his view of him changes.

## **Stanley**

A waiter at Frank's Chop House where Willy is to meet with his sons to celebrate their hoped-for success.

## **Miss Forsythe and Letta**

Two women at Frank's Chop House. Their presence distracts the Biff and Happy in their meeting with Willy.

## **Jenny**

Secretary to Charley, Willy's next door neighbour.

# Interview

## Sarah Esdaile – Director

### **How did you discover Arthur Miller?**

The first play of Arthur Miller's that I studied was *The Crucible* at school and after that I read everything else – plays, biographies and fiction – anything of Miller's that I could get my hands on. I realised that more than Shakespeare, more than any other playwright, these were the plays for me. The stories and the characters moved me. Miller fuses the personal and the political more successfully than any other writer. Audiences don't feel that they are preached at, rather they are witnessing intimate stories, and these stories operate on many levels.

### **Why *Death of a Salesman*?**

It's a great, great play and beautifully crafted. And plays like this are never not relevant. The subtitle of the play is interesting "Certain private conversations in two acts and a requiem" and as an audience watching the play you do often feel that these are conversations that you shouldn't be listening to. This play moves people because audiences can identify with what the play is fundamentally about – a man's desire to be successful and the painful reality when he realises that these aspirations cannot be achieved. The writing is sophisticated and complex. Many commentators make sweeping statements that *Death of a Salesman* is a protest against the capitalist philosophies of the American Dream but actually the most stable character in the play is Charlie who is a capitalist. Ultimately, according to Miller, the play is a love affair between father and son and them both with America. It's about the impact of expectation on the Loman family and how Willy's expectations, which have been constructed by society, lead to his downfall.

### **What will this production bring to the play?**

I feel very humble in directing this play and I trust in Miller's writing. I am particularly interested in exploring Willy's cruelties, his affair and the merging of his past and present. Miller once said that there are no flashbacks in this play, that for Willy it is all part of his present. What we see on stage are Willy's memories which he prefers to his present and I'm interested in the subjectivity of these memories – we don't know the truth, all we have is the past as Willy sees it.

On the design side this production will contain projections so video will be interspersed throughout. Of course, any new team of creatives and actors coming together will bring something to a piece and we are discovering new elements in the rehearsal room.

### **How are rehearsals going?**

We are working chronologically through the play. In order to create an ensemble I have undertaken a lot of character work with the actors. In terms of character stage-time, this play is rather unbalanced – there are some characters who just appear for one scene. However, we have done detailed work with all the actors in really exploring their characters. We have split the text into units and rehearse in these chunks – systematically working through for a first draft. I think it's important for the company to get all the way



# Interview

## Sarah Esdaile – continued

through the piece as this will help the understanding of the characters and the play and then for us to go back and work through in more detail.

### **How will this production touch the audience?**

I hope that the production moves the audience. I feel a great deal of responsibility for this piece in that my role is to act as a conduit for the playwright and audience. I am also very aware that many people seeing this production will be seeing it for the first time, many of them students who are reading the play in school, and I feel an incredible responsibility in bringing it to life. Audiences will receive the story in different ways - some on a personal level and others on an intensely political level.

The play is complex and was pioneering in structure when it was written and I hope to enable the audience to be fully engaged with what is in Willy's past and present. The intended focus in the play is not on minute-to-minute action. The **how** is the focus not the **what**. Willy's death is inevitable.



# Interview

## Marion Bailey: Linda Loman

### How are rehearsals going?

Very well. We're working long days and it's very emotional but in a good way. The process has been to undertake a lot of text and character work in the beginning. We were given a lot of homework! The primary tool for us in discovering our characters has been to look at the text and in particular what the character says about themselves, what other characters say about them and what they say about others. Sarah (Esdaile, director) asked us to create a biography for our character using words from the text. We also looked at other elements that would tell us something about the character such as a colour that represents the character, an object that is special to them, an animal that represents them and the character's favourite piece of music. We shared these ideas with the rest of the company. In the first few weeks of rehearsal I was the only female actor so it was interesting hearing the male take on Linda. I am discovering new elements of Linda everyday and I'm getting to know her.

### What makes *Death of a Salesman* a great play?

We have been discussing in rehearsal how influenced Arthur Miller was by Greek tragedy and how this play has an epic, dance-like feel. *Death of a Salesman* works on a visceral level, it is poetic and beautifully written but it would work without the words. It doesn't just engage the brain but the heart and the gut too. It is a politically sharp piece but the personal story of the unintentional destruction of the Loman family because of their inability to face reality is incredibly engaging.

### What does Linda want most in the world?

In her thirties Linda wants domestic happiness - a happy family life with all of the American accoutrements. She profoundly loves Willy. Later, the point at which we meet Linda in the play, she desperately wants to hold onto that dream and to Willy. It's interesting that she talks very little about herself in the play, it's always about others and by the end, it's all about Willy and his survival and happiness.

### What does Linda think is Willy's best quality?

Willy's best qualities are his sense of fun, his masculinity, his desire to look after them all and his dreams and aspirations. Later she does still see these qualities but she also sees what she perceives to be his exhaustion and the breakdown of his relationship with Biff. She thinks that if she can reconcile Biff and Willy, life will change. Linda hopes she can heal Willy.





# Interview

## Marion Bailey – continued

Linda sees her role in life as being a good wife to Willy. She is very good at budgeting and running the home and she handles her husband well. She knows Willy and his weaknesses as well as his strengths, his exaggerations, the fact that he is economical with the truth. I believe that she also knows about his women and about Boston but she dare not open that box. She knows that Willy loves her and she is right.

### **What excites you about this production?**

The scope of it, that it moves from the prosaic to the epic, from joyous domesticity to despair. It is not a naturalistic play and was pioneering in form when it was written.

I am enjoying playing a strong woman. When Sarah asked us to choose an animal to represent the character I chose a lioness. Miller is sometimes criticised for weak women in his plays but I see Linda as the backbone of the Loman family. When she defers to Willy it's because she chooses to let Willy have his way.

### **What is the challenging about this production?**

The greatest challenge I feel is doing justice to Arthur Miller's great play.

### **How would you like the play to touch the audience?**

I would like the audience to be moved by the play, and to enjoy it. I hope that the audience will hear the language, see the physicality and experience the power of the play.



# Interview

## Nick Barber: Happy Loman

### **What makes *Death of a Salesman* a great play?**

A couple of things strike me. One is the relationships within the play. It is about family, the dynamics within that family and how they shift. This element is very truthful and everyone can relate to this portrayal of the family. The other thing is that Miller is not afraid to take the audience on a journey into a dark place. We have been discussing in rehearsals how the play has elements of Greek tragedy. It is cathartic in the sense that it takes the audience on this journey and brings them through it. The audience know what will happen to Willy from the start of the play but it's not about what happens it's about how it happens.

### **How would you describe Happy?**

Happy is happy go lucky but not very emotionally intelligent. He would rather everyone had a nice time than approach their problems. He's papering over the cracks. He's also a misogynist and sees women either as whores or as paragons of virtue which is how he sees his mother. Other women he sees as objects. He is much like Willy in that he has no sense of self and what he really wants from life. He thinks he wants women, cars and a nice apartment but this doesn't seem to have made him content. He embodies Willy's sense of self importance and ambition. He could turn into Willy.

### **What excites you about this play?**

I'm loving being back at West Yorkshire Playhouse. I was here last year with *His Dark Materials* which was co-directed by Sarah Esdaile. It's great to work with Sarah again and a fantastic company. It is a very strong group of actors and we are discovering so much together about the play.

### **What are the greatest challenges for you as an actor in this play?**

Technically the accent is quite a challenge. It's a very specific accent – it's New York-Brooklyn but not gangster. It's important to get this right.

One of the greatest performances is the emotional trajectory for the characters. When we are rehearsing single scenes at a time it's a challenge to feel the weight of the story that has come before a particular scene. This of course will become clearer when we start to run through the play as a whole.



# Interview

## Nick Barber: Happy Loman – continued

### **What do you think Happy believes to be Biff's greatest flaw?**

Happy thinks Biff's greatest flaw is that he doesn't seem to want to do anything with his life, which is also what Willy thinks. Happy loves Biff and looks up to him but he cannot understand his seeming disinterest in success.

### **What is the definition of success for Happy?**

The definition of success for Happy is having lots of money, business colleagues who admire him, women falling at his feet and a flash apartment. At the end of the play I think he becomes even more determined to achieve this. At the start of the play he does appear to have some of this but we learn that in reality he is pretty low down the pecking order in the firm and the death of his father gives him more of an impetus to want to move up. However, Happy lacks drive and entrepreneurial intuition, just as Willy does and this is a source of major conflict within him.





# Rehearsal Diary

## Elle While – Assistant Director

Rehearsal Room One at West Yorkshire Playhouse has been a hub of creativity, exploration and discovery over the past four weeks.

Rehearsals began with detailed text and character work. Each actor studied the text rigorously to gather information about their character. This included making lists of everything that their character says about themselves and others in the play and everything that is said about their character. In order to build fully rounded characters the actors also created a history. This was a combination of facts about the character from the play and an imaginary history.

The text work undertaken by the company was fundamental in giving the actors a solid foundation to their work. The pioneering style which Miller used in *Death of a Salesman* means that it can be initially confusing as to where and when each scene is taking place. Creating a timeline for the scenes set in the present (1949) and working out the order of Willy's memories (1932) helped us to clarify the journey of the play to ourselves, and therefore to our audiences. Research was also undertaken to ensure that the company understood every reference in the play which is particular to the period or to America.

### **16/4/10**

Charmian Hoare (Voice Coach) spent an hour with the company in the auditorium today. This was a fantastic opportunity for the actors to explore the acoustics of the theatre and how their voice carries in the space. The Quarry is a large auditorium with seating that curves around the stage, Charmian brought the actors up into the auditorium to give them the opportunity to hear each other on stage. Seeing the stage from the point of view of an audience member should really help the actors to deliver a performance which reaches every one of the seven hundred and fifty seats each show.

### **21/4/10**

Terry King (fight director) came to rehearsals today to work with the company on the violent moments in the play. Sarah Esdaile (Director) has worked out where she wants these moments to take place and has an idea of how they might look so she and Terry worked together to realise these moments. Terry worked with the actors to ensure that they were safe in these sequences. It is important that, no matter how caught up in the performance the actors are, they make eye contact for a split second as themselves in order to communicate that they are ready for the move. Learning the moves for a fight sequence is like learning the moves to a dance but when sped up it looks, to the outside eye, uncontrolled and dangerous.

### **27/4/10**

Today was the last day in the rehearsal room before we move to the theatre to begin technical rehearsals. As well as a fantastic run of the show (which left everyone in tears!) Sarah (Director) ran an exciting exercise with the company. Close to the end of the play Willy Loman is alone on the forestage and there is a stage direction which reads.... 'he turns around as if to find his way; sounds, faces, voices, seem to be swarming in upon him...' In order to give Philip Jackson (playing Willy Loman) the opportunity to see what this would actually feel like, Sarah gathered the whole company and asked them to think of a line in the play that their character says to Willy which applies pressure to him. The scene was then played but as Philip came to the section where he is quieting the voices in his head, the actors swarmed around him repeating their lines in character. Not only was this brilliant to watch but it gave Philip a tangible experience of what Willy is going through in this moment.



# Practical Exercises

## Perspectives on Willy Loman

Students will need a decent knowledge of the play to enable them to take part in these activities.

Ask the group “who is part of Willy’s life?” Ask the group to hold the roles they have suggested e.g. Linda/Biff/Charley. The students can think of characters from the play and other people who may be in Willy’s life e.g. his father, Howard Wagner’s father etc. Use a flip chart to record their answers.

Ask each student to do a text search to find a line of text which summarises their character’s attitude towards Willy or from their knowledge of the play create a sentence themselves.

Place chairs in a circle and ask the students to stand behind a chair and one volunteer (a confident student or staff member) to stand in the centre in-role as Willy Loman. You may like to introduce an element of costume for Willy. Perhaps add a bit of text here for the in-role person to speak as they become Willy. Don’t worry about accent.

Ask the students, now in role, one by one to read out their text summarising their view of Willy.

### **Development**

Now, ask the group, in character, for thoughts and feelings about Willy – you could begin this by posing questions such as “Linda, what do you think is Willy’s best quality?”

Encourage the characters to interact and ask the actor playing Willy to respond to questions other characters pose or comments they make.



# Practical Exercises

## Character Focus Groups

In exploring characters, the primary source for the actor is the text and within this

- what the character says about themselves
- what others say about their character
- what they say about other characters and how they say it
- what is left unsaid

Split the students into 4 groups and give each group one of the following characters to focus on: Willy, Linda, Biff or Happy. Ask the students to complete the following statements for their designated character, supporting this with reference to the text.

- What I want most is.....
- To be successful means...
- What I fear most is...
- The most precious thing in my life is...

Now ask each group to complete the following questions in relation to another character – e.g. Biff about Linda, Linda about Willy, Willy about Happy, Happy about Biff etc

- My greatest worry for them is...
- Their best quality is...
- Their greatest flaw is....
- What I wish for them is...

Feed this back to the group. You might like to do this in role by one member of each group taking on the role or the whole group speaking as a “conglomerate” of a character.



# Practical Exercises

## The Ripple Effect

Make sure the idea of a stone dropped into water is clear to the students. Ask them to accept that the stone dropping into the water in this play is the moment when Willy Loman meets his death and lots of people's lives are changed. Could there have been a chance to stop the stone dropping and the ripple to stop rippling?

Have ready all the names of the characters from the play or those mentioned in the play (except for Willy's) on cards, such as:

Linda/Biff/Happy/Howard/Charley/Bernard/The Woman

Distribute the names and ask those who have not got cards to form a large circle. Ask the students with cards to stand outside of the circle and not to look at what's written on the cards until everyone has got one.

Ask a volunteer to stand in the centre of the circle as Willy. Find a drama way of creating a representation of his death.

The students should now look at the names on their card and decide where to stand in The Ripple Effect to show just what Willy's death means to the character they are representing. Ask them to think about:

- Will they stand close to or further away from Willy?
- How will they stand?
- What direction will they be looking in?
- How will they stand in relation to each other?

Ask the students standing on the outside of The Ripple Effect to comment on what they see – do they agree with the placement of characters?

### **Development**

#### **Text**

Individually create a short monologue explaining what a chosen character would have said to Willy if they could have. Perform these and hear Willy's response.

#### **Physical response**

Split the whole group into two. One half of the group will sculpt the other into the different principal characters of the play after they learn of Willy's death. Swap the groups over and this time ask the sculptors to sculpt the character at five years after the end of the play. Ensure that everyone sees both of the tableaux by stepping out one-by-one.


Use these tableaux to examine the characters' through line in the play in discussion with the group.

# Design Photos





# Reviewing and Reflecting



Reviewing and reflecting are important parts of seeing a theatre production. Through reflecting on what we have seen we can start to make more sense of it and develop our understanding of the story, characters and the theatre techniques used. It also allows us to form an opinion on what we have seen.

This reflection can be done through group discussion, group activities or through a more formal written review. Here are a few starting points.

## **THE ACTORS AND THEIR PERFORMANCES**

- What sort of skills do the actors need to employ to portray their characters?
- Do you think they are successful?
- Were there special moments of performance that you remember?

## **THE SET**

- Is the set realistic?
- What colours are used?
- What mood/atmosphere does it create?

## **LIGHTING**

- What mood/atmosphere is created by the lighting?
- Are colours used?
- Do you think this lighting was appropriate to the play/story?


## **SOUND**

- Were sound effects used?
- Was there any music in the production?
- Was the sound recorded or live?
- How did this add to the impact of the production?

## **COSTUME**

- Are the costumes of a historical period?
- Do they help us to understand each character?
- What do the colours and materials used say about the characters?

# Reviewing and Reflecting



## **PRACTICAL REVIEWING**

Group discussion may be a useful way of engaging the group with the notion of reflection and review. Here are some practical exercises that may aid that discussion process.

### **ANYONE WHO...**

The group sits in a circle with one less chair or space than there are group members. The person with no chair stands in the middle of the circle and makes a statement about what they thought about the show beginning with “Anyone Who...”. All the group members who agree with this statement stand up and swap places. The speaker must try to move into a seat. One person will be left with no chair and they then make the next statement.

Example: The person in the middle says “Anyone who thought the use of a live flautist worked well in the production” All those who agree swap places.

### **CONTINUUMS**

The group is asked to form a line in order of how they felt about a certain aspect of the production. They do this through discussion with one another.

Example: Did you enjoy watching the production?

This “continuum” can be done in a line stretching across the classroom or can be corners of the room. The teacher then asks the class how they arrived at this decision and uses it as a starting point for discussion.

### **TABLEAUX**

Split the class into small groups and ask them to create freeze frames of 3 key moments from the play – it doesn’t have to be a direct copy it can be a representation of the part that they liked.

Show to class and use as a starting point for class discussion.