Death of a Salesman

from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Play 1949 by Arthur Miller, the story of the defeated sales representative Willy Loman, which captured the limitations and deceptions of the American dream of success.

Summary Article: Death of a Salesman

from Broadway Plays and Musicals: Descriptions and Essential Facts of More Than 14,000 Shows through 2007

[10 February 1949] play by Arthur Miller [Morosco Thea; 742p PP, NYDCCA, TA]. Salesman Willy Loman (Lee J. Cobb) has always believed that being aggressive yet well-liked brings success in America but at the age of sixty-three he is still struggling and, with his faithful, supportive wife Linda (Mildred Dunnock), can barely make ends meet. His two grown sons, raised with the same philosophy, are also struggling. Biff (Arthur Kennedy) wanders restlessly from job to job and Happy (Cameron Mitchell) only finds pleasure in chasing women. People and scenes from the past come to haunt Willy until he is driven to a suicidal car crash with the hopes that his insurance money will give his family a new start. Also cast: Thomas Chalmers, Don Keefer, Howard Smith, Alan Hewitt, Winifred Cushing. Commentators recognized the play as one of the best of all American dramas and adulated the powerful performances, Elia Kazan's poignant direction, and the expressionistic skeletal setting by Jo Mielziner. Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried produced.

REVIVALS: 26 June 1975 [Circle in the Square Thea; 64p]. George C. Scott directed and played Willie Loman and was showered with adulation for both efforts. James Farentino and Harvey Keitel were his sons and Teresa Wright was Linda. Also cast: Arthur French, Chuck Patterson, Ramon Bieri.

29 March 1984 [Broadhurst Thea; 158p TA]. Dustin Hoffman's Willy was a smaller, more nasal wheeler-dealer whose nervous ticks showed the insecurities beneath his bluster. His acclaimed performance and movie-star popularity turned the revival into a hit. Michael Rudman directed and the strong supporting cast included Kate Reid (Linda), John Malkovich (Biff), Stephen Lang (Happy), Louis Zorich (Ben), and David Huddleston (Charley).

10 February 1999 [Eugene O'Neill Thea; 274p TA]. The fiftieth-anniversary mounting, directed by Robert Falls, was extolled for its simple, straightforward staging and masterful performance by Brian Dennehy as Willy. His expert supporting cast included Elizabeth Franz (Linda), Kevin Anderson (Biff), Ted Koch (Happy), and Howard Witt (Charley). The award-winning revival did brisk business for neatly nine months.


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