* Written in 1948, when Miller was only 33 years old; though already a successful playwright at the top of his game, what allows him to have a clue about what is going on inside the head of a washed up more than 60 year old salesman about to go out in a blaze of glory? And yet not a note of the play rings false. The play is inextricable from his own life—much of it drawn from the experiences of people he knew closely. He had grown up around salesman and knew the pressures they faced, and the struggling Loman family are closely based on Miller’s own Uncle Manny, with his wife and two errant sons. While Miller’s plays are never quite autobiographical, he invests so much of the real world into them they always feel fully authentic. As Marsha Norman suggests, “In writing about Willy Loman, Arthur Miller wrote about all of us, about our indestructible will to achieve our humanity, about our fear of being torn away from what and who we are in this world, about our fear of being displaced and forgotten.”a Miller knew firsthand, the social and historical forces operating against the Loman family and his play neatly depicts the history of business practices in the US from peddlers (Willy’s father), to drummers (David Singleman), and passed Willy who travelling days are clearly coming to a close, to the new kind of salesman, disconnected from the product being sold, but part of a corporation structure—the rise of the industrial and the dehumanization of the worker as technology advances. The play has the distinction of being the only drama ever to be selected by the “Book of the Month Club.” At times comic, yet also poetic and tragic, with a realistic veneer that made it easy to involve any audience, *Salesman* was a new type of serious drama that merged the forms of realism and expressionism to suggest new directions and possibilities for all of American drama, as well as offering a challenge to previous definitions of tragedy.

Since then, *Salesman* and Willy Loman have truly become part of our national conscience (often referenced or quoted in books and articles about all kinds of American concerns), and each new production of the play amazingly seems to almost have been written for the time and place in which it is being produced. Who would have thought that a play about a hard worker being downsized as he struggles to make payments on his house, would be as applicable to an audience in 2016 as it was in 1949? Indeed, Second Story Theatre cancelled a production they had planned for back in 2008, as they felt it was potentially too depressing to mount, as people’s lives were imploding around them. Though written nearly seventy years ago, the play continues to remain relevant.

* The myriad ways in which this play has been produced bears testimony to its inherent strength and design, that it continues to succeed (for the most part) in so many different guises, raises it to a level achieved by few playwrights outside of Shakespeare.

As I mentioned, *Death of a Salesman* is not Miller’s most produced play (*The* *Crucible* is—especially with its large ensemble so attractive to high school directors and references to witches that cause it to often fill a theater company’s October slot: really, there is a spike of productions every year around Halloween) but *Salesman* is his most important, in its effectiveness as a human story, a cultural commentary, an engaging experience, and a tremendously successful theatrical experiment.

*Salesman* has been produced, repeatedly, six times on Broadway, as well as on every continent. And since its opening smash in 1949 that had them sobbing in the aisles, every actor worth his salt has wanted to try his hand at Willy Loman; just as they clamor to play Hamlet or King Lear. Miller tells us that Loman is in his sixties—in 1948, when the play is ostensibly set, the male life expectancy in the US was 64, though that has now risen to 76 [2015]—but Willy is frequently played by much younger actors—as if the rigors of the role demand a youthful vigor—which is also telling about the overwhelming pressure the “actual” Willy Loman must have felt. Several Willys, even the younger ones, have ended their runs early, claiming exhaustion. Of Philip Seymour Hoffman’s turn as Willy in 2012, one friend claimed shortly after Hoffman’s death,"That play tortured him. When it was over, he said to me that he wasn't going to act in theatre for a while." It was his last stage performance.

* When Miller wrote the part of Willy Loman, he was imagining his uncle, Manny Newman, a small rooster of a man, with a big personality. However, Elia Kazan, who directed that premier production in 1949, somehow saw Lee J. Cobb in the role, and while Miller was not initially sure, he later came to view Cobb’s performance as one of the best. However, he had to change a few lines to accommodate, including one in which Willy comments about fellow workers calling him a shrimp to calling him a walrus, as Cobb was a pretty large man. So Cobb played first of the great “walruses” in at the tender age of 37 (with Mildred Dunnock at 48 playing Linda). His initial performance won him rave reviews. Brooks Atkinson described Cobb’s Willy as “heroic,” though Harold Clurman complained that once the director Elia Kazan moved on, Cobb’s portrayal became more self-indulgent, with an increased “grandiosity” and “histrionic bravura” that made the character too pompous. But exhausted, Cobb left the role fairly early in the run (just 9 months in).
* His repeat performance in the 1966 film version, again with Dunnock as Linda, perhaps benefited from him being older, now 54, and one reviewer spoke of the “wordless eloquence” of his portrayal, with *Newsweek* hailing the couple as “the definitive Willy and Linda. And so they were for almost another decade.
* Gene Lockhart had taken over for the next 6 months of that premier production after Cobb had left, followed by Albert Dekker for another four months, who then passed it along to Thomas Mitchell to round out the 742 performances of this initial run. Each portrayed Willy in a slightly different fashion but was successful in his own way. Atkinson felt that after Cobb’s “big and powerful” portrayal, Lockhart, older at 59, seemed “pudgy and crumpled” but was still able to convey the character’s anguish effectively. Dekker at 45, had toured the role for the previous year, and would go on to make the first television version in 1957 for Britain’s ITV, which some reviewers felt was even better than the stage version they’d seen. *The Times’* critic described Dekker thus: “Stumbling in speech and turning a massively brooding face towards the camera, he returned to scenes of crushing humiliation and desperate ambition with a haggard energy and retreated from them in abject exhaustion.” Rod Steiger seems to have been a little too energetic to be fully credible in Britain’s second stab at a TV version in BBC’s *Play of the Month* in 1966. *The Times* described his performance as “relentlessly explosive”: he was 40, and though not seen as a failure, this version was not as lauded. People were not yet ready to see a more edgy Willy. Going back to the original stage version: many reviewers felt that Mitchell at 58, just a year younger than Lockhart, added an intellectual element to the role, although Atkinson complained that he lightened the production too much, almost turning it at times into a “folksy comedy.” Audiences, however, kept on coming.
* In London, Kazan also directed the premier, but with a British cast. 16 years older than Cobb, (at 53), Paul Muni was cast as Willy. While there was tension between he and Kazan, since Muni despised the Method acting of which Kazan was a champion, many saw Muni’s performance as an ideal, and he garnered excellent reviews, although Miller himself was not a big fan. Miller thought Muni’s performance was too “studied” and “technical,” and needed more gut to it. Kazan liked the performance but described Muni’s take on Willy as having a “Chaplinesque” quality. Muni left after only six months, claiming ill health and feeling worn down by the role.
* The first film Willy was the 53 year-old Fredric March in the 1951 film scripted by studio hack, Stanley Roberts, who cut 15% of the play, including several key thematic elements (such as references to Willy’s father, Biff’s darker aspects and criminal past, and most of Happy’s lines, including his denial of his father at Stanley’s Chop House, and his Requiem declaration to follow in his father’s footsteps). The film also presented Willy as borderline insane.
* March had been Miller’s first choice for the premier production, but Miller did not like this filmed rendition. As one critic says, “The whole film had a darkness to it, it was very melancholy, depressing, desperate, hopeless” and March plays Willy as “a truly desperate man at the end of his sanity.” We see him crazily talking to himself in several scenes, which severly undercuts his tragic status. Someone who is nuts has no self-agency, and a tragic hero must be at least partially responsible for his own mistakes. *Salesman* works, but not when you cut out a bunch of Miller’s lines—it seems there are limits, although I like to show the closing scene from this version in class as it really shows most clearly that Willy is going to his death full of hope rather than the despair too many students assume must be behind this act.
* In 1975 George C. Scott took on Willy at the age of 47. While critics lauded Scott’s unique portrayal of Willy “as a walking time bomb,” the overall production was seen as problematic in terms of other casting, and the set design. Many disliked the horse-shoe shaped stage, offering an open platform filled with props, with the Loman’s house set at one end with exterior walls on display; they felt it made the play too diffuse. Still, critics responded to Scott as Willy even more strongly than they had to Cobb; Clive Barnes, not one to go overboard, declared it “a performance to bate your breath . . . exciting beyond words” and Christopher Sharp insisted the difference between Cobb and Scott was “the distinction between the general and the particular.”
* A little older, at 53, Warren Mitchell first played Willy in London in 1979, and reviews were ecstatic. Returning to Miller’s original vision (and dialog) of Willy as a shrimp rather than a walrus, Mitchell played the character, as the *Yorkshire Post* reported, with an “intrepid, crazy kind of faithfulness toward those bad things he believes in.” While American portrayals had tended to present Willy as initially strong, and then stripped down to frailty, Mitchell turned the tables; he began as frail and gathered in strength. Ultimately the character was less sympathetic, and more than one reviewer described him as “a cornered rat.” Miller enjoyed this production far more than he had Muni’s. The stage had emulated Mielziner’s original design, although the backdrop was more realistic while the Loman house was less so, as the house was moved around the stage on a raft while other sets were trucked in.
* Mitchell repeated his performance at the age of 70 for a TV version with David Thacker in 1996, making him one of the older Willys. Designed for watching in schools (5 x 30 min. segments broadcast during the day for schools), this repeat performance was well received, despite its low budget. As Amanda Wrigley points out: “The close-up shots and clever lighting underscore the claustrophobia in the individual tragedies and personal relationships, whilst the use of a layered perspective intelligently conveys the complexities of the family dynamic well.” As we see here, the careful framing of the characters enhances our understanding of their relationships with all their suspicions, likes and dislikes.
* Dustin Hoffman was aged 46 for the 1984 stage version, which was filmed for CBS the following year. He lost weight to make sure his suit could hang off a spindly frame. Like Mitchell, Hoffman was another shrimp, described “as a sharp, birdlike creature with flapping arms and a piercing voice. He is the quintessential little guy, straining to look bigger than he is.” Feisty--even arrogant--and filled with equal measures of rage and exhaustion. Pressures of the role led Hoffman to cut back from 8 to 6 weekly performances.
* The 1985 film version was distinctly expressionistic in presentation and a critical and popular success. Hoffman was described as “effective, gripping, spectacular,” though there was some feeling he was too young, but it was felt that his Willy had more pathos than Cobb’s. Miller was involved in both the stage and film versions as an advisor, and felt that Hoffman’s presentation of Willy was as fully authentic as Cobb’s, even though intrinsically different.
* At 70 years old Hal Holbrook took on the role for a seven city tour in 1996 directed by Gerald Freedman, and played Willy as “dead already of a sort of Alzheimer's of the spirit.” According to one critic, “His Willy Loman is a brittle, noisy and fascinating victim of misdirected hope and ambition.” Holbrook’s Willy did not exaggerate, but out and out lied. (Incidentally, this was where Elizabeth Franz first cut her teeth on Linda). The production was aiming at Broadway but never made it, most likely due to reviews that described it as “solid but plodding.” As another critic complained, Holbrook “looks and sounds more like a crusty, old-fashioned newspaper publisher than a pathetic and self-deluded salesman,” but I was sadly unable to find any pictures.
* Robert Falls’ 1999 “harrowing revival,” again on Broadway, offered a dark portrait of familial love and shifting modular scenic design by Mark Wendland, that had the Loman house separating and drifting apart into different configurations to underscore the action, which some found noisily distracting and others wonderfully suggestive. At 60, Brian Dennehy played Willy as “a big man who can be gentle and quiet one moment, only to explode in Shakespearian anger and rage the next.” It was a performance full of peaks and troughs, and “when he sags” one reviewer suggests, “his massive body seems to implode.”
* One might say, the return of the walrus, but Dennehy also played Willy as an intelligent man who truly believed in his own myths, and could be both loving and vengeful. Some felt the following year’s filmed version lost some of its punch on the smaller screen (and with some cast changes).
* At age 72, Christopher Lloyd, the oldest Willy here, took on the role in a Weston Playhouse production and conveyed “the scary and sad descent from denial into dementia.”Critic Frank Rizzo further assessed:“**There's something in Lloyd's haunted, deep-set eyes, his skeletal visage and his tall, lean and bent frame that is so physically right for the role of a common man betrayed by the American Dream and under siege by his demons.”**
* **And there is also that creepy resemblance in the actor to the elderly Miller himself! (although the character of Charlie is more reflective of Miller’s father, and Miller’s upbringing is a mix of Biff and Bernard’s; being a slacker sports-star student, but also hard-working, ambitious, and successful in his career choices. He also paid for the wood to help build the stoop on the family house from his bakery delivery round, rather than steal it as Biff had done)**
* Playing Loman at high school was one of the factors credited with giving Philip Seymour Hoffman the acting bug. At 44, Hoffman’s 2012 Broadway revival was one of the younger Willys, and he played up the character’s helplessness, going through an emotional breakdown each performance. Critics were divided. Some felt he was “too slouchy and hangdog, with line readings so flat and matter-of-fact” that it was impossible to envision him ever selling anything, as well as complaining that he was just too young and awkwardly “lumbering.”
* But others found it “revelatory, because Hoffman forces you to chuck away the preconceptions—above all the tendency to pity—that have built up around the character over the years.” A Willy who was tired to death and, as is evident from these pictures, frequently depicted sitting down--but perhaps not yet burnt out. I also thought it interesting that all of the production stills published were black and white—to round out what was in many ways a fairly nostalgic production. (Director Mike Nichols used the original Mielziner set and lighting design, and form that aspect seemed to present a fairly traditional version of the play, and several found the reintroduction of this inventive set the shows highlight.)
* And of course, Miller’s centennial year saw Anthony Sher at 65 take on the role for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2015 production; being one of the few modern plays produced by this prestigious company. As Sher explained in an interview, “Actors want to play Miller's characters because they are great roles, full of complexity.” He also confessed that playing Loman was “immensely demanding and tiring.” Reflecting the argument I have been more long-windedly arging, one critic points out that it is “a sign of the play’s stature that it can accommodate different approaches to Willy Loman: you can cast a physical flyweight like Dustin Hoffman or a titanic heavyweight like Brian Dennehy. What is extraordinary about Antony Sher’s performance,” he goes on to explain, “is that it seems to combine elements of both. Initially, Sher seems a small, shrunken figure trudging wearily homewards after an abortive sales-trip. But, as he relives his past, Sher becomes a dapper, spring-heeled joker whose desperate desire to be liked is symbolised by his use of the old vaudevillian trick of extending his hands as if seeking applause. Sher also catches beautifully the contradictions of the ageing Willy who both craves love and repels it and who goes brick-red with rage at a moment’s notice. It is a deeply conceived, superbly detailed performance that reminds us that Willy is, like King Lear whom Sher is soon to play, a man who has “ever but slenderly known himself.”
* As further testament to its flexibility, the play has also seen its share of color-blind or ethnic casting. The first professional all African-American cast was in 1972 at Center Stage in Baltimore, with gravel-voiced Richard Ward as Willy. It was not a great success, Mel Gussow felt Ward lacked assurance and wore his role as if it were someone’s else’s clothes, and his only effective scene was when gets totally demeaned by Howard (though he liked the actors playing Happy and Biff). The critiques, however, was over the quality of the acting rather than seeing this as a play not able to work with African-Amwerican actors. Occasionally productions have made Charlie and Bernard black, as in the 1975 Scott version, but most reviewers objected to such a choice, feeling was that interracial casting created statements the play was not intended to bear. But in more recent years the play has been presented successfully several times with all-black casts. Yale Rep succeeded in 2009 with Charles S. Dutton playing Willy as something of a lovable teddy-bear.
* South Coast Rep saw Charlie Robinson in 2013 play him more as a bitter grumpus, and Pennsylvania’s Plays and Players Theatre, saw Keith "Kash" Goins playing him as fierce and volcanic in a “feisty” production the following year. Both Dutton and Goins effectively utilized distorting sound effects to convey Willy’s dips into his memory.

*Salesman* has been translated into numerous languages, including Yiddish, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi and Tagalog.

* One of the best known foreign productions is the one Miller himself directed in Beijing at People's Art Theater in Chinese with Ying Ruocheng as Willy. This was considered a landmark production in terms of the opening up of China to Western culture, and it is not insignificant that they chose Miller’s play to initiate the process. With his insistence that the actors forgo the usual wigs, pale face make-up and stylized gesture, Miller’s direction revolutionized the acting style of foreign plays in China to some degree. Costumes were created for the production to emphasize the obvious foreignness of such characters, but in a more naturalistic fashion—Ben played his role as you se here in a cowboy hat! Not a costume choice I’ve ever seen in an American production, but it worked there.
* In a culture without salesmen or life insurance for several decades, for the Chinese the play was less about the American dream and its failings, than about class struggle, with the underclass suffering from the oppression of the ruling class. So although it meant something different, it was nonetheless successful.
* In 2012, People's Art Theater mounted another production in Beijing with **Ding Zhicheng** as Willy. None of the actors even attempted to look or act their age, and the set and costumes were even more whimiscal, as the “Star-Spangled Banner” was blasted at the climax of both acts. The director, Li Liuyi was granted permission to perform the play as a contemporary Chinese story, replacing the opening flute music with a melancholy violincello, and using contemporary costumes and rock music. The set was very different and highly representational, emphasizing the expressionistic base of the play by drawing on the aesthetics of Chinese opera.
* China was not the first Asian country to produce Salesman, that honor goes to South Korea in 1957, and the play has also been recently produced on US shores with an all-Asian cast, as you can see here, and with a surprisingly youthful Vishaal Reddy as Willy.
* One aspect of Salesman that makes it so unique is the importance of its set, which can often be viewed as an additional character. Mielziner’s original set and lighting design, coupled with Kazan’s direction and insight, were big contributors to the play’s initial success. As Brenda Murphy explains, Mielziner’s designs “combined translucent scenery, expert lighting effect, and sets that went, as the eye travelled upward, from drab realistic interiors to light, delicate frameworks that were mere suggestions of buildings” which she goes on to call “subjective realism”—Miller and his technical crew basically invented a whole new way of presenting a play on stage which would become increasingly influential.
* Miller wanted a set that would convey aspects of both the claustrophobic present and the idealized past within the same space, and Mielziner obliged with an inventive use of scrims and lighting in a design that would allow all the scenes to be played out with only minimal stage management.
* The forestage was essential to allow for breakout space to play the scenes beyond the Loman’s house.
* Many productions have striven to emulate Mielziner’s stage design, especially those with a proscenium style theater space.
* In 1963, designer Randy Echols tried something very different at The Guthrie that was fairly controversial, but probably worked better on that theatre’s open stage. Most of the acting was done on the expansive apron with minimal props. Some liked it, but others called it a “daring disappointment” and too stark—the general opinion was that there was not a sufficient sense of the crushing environment against which the Lomans were meant to be struggling. Hume Cronyn, one of the first “shrimps” (or bantams) to play Willy, was also ambivalent about the production (his wife, Jessica Tandy played Linda). He felt that the design veered too far from the expected. But critics were also ambivalent about Cronyn, preferring to see Willy played by someone larger—arguing that his smallness detracted from the character’s tragic potential.
* Others have presented the play in the round to draw you in, and they seem to have worked better than Circle-in-the-Squares’ botched attempt by being sparser; that way the scenery does not get between the audience and the play.
* The use of framing, an extension of Mielziner’s original skeletal design for the Lomans’ house has also been fairly popular . . . perhaps showing the fragile design of Willy’s hopes and dreams?
* As well as the use of actual frames as set decoration, possibly to emphasize the idea of how the family feels constantly under the gaze of their society?
* There have been a great variety of stagings for the play: some on an evident budget, or they have simply chosen to be minimalistic. The 4 chairs included at Lyric Arts (top right here) is an interesting staging decision since Miller’s direction only asks for three, a point on which several scholars have wondered, given that the family has four members.
* Checkered flooring seems prevalent in numerous productions—just a means of conveying the period, or to carry the suggestion of Willy as a pawn on a game board?
* Then there is the poetic imagery of David Thacker’s 1996 production at National Theatre in London with Alun Armstrong as Willy, an almost elegiac rendering of the play.
* I love the grimness of this one, with its ugly dark (checkered) wallpaper, as if to show the true poverty of Willy’s dream, or maybe of the reality he is refusing to accept. We saw something of this also in the darkness and peeling paint of the house as presented in the 1985 Hoffman film version.
* Other productions have gone for more complexity in their designs. This is similar to Mielziner’s design, but with a greater solidity. Gone are the skeletal beams.
* Some have presented increasingly realistic and detailed sets… even on what is clearly a smaller stage.
* And here we see realism gone insane! Goodness knows where/how they played the break out scenes at Stanley’s Chop House, the Boston hotel, or Charlie and Howard’s offices.
* Then there are the more representational/expressionistic renderings. I couldn’t find a photograph of the 1999 revival, which would clearly fall into this category, but here are some other pretty funky ideas I wish I had been able to watch:
* I kind of like Indiana Rep’s off-kilter design, as if to convey Willy’s skewered view of the world around him:
* And here we have not the usual black but a red checkered floor (red always conveying a sense of danger), and although the head is cut off in this image, you can just make out their shadowy backdrop image of a guy in a disheveled suit and tie which was there throughout the performance, to show the dark and shadowy dream that has captured the protagonist.
* Focusing on Miller’s imagery and original title “The Inside of His Head,” Thompson River University Actors Workshop Theatre stage set actually depicted a giant profile of a head, against which the actors play their scenes, all of them carrying suitcases. This had been Miller’s original vision for the staging (the giant head, not the incessant suitcases)—and one that Kazan and Mielziner swiftly talked him out of doing.
* In Theatre Mitu’s production, the players are masked and certain characters are replaced by inanimate objects, such as Charlie by a rolling refrigerator door; The Woman, a table fan; and Happy a black punching bag on a movable frame (we see him here in the background “talking” to Biff! The play is so solidly written it can even sustain this high level of expressionistic rendering as this production got pretty positive reviews.
* And while most productions present the play as being set in the late 1940s, we do sometimes also see more modern sets (aside from the Chinese one). These are perhaps being used to show that this need not be an historical piece and is in fact a timeless story, as it is with continual productions near 70 years on from its premier, kind of proving itself to be. *Death of a Salesman*, like Shakespeare, seems to have become part of the global Zeitgeist, and I see no play by O’Neill, Williams, Albee and all the rest, wonderful though many of them are, with quite that reach and power.