**Production History of *Death of a Salesman***

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*Death of a Salesman* may not be Miller’s most produced play (*The* *Crucible* is) but *Salesman* it is his most important, and has been produced on every continent. 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. 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.

* The first of the great “walruses,” Lee J. Cobb, played Willy in 1949 at the tender age of 37 (with Mildred Dunnock at 48 playing Linda). His initial performance won him rave reviews, though Miller had not been initially keen on him for the role, having imagined someone smaller--like his Uncle Manny Newman--in the part (See *Timebends*). 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. Cobb left the role fairly early in the run (just 9 months in).
* His 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 performance, with *Newsweek* hailing the couple as “the definitive Willy and Linda.
* Gene Lockhart took over for the next 6 months, followed by Albert Dekker for another four, who then passed it along to Thomas Mitchell to round out the 742 performances of this initial run. 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: “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’ (“Independent Television: *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller.” *The Times*, 28 November 1957, p. 3). 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 this version was not as lauded. Going back to the original stage version: many reviewers felt that Mitchell, almost the same age as Lockhart (58) added an intellectual element to the role, though Atkinson complained that he lightened the production too much, almost turning it at times into a “folksy comedy.”
* 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 him and Kazan, since Muni despised Method acting, many saw his performance as an ideal and he garnered excellent reviews, though Miller himself was not a fan. Miller though 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, and his Requiem declaration). The film presented Willy as borderline insane.
* March had been Miller’s first choice for the premier production, but Miller did not like this 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 undercuts his tragic status. (*imdb.com*)
* 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 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, and 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. Miller enjoyed this production far more than he had Muni’s. A shrimp rather than a walrus, Mitchell played Willy, 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 began as frail and gathered in strength. Ultimately the character was less sympathetic, and more than one reviewer described him as “a cornered rat.” The stage had emulated Mielziner’s design, though the backdrop was more realistic, while the Loman house was less so, and was moved around the stage on a raft while other sets were trucked in.
* Mitchell repeated this 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 (*wordpress.com*) 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.
* 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. 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” (David Richards). 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,” (*Baltimore Sun)* though there was some feeling he was too young, but it was felt that his Willy had more pathos than Cobb’s.
* 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” (Larry Stark at *Theatre Mirror).* According to one critic, “His Willy Loman is a brittle, noisy and fascinating victim of misdirected hope and ambition” (Jack Zinc *Sun Sentinel).* 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” (Laurie Winer *LA Times*, 28 March 1996). As another critic complained, Holbrook “looks and sounds more like a crusty, old-fashioned newspaper publisher than a pathetic and self-deluded salesman” (Winer), but I was unable to find any pictures.
* Robert Falls’ 1999 “harrowing revival” (*NYT*), 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” (Fergus McGillicuddy). 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” (*Hartford Courant).***
* **And there is also that creepy resemblance in the actor to the elderly Miller himself!**
* At 44, Philip Seymour 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, while some felt he was “too slouchy and hangdog, with line readings so flat and matter-of-fact” (*Time*) it was impossible to envision him ever selling anything, as well as too young and awkwardly “lumbering” (*NY Post*).
* 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 seen seated--but perhaps not yet burnt out. I also thought it interesting that all of the production stills 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 seemed to present a fairly traditional version of the play).
* And of course, just last month (2015) saw Anthony Sher at 65 take on the role for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production. One critic pointed 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 say, “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.” (Michael Billington, *Guardian*).
* 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, and 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). Occasionally productions have made Charlie and Bernard black, as in the 1975 Scott version, but most reviewers find this weird and even perverse, feeling was that interracial casting created statements the play was not intended to bear. In more recent years the play has been presented several times with all-black casts to better reviews. Yale Rep succeeded in 2009 with Charles S. Dutton playing Willy as something of a lovable teddy-bear.
* South Coast Rep saw Charlie Robinson (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 (2014) in a “feisty” production. Both Dutton and Goins 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. Costumes were created to emphasize the obvious foreignness of such characters—Ben wearing a cowboy hat!
* 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.
* While the first Asian production was earlier than this, in South Korea in 1957, more recently (2012) People's Art Theater mounted another production 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. *Salesman* was even mounted recently in the US with an all-Asian cast, and a pretty youthful Vishaal Reddy as Willy.
* 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 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.
* 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.
* 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 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 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, 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.
* Focussing on Miller’s imagery and original title “The Inside of His Head,” Thompson River University Actors Workshop Theatre stage set 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! The play is so solidly written it can even sustain this high level of expressionistic rendering as this production got some fairly positive reviews.
* And while most productions present the play as being set in the late 1940s, we do sometimes also see more modern sets. 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.
* The recent Lyric Theatre production (2014) in Boston, won rave reviews and seemed in its characterizations and staging, a wonderful amalgam of several of the previously described productions. But the big question is—how would you stage the play, or like to see it presented?