

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

Video Description

Willy Loman, a 63 year old exhausted salesman, a defeated prince of a man, approaches the end of his working life still believing in and seeking the American Dream and the success it insures. Willy arrives home from a less than successful business trip to New England and is confused and hallucinatory, but is pleased by the visit of his sons, Happy and Biff. In the hours that unfold in the course of the play, we witness Willy's memories acted on stage, accurate or not, and we see the desperate love and hope he has for Biff. The confrontation made of tangled dreams and intense love, worship and betrayal, lies and faith flairs quickly as Willy continues to have great expectations of Biff and Biff refuses to accept Willy's distorted dreams. Biff wishes simply to know himself and to find happiness; Willy wants Biff to be well liked, to rise to the top and to be the #1 man. Willy's infidelity to Linda, seen in one of Willy's memories and with Biff finding him with the other woman, has deemed him a fake and a phony in Biff's eyes, and their life and dreams all a farce. Linda tries to protect and save Willy, she knows he is tired and defeated, and is trying to commit suicide. She demands that the boys save him. But the tragedy continues to unfold as Biff and Happy desert their father in favor of women and Biff demands in his showdown with his father that Willy tell the truth about who they really are. Willy accuses his son of living out of spite. Biff cries upon Willy's shoulder, begging Willy to let go of all the crazy dreams. A "remarkable" thing in Willy's eyes. With tragic irony, Willy proceeds to act upon Biff's love and plans his own death with the false belief that the insurance money will enable Biff to reach the top. Arthur Miller's commentary explains how and why he came to write the play, and in doing so he tells of his own experiences and fears when called to testify about his communist affiliations. The actors insightful comments about the characters encourage us to understand and appreciate the individual perspectives and struggles. The readings and performances prove to be enlightening and powerful.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be exposed to and will study and evaluate the nature of the American Dream and the idea of success as seen in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. (Standards 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 11)
2. Students will consider the design of Arthur Miller's play and how his particular creation enhances the development of a story having the past and memory as primary catalysts. (Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 11, 12)

Dramatic Activities

1. Use the following themes and concepts as prompts for improvised speeches originating from each of the four family members: betrayal, exhaustion, dreams, expectations, love, and responsibility. Have assorted groups of four students play the

roles of Willy, Linda, Biff and Happy. The group of players will change as each new idea is introduced.

2. Willy and Biff have great love for each other. Their happiness and sense of identity are intertwined with the other. But Willy accuses Biff of throwing his life away out of spite. Is Willy's conclusion a valid one? How and why would Biff think differently? In small groups, have students script the conversation that would take place between father and son if each were to remain calm and able to articulate their deepest desires and understandings. Each group would present a reading of their script.

Oral Activities

1. Have students reflect upon significant moments in their lives by creating a timeline listing what they consider the five most important incidents. Students should annotate each episode by describing what took place, who was there, how they felt, and why it has proven to be important. Have students interview each other and then share with the large group what they found most interesting.
2. Willy believes it is important to be well liked, especially if one is a salesman. Arthur Miller suggests that in chasing the American Dream, we are all selling and trying to find success just like Willy. Have students agree or disagree with this assertion. In doing so, they should list reasons and illustrations from contemporary American society, which support their position. As a culminating part of this activity, the class should discuss the following statement, *Death of a Salesman* is relevant or not relevant to life in contemporary America.

Written Activities

1. Arthur Miller describes the walls of the Loman house on stage as being transparent. Throughout the play Willy is continually remembering scenes from the family's past. (Miller asserts the past is never past.) And in the midst of the play, Willy asks the question, "How did I get here?" Ask students to consider these aspects of the play and to write a short expository essay in which they illustrate how all three work together to illuminate not only the story of Willy Loman, but the nature of our lives in general.
2. If Willy Loman has a tragic flaw, what might it be? How does it lead to his death? Have students use Linda's intimate knowledge and perspective, and write with her voice a new closing speech at Willy's Requiem. This should be a clarification and tribute that would conclude the play speaking about the life of the salesman.