

From “Selling (and Buying) the American Dream”
(Chapter Four of *Theatrical Liberalism*)

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Like any traveling man, he had to my mind a kind of intrepid valor that withstood the inevitable putdowns, the scoreless attempts to sell. In a sense, these men lived like artists, like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether.

–Arthur Miller, *Timebends*, p. 127

“I meant,” he said, softer, “that as a salesman you are basically an artist type. The seller is in the visionary sphere of the business function. And then you’re an actor, too.”

–Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*, p. 88

Now, sell it! Sell it!

–Rose, in *Gypsy*, by Arthur Laurents, p. 64

“Selling and Buying the American Dream” is excerpted from a draft of the fourth chapter of my current work-in-progress, *Theatrical Liberalism*. In this project, I argue that theater is central to understanding the complexity of Jewish engagement with modern, liberal non-Jewish societies. For European and North American Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theatricality served as a vital metaphor for the presentation of self in everyday life, and theater itself was a venue of major importance in terms of both consumption and production. The efforts of Jewish writers to articulate a modern American Jewish identity created a new American theatrical culture while paradoxically re-inscribing Jewish difference. Theatricality came to represent, in the work of American Jewish writers and artists, the liberating potential to *make a self*, a promise often set in opposition to the implicitly anti-theatrical (and essentialist) constrictions of *being a self*. Jewish writers and artists not only used the theater to articulate their own identities but also became identified with it, and the shifting status of theatricality in American culture is closely related to the rise and fall of antisemitism. *Theatrical Liberalism* explores the uses of theatricality in secular American Jewish culture as a way of identifying a specifically Jewish attitude towards the central ethical issues of modern American individualism. Drawing on a century’s worth of fiction, memoirs, plays, essays, and performances, *Theatrical Liberalism* tells a history of Jewish literary self-representation in America, identifying a series of

narratives Jews have used to articulate the contours of the American Jewish individual and, by extension, American Jewish liberalism more broadly defined.

Chapter Four, “Selling and Buying the American Dream,” argues that the central popular American Jewish narrative that emerges in literature of the immediate postwar years, is, ironically, considering the rapid social and economic advances of second-generation Jews in the 1940s and 1950s, a story of failure. Foregrounding a longstanding connection between selling and acting in American literature, numerous mid-twentieth-century texts questioned the apparently redemptive power of theatrical liberalism that had seemed so promising in earlier decades and began to reformulate the impetus to perform – and the materialistic goals of that performance – as a sort of tyranny waged by American commercial culture. Written with all the anger and pathos of a spurned lover, or the passion of a religious convert, these texts critique those who retain faith in illusion and dreams, live “phony” double lives, or are duped by con-men. If there is a central hero (or more often, anti-hero) of post-war Jewish culture, it is the salesman, usually the failed salesman. Failed actors and would-be con-men also make frequent appearances, and in some cases a character can be all three at once. But no longer do actors and salesman have control over their stage, as they did in the popular culture of an earlier era. They are pathetic losers, unable to see the harm their own “phony” behavior does to those closest to them and to themselves. The chapter begins with the text which popularizes the core narrative of the era most effectively, *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Bracketing *Death of a Salesman* are two novels by Saul Bellow, one, *The Victim* (1947), prefigures many of the issues in Miller’s play; the other, *Seize the Day* (1956), responds to and critiques the play. The chapter ends with a discussion of *Gypsy* (1959), the only prominent example of the woman as failed salesman in this Jewish literature, followed by a coda on David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which represents a 1980s re-working of this powerful narrative of loss and failure. The narrative of the failed salesman needs to be read in the context of the rich Jewish intellectual landscape from which it emerged and with which it is largely continuous. David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, Will Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, and the method acting theories of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, among others, all play an important supporting role in understanding how this narrative emerged, developed, and had a remarkably long-lasting impact on both American and American-Jewish culture. For the purposes of this conference presentation, I include here a condensed version of my discussion of *Death of a Salesman*.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, more than any other single work, anchored Jewish disillusion with theatrical liberalism in public consciousness as *the* central narrative of the post-war period. The central character Willy Loman gets by on the one real talent he has – blind faith in his own skewed version of theatrical liberalism. So incapable is Willy of seeing beyond the ideology to which he has devoted his life, that when the narrative ceases to function for him, he loses his mind rather than his faith. Willy never wakes up from the dream and dies in pursuit of it. This narrative of the failed salesman was and is remarkably powerful in its ability to move a popular audience. Miller and numerous critics recall audience members unable to move at the end of the play, grown men slumped over their seats weeping, people emerging stunned and red-eyed from the theater. Within a year of the Broadway opening, productions had been mounted in Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Argentina, Italy, France, Austria, Greece, Germany and Israel. The play has seen three successful Broadway revivals since its opening in 1949, as well as major professional and amateur productions around the world. According to theatre historian Brenda Murphy, since its premiere in 1949, “there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world.”¹ It won the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award when it initially appeared, and won additional Tony awards for two of its revivals. The play is standard reading on American high school and college curricula and is widely considered universally applicable.² Miller has been lauded as the only playwright able to produce a serious tragic drama about American life. As Stella Adler points out to her acting students in her memoir *The Art of Acting*, “*Death of a Salesman* is as near as you will get to playing Hamlet.”³

Arthur Miller became America's most celebrated playwright with three important plays, *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *The Crucible* (1953), all of which are devoted to the demystification and unmasking of hypocrisy, artifice, illusion, and faith in false gods. Redemption for Miller's central characters lies in *disillusionment*, the rejection of artifice, and the embrace of something that can best be labeled authentic humanity (although it is unclear if any of the characters ultimately achieve this salvation). The plays are decidedly anti-theatrical in the sense that Jonas Barish in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* traces back to Plato: they rail against the immorality of artifice and illusion that form the very backbone of the theater itself.⁴ The very theatrical ideology that guided many in his father's generation in their quest to join the

middle and upper classes of American society in Miller's work threatens to be the source of the son's – and the whole society's – undoing. He condemns those who live within a world of illusion, those who manipulate illusion to ensnare others, those who lie, and especially those who lie to themselves.⁵

In all of his early plays, but especially in *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller expends an enormous amount of energy criticizing the faith that Jews (and other ethnic Americans) expressed in the illusory dream of unfettered self-making in America.⁶ Two different but interconnected aspects of self-making come in for particular scrutiny in the play: the twin promises of financial and social mobility that lie at the heart of theatrical liberalism. Nineteen twenty-eight – the year Willy repeatedly returns to in his hallucinations – becomes the touchstone in the play for the moment just before faith is shattered. Nineteen twenty-eight is, of course, also the year just before the crash of the stock market, and for Miller, the Depression was a devastating event. His own father lost his lucrative business and was forced into a hand-to-mouth existence and this failure is clearly reflected in the play. Miller sees the Depression not just as a financial crisis, but as a spiritual one. He writes in *Timebends*: “The Depression was only incidentally a matter of money. Rather, it was a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the façade of American society” (115). Willy's obsession with 1928 represents the desire to return to a time when “the façade of American society” was still intact.

The second blow to Miller's own faith seems to have come as a result of American responses to the rise of Nazi Germany. Miller notes in *Timebends* that his family was ideally positioned to assimilate to American society: “If ever any Jews should have melted into the proverbial pot, it was our family in the twenties” (62). And yet, he acknowledges in hindsight:

As it turned out, we were building a fortress of denial that would take two massive onslaughts to crack—the Depression and Hitler's war. Nor was it only a question of Jews denying the world's reality, as events would show, but also a failure in practice of the most sacred claims of our democracy itself to a more perfect decency and sensitivity toward injustice. By the early 1940s the world knew that the Jews en masse were being hunted down by the Germans, and by 1942 that they were being incinerated, but such was the grip of antisemitic bigotry on the American State Department and the British Foreign Office that even the official immigration quotas—which, small as they were, might have

saved at least some thousands of Jews—were never filled, and the rail lines into the killing camps were never bombed even after other equally distant installations were. (63)

Social mobility for American Jews turns out to be as much of a hoax as economic mobility. As Miller describes it, this “fortress of denial” began to crack in the summer of 1940 when Miller traveled to the suburbs of Cleveland to marry his Catholic girlfriend Mary Slattery. Miller’s memories of his encounters with his first wife’s family, who were almost all isolationist Republicans and none-too-happy with the prospect of a Jewish son-in-law, revolve around his feelings of alienation. In 1940, Miller remembers, his father-in-law listened avidly to the antisemitic diatribes of Father Coughlin on the radio and attended meetings of the local German-American antisemitic organization. Miller’s disillusion – and his sense of moral purpose – was further reinforced by the increasing power of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the post-war years, which called many members of the entertainment industry, including many of Miller’s close friends, before Congress to testify about their political activities and to provide the names of colleagues and friends who might have once sympathized with the Communist Party. The often overt antisemitism of the Red Scare convinced many Jews, including Miller, that no matter how well they performed Americanness (defined in this case as anti-communism), they could still be persecuted for being Jewish. Theatricality apparently offered no real source of comfort and no real strategy for advancement in the face of the rabid anticommunism of the McCarthy era.⁷

The result of this confluence of personal and political disillusion for Miller was to reinforce his sense of religious purpose; he writes that this moment in history led to a “[welding of] my personal ambition as a playwright [to] my hopes for the salvation of the Republic.” His experience with antisemites in Ohio led him to take on the role of “mediator between the Jews and America, and among Americans themselves as well.” By the height of the McCarthy era, Miller was shouldering the burden of demystifying the illusions of theatrical liberalism not only for American Jews but for Americans in general. Rejecting the notion of performed identity altogether, Miller’s plays instead encourage audiences to discover their authentic, true selves and in doing so, to see the larger, universal human motivations behind their actions and desires. Miller hoped to show Jews that they do not need theatricality, the “performance” of Americanness, in order to be accepted into American society, to be well-liked (as Willy instructs his sons to be). In fact, like Willy Loman, Jews are bound to be disappointed if they continue to

follow this particular strategy of self-making, to remain, as he said fifty years later, “on the sidewalk side of the glass looking in at a well-lighted place.”⁸ Instead, Miller will show all Americans that Jews, like other Americans, are simply human beings, and as such are *already* part of a group that shares “common emotions and ideas.”⁹ Performance of identity becomes unnecessary, indeed counter-productive, in this universalist vision.¹⁰

Death of a Salesman serves as a sort of core rendering of this Jewish anti-theatrical narrative of authenticity and universal humanism emerging in the 1940s. Its mythic outlines allow us to trace the narrative in its broadest and most popular incarnation. The narrative was also embraced and developed by a wide range of other Jewish writers, artists and intellectuals and utilized in a variety of forms.¹¹ Method acting, an acting style that arguably developed in order to express the very narrative of disillusion and anti-theatricality that *Death of a Salesman* made famous, was popularized largely by Jews raised on the Yiddish theater and influenced by the Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski; among the best known are Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner. The Method became the gold standard for “authentic” acting in the second half of the twentieth century on both stage and film, enshrining aspects of this narrative of disillusion deep within American popular culture.¹² With its focus on the individual personality, and its emphasis on psychological verisimilitude and genuine emotion, it grew in popularity in response to, and in conjunction with, the rise of realism and the rejection of overtly self-conscious theatricality on the American stage. But Method acting was a relatively new phenomenon in the American theater in the 1940s, and the move from the earlier, more theatrical style to this brand of naturalism can be read as another layer in the larger narrative of Jewish disillusion with theatrical liberalism.

In 1921, *The Saturday Evening Post* interviewed David Belasco, famed Jewish actor, director, and producer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century about his views on the “science of acting.” Belasco categorically asserts that the goal of the theater is artifice, not authenticity:

In acting take Nature as your model—but never fall into the error of attempting to present Nature in the stead of art. The speech of the stage should seem to be the speech of Nature. I say “should seem to be” because it is one of the paradoxes of acting that it cannot seem to be and never has seemed to be the speech of Nature when actually it is so. The great thinker, the poet Goethe . . . cogently remarked that “art is art precisely because

it is not Nature.” True of all arts, it is most conspicuously true of the art of the theatre. . . . Everything about a stage representation is radically artificial.¹³

Belasco then goes on to describe the various arts and techniques the actor must acquire in order to compel an audience – refinements in voice, gesture, expression, etc. No doubt responding to early shifts towards naturalism on the stage, Belasco is resolutely opposed to the notion of “genuine feeling” in acting, and claims that this approach will just lead to boredom:

The Great Master has told us that the purpose of playing is “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to Nature.” No way to failure in acting is so sure and so short as that of attempting to hold up Nature itself instead of the picture or reflection of Nature. The perfection of acting may be summarized in two words—namely, “illusion” and “effect.” It is when the would-be realistic actor forgets this primary fact. . . . that he defeats his own purpose and, striving to be what he supposes is natural, seems to be only artificial and commonplace.¹⁴

Morris Carnovsky, a Yiddish theater actor and founding member of the Group Theatre in the 1930s (which produced the work of Clifford Odets, among others), described his utter rejection of what he saw as the overly theatrical acting style of Belasco’s generation:

In the twenties, when I first came to New York and to the service of the theatre, the stage was the stamping ground of many an attitude and fixed persuasion It was a field day for every sort of exhibitionism, dominated by “stars” who were expected to be the exhibitionists par excellence. It was a competition not so much of living or cultural values as of showmanship. The lily of truth was often unrecognizable for the gilding that weighed it down.¹⁵

After denouncing “showmanship,” Carnovsky goes on to celebrate the new Stanislavski-influenced acting style of the Group, which allowed him, as he notes, to discover that he had rediscovered “his true Self,” “a wholeness” or “integrity,” in the art of acting. (616) Lee Strasberg, another of the founding members of the Group Theatre and a formidable force in the central training site for the Method in the 1940s and 50s, the Actors’ Studio, draws the connections between “life” and “acting” even closer in “The Actor and Himself”:

The extraordinary thing about acting is that life itself is actually used to create artistic results. In every other art the means only pretend to deal with reality. Music can often capture something more deeply than any other way, but it only tells you something about reality. Painting tells something *about* the painter, *about* the thing painted, and *about* the

combination of the two. But since the actor is also a human being, he does not pretend to use reality. He can literally use everything that exists. The actor uses thought – not thought transcribed into color and line as the painter does, but actual, real thought. The actor uses real sensation and real behavior. That actual reality is the material of our craft.¹⁶

In this brief history of Jewish-American acting theory, we can see the emergence of a disillusion with anything that smacked of “theatrics” and the embrace instead of the “authentic” that is so central to Jewish culture after the war, and so central as well to understanding *Death of a Salesman*.

Despite the clear presence of this anti-theatrical narrative in popular culture, sociology, acting theory, and historical accounts, it still seems a contradiction in terms to label a work that has been repeatedly lauded as America’s most important play anti-theatrical. And indeed it is. This contradiction may in fact help us to understand the play’s success. The play overtly preaches anti-theatricality, but makes strategic use of highly theatrical modes in order to elicit the sympathy that so moves the audience. Buried within this play, therefore, is a deep ambivalence about theatrical liberalism. Kirk Williams notes, in his analysis of the relationship between naturalism and anti-theatricality, that Western theatre has always been concerned with the morality of its own practice, and that this concern therefore forms the subject of countless plays. He argues,

the stage itself is often the best and most persuasive setting for an exploration of its own moral failings and ontological dangers. Anti-theatricality is, in short, a trope specific to and even parasitically dependent upon theatrical representation. One might argue that it is the *raison d’etre* of the theatre itself.¹⁷

Anti-theatricality is best explored, ironically, on the stage. *Death of a Salesman* explores the problems of theatricality in two distinct ways, in its form and in its content. The tension between the two approaches to theatricality creates the emotional power for which the play has always been celebrated.

The overt content of the play clearly rejects the world of illusion, which in dramatic literature is almost always closely aligned with the stage itself. The American dream of material success is presented in this play as a con, a cruel illusion that destroys the common man. Willy’s faith in this illusory dream leads to his own downfall and damages his family irreparably.

Willy's career as a salesman is compared to that of the actor, and is rejected by Biff as inauthentic. Likewise, Willy's imaginative life, his ability to speak to people who are not there, to bring the past to life, to invent and re-invent scenes of conflict and joy on the stage defines Willy not as an artistic genius (as might have been the case in a different play or at a different historical moment), but as mentally unbalanced. The content of the play devotes itself to the anti-theatrical project of unmasking false gods and revealing the truth. The form of the play also resists theatricality, but in a way that ironically subverts the anti-theatricality of the plot. The formal goal of dramatic realism, of which Miller is considered a master, is to create a seamless illusion on the stage, to eliminate signs of artifice or of self-conscious theatricality. In the Introduction to his *Collected Plays* in 1957, Miller writes of *All My Sons*:

My intention in this play was to be as untheatrical as possible. To that end any metaphor, any image, any figure of speech, however creditable to me, was removed if it even slightly brought to consciousness the hand of a writer. So far as was possible nothing was to be permitted to interfere with its artlessness.¹⁸

Miller is especially concerned here with the removal of obvious metaphors and with self-conscious artifice, with anything that suggests a world outside of the play. Further on in the essay, Miller comments that “the strategy [with *Death of a Salesman*], as with *All My Sons*, was to appear entirely unstrategic but with a difference.” The difference he describes is that in *Death of a Salesman*, he is less concerned with responding to (or resisting) the form of the well-made play and more concerned with absolute realism: “I wanted to proclaim that an artist had made this play, but the nature of the proclamation was to be entirely ‘inartistic’ and avowedly unstrategic; it was to hold back nothing, at any moment, which life would have revealed, even at the cost of suspense and climax.”¹⁹ Miller's goal is to attempt a realism akin to the stream of consciousness of Joyce or Faulkner, to reproduce on stage, as exactly as possible, the inner workings of the human mind. To achieve this psychological realism, it was necessary to reject everything that smacked of what Miller calls “theatrics”: “It began to seem to me that what I had written until then, as well as almost all the plays I had ever seen, had been written for a theatrical performance, when they should have been written as a kind of testimony whose relevance far surpassed theatrics.”²⁰ For Miller, there is something higher that lies outside of or above the theater – *testimony* – and artlessness is the route to creating this more moral art form.²¹ Illusion

thus represents, in *Death of a Salesman*, both the moral problem and the theatrical strategy for solving that problem.

Despite Miller's stated realist goals, the formal anti-theatricality of *Death of a Salesman* is therefore neither seamless nor straightforward. The artless realist impulse exists in fascinating tension with the artful, highly self-conscious, and brilliantly theatrical behavior of Willy Loman himself. The struggle between Willy's faith in theatricality and Biff's desire for the truth which structures the overt content of the plot is mirrored by a parallel formal tension in which two opposing forces – the anti-theatrical and the theatrical – struggle for dominance. The scenes of the present are acted in the best naturalist Method acting style; this is the space of authenticity, of anti-theatricality, and of realism. In the scenes of the past, however, vestiges of popular theatrical culture – of immigrant melodrama, vaudeville, musical theater – evoke the very artifice which Miller so desperately wanted to exorcise from his plays.

For example, in a climactic scene in the play, Biff and Happy leave a restaurant with two women while their father Willy is in the bathroom. When one of the girls asks, "Don't you want to tell your father—", Happy replies, "No, that's not my father, he's just a guy." (91). This trope of denying the father was a common one in immigrant literature; in the struggle between generations that shapes *Death of a Salesman*, we hear echoes of the immigrant melodrama of the earlier decades of the twentieth century.²² Throughout the teens and twenties, on the Yiddish and English language stage, in silent and sound movies, as well as in countless serialized stories and novels, the basic plot and structure of the immigrant melodrama was repeated hundreds of times. While there were a number of typical plots – the Jewish-Catholic intermarriage immortalized in both Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* and Anne Nichols' *Abie's Irish Rose* (not to mention in Miller's memoir *Timebends*), for example, or the young immigrant girl threatened by the evil or lecherous boss as seen in Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* and D.W. Griffith's *Child of the Ghetto* – one of the most popular and enduring was that of the struggle between immigrant parents and their children over the desire to become Americans. Perhaps the most famous of these family melodramas was *The Jazz Singer* (1925, film 1927) by Samson Raphaelson, which pitted Jackie Rabinowitz, a talented blackface singer, against his Old World father who wants him to become a cantor. In this play (and film) as in many others, the father's deep attachment to traditional values, however authentic, is depicted as backwards and untenable. The son's ability to become an American, to perform in American styles, to adapt to American values is praised as

the way of the future. *Death of a Salesman* clearly owes much to this theatrical tradition, but reverses both the generational struggle and the value system in order to make a very different point. Here it is the father who strives to perform Americanness and his son who looks to the more authentic and traditional past. The theatrical triumph of the first generation becomes the phony nightmare of the second. Willy wants to be too American; Biff resists Willy's insistence on complete assimilation to a narrative that seems to depend on illusion and empty promises. Willy follows the lead of Jack Robin in *The Jazz Singer*, insisting on the highly theatrical career (for himself as well as his sons) of salesman, a choice that depends, like Jakie's choice of becoming a blackface performer in *The Jazz Singer*, on artifice and adaptability. Biff, on the other hand, looks to older and more stable ideals situated in the pastoral, the open frontier, and the authentic self. The sympathies of the play have been wholly reversed – Willy's theatrical style is rejected and Biff's commitment to the truth is embraced. His final judgment of his father, at the funeral is, "The man didn't know who he was." (111)

When asked about his theatrical influences, Miller was always careful to trace a path that led from his early interest in classical Greek drama, Ibsen, and the plays of Odets and the Group Theatre directly to the psychological realism of *Salesman*. Realism, after all, carried a certain high-art and morally serious cache that was utterly lacking in the more popular commercial theatre of the time. By the mid-twentieth-century, dramatic realism had become the gold standard by which "serious" plays on Broadway were judged.²³ Even musicals of the 1940s, beginning with *Oklahoma!* were praised or criticized on the basis of their realist pretensions – those musicals which effectively "integrated" song and story within a realist structure were considered mature works of art; those that didn't tended to be dismissed as commercial fluff. The overarching goal of dramatic realism was to create a believable world into which audiences could enter both intellectually and emotionally, forgetting that they were in the theater for the two or three hours of the play, in order to more fully sympathize with the characters on the stage. Actors in the realist theater worked hard to create a sense of a complete world on the stage, and avoided at all cost the habits of performers in more self-consciously theatrical genres – breaking character, referring self-consciously to the audience beyond the footlights. But despite Miller's insistence on his lofty artistic and political goals, his description of theatre-going in his childhood and teenage years in his memoir reveals a fascination with the more theatrical commercial theater that complicates the straightforward path from the Group Theatre to

psychological realism that Miller continually re-asserts elsewhere. In *Timebends*, for example, Miller describes his regular and enthusiastic attendance at the local vaudeville theatre. Miller remembers attending “the vaudeville show on Saturdays, always the most anticipated day of the week, the opening acts—the mildly amazing Chinese acrobat families with their spinning plates and flying children, fairly boring after you had seen them twenty times. . . .”(59) Vaudeville was clearly the shaping theatrical influence of Miller’s childhood. He anticipated regular Saturday attendance and often saw the same act twenty times or more. Miller remembers fondly the great performers he saw week after week, including those who made *The Jazz Singer* a hit on both stage and screen:

These included jokers and singers like Eddie Cantor and George Burns and Al Jolson and George Jessel , the black tap dancers Buck and Bubbles and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and the headline acts like Clayton, Jackson, and Durante, whom my father all but revered.
(59)

The deliberate connection Miller makes between his father and the popular theater offers insight into the ambivalent theatricality with which he later depicts Willy Loman. He says that his father was “a connoisseur, having seen these performers so often during his days on the road that he could tell me how their routines had changed.” The “road” is conflated with the experience of vaudeville here as it is, in symbolic ways, for Willy. Furthermore, as a teenager, Miller attempted to make a career as a singer of popular show tunes, on radio if not on the stage, and actually auditioned for a radio show in the Brill Building (at the heart of Tin Pan Alley), crooning a Lorenz Hart ballad. The career choice obviously did not work out but the fact that he considered it indicates his own familiarity with, and affection for, the songs and performance styles of the popular musical theater of the 1930s.²⁴

A key feature of the popular musical theater and vaudeville that so impressed Arthur Miller in his youth is the episodic nature of the performance, the clear division between story and song in musicals, the rapid movement between different performance modes in vaudeville. This episodic structure prevents audiences from forgetting that they are in a theater. In the brief pauses between acts or numbers, audiences are expected to respond directly to the performers, preferably through applause and cheering for encores. We see vestiges of this self-consciously theatrical episodic structure in *Death of a Salesman* in the constant shifting between the present and past, the real and the remembered. In a musical, when a character’s emotions reach a peak

and the character can no longer express those feelings in a scene, the character breaks into song. Instead of breaking into song in *Death of a Salesman*, Willy goes into a memory.²⁵ As is appropriate for the star, Willy gets all of the good songs and his family serves as the supporting chorus. Memory scenes – like musical numbers – are generally introduced by instrumental music and a change in lighting. In the first memory scene, the stage directions indicate that “the apartment houses are fading out, and the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves. . . Music insinuates itself as the leaves appear.” (16) In the introduction to the second memory scene, which immediately follows the first, “music is heard as behind a scrim.” (24) The following scene, which introduces Ben, begins when “Ben’s music is heard.” (30) And so on. This use of music not only introduces a shift in theatrical mode, it also evokes the melodrama discussed above as each of the characters from Willy’s past (Ben, the Woman, his father, and Willy himself) have their own musical theme which cues the audience to particular emotional and moral responses.

Another crucial difference between vaudeville and the realist stage is the relationship between the audience and the players. To “break” the fourth wall – the invisible, imagined wall that divides the stage from the audience – is to commit an unforgivable breach of the rules of dramatic realism. In popular theater of the early twentieth century, in contrast, especially in vaudeville, the Yiddish theatre, and the musical theater, the fourth wall was highly permeable. Audiences frequently communicated with the players on stage, applauding and shouting for encores in the middle of the show, shouting out directions to the actors, throwing flowers, and sometimes even “stopping the show” with cheers, applause and standing ovations. Actors showed an awareness of the audience as well, making self-conscious asides directed at the audience, hamming up jokes to get a few more laughs, performing songs downstage center in full frontal position even if the songs were ostensibly directed at other characters in the play, going out of character to bow after musical numbers, even taking requests from the audience.²⁶ Even the ostensibly realist theatre of Clifford Odets and the Group reputedly broke the fourth wall at the end of the political piece *Waiting for Lefty*, when the actors on stage (including Elia Kazan, the director of *Death of a Salesman*) exhorted the audience to “strike!” and the audience responded by shouting “Strike! Strike!” While Arthur Miller aimed to abolish the theatrics that draw attention to the constructedness of the theatrical event, these other theatrical forms depend

for their success on a heightened self-consciousness about the respective roles of the audience and the players.

In *Death of a Salesman*, there is an extreme concern in the play with walls and the way in which walls are to be treated by the actors. As the curtain rises, we see the Lomans' small house, surrounded on three sides by apartment buildings which loom over it, shutting out the light and enclosing the house as if in a trap. The opening stage directions then describe the manner in which the walls of the house itself map the movement between realism and self-conscious theatricality: "Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall lines, entering the house only through the door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping "through" a wall on to the forestage." (1)²⁷ Willy's first scene highlights the importance of walls (and windows) as a metaphor for theatricality. Willy has returned home because he keeps driving off the road. He describes his experience to his wife Linda: "I was driving along, you understand? And I was fine. I was even observing the scenery. You can imagine, me looking at scenery, on the road every week of my life."(3) Willy is surprised at his interest in the scenery. He has been a traveling salesman for years. He's played this scene a million times. Why take a sudden interest in the scenery? Something about the scenery, or the way Willy looks at it, must have changed. And a change in the scenery signals an important shift in both the theater in which Willy performs and in the life he leads. Willy continues, "I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me. And then all of a sudden I'm goin' off the road! I'm tellin' ya, I absolutely forgot I was driving." (3) Willy opens the windshield and loses control of the car. Something in the act of opening the windshield is dangerous, even violent. "I might've killed somebody," he continues. We learn a few pages later why the opening of the windshield nearly leads to disaster:

LINDA: And Willy—if it's warm Sunday we'll drive in the country. And we'll open the windshield, and take lunch.

WILLY: No, the windshields don't open on the new cars.

LINDA: But you opened it today.

WILLY: Me? I didn't. [*He stops*] Now isn't that peculiar! Isn't that a remarkable—[*He breaks off in amazement and fright as the flute is heard distinctly*]

LINDA: What, darling?

WILLY: That is the most remarkable thing.

LINDA: What, dear?

WILLY: I was thinking of the Chevy. Nineteen twenty-eight. . . when I had that red Chevy—That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevy today. (7-8)

To open the windshield is, for Willy, to experience a certain kind of freedom, the joy of literal, temporal, and metaphorical mobility (the warm breezes “bathing over” him, the memory of the past, the dream of a better life). To be unable to open that windshield is to be trapped within the car, within the present and within a self-representation that offers no hope of escape. The windshield, the clear glass through which one observes the scenery, seems a fine metaphor for the fourth wall on the stage. Willy’s failure lies in his inability to acknowledge that the windshield is sealed shut, his inability to recognize theatrical mobility as a false dream and to accept the inevitability of dramatic realism, of walls that stay where they belong, of hard truths that shine like diamonds in the jungle.

Willy Loman is the most overtly theatrical performer in the play, able to not only sustain his own over-the-top performance style in the face of incredible odds but to continually wrest the play from its realist moorings and to engage the audience in theatrical flights of fancy reminiscent of the non-realist forms in which he clearly feels more comfortable. It is Willy who always has a story, who is always performing, who manages to conjure whole scenes of the past out of thin air, complete with music, lighting, performers and sets. In these memory scenes, the actors play younger versions of the characters in the realist scenes, reminding the audience that they are indeed actors. The scenes, especially those of the boys and the car, briefly recapture the power of the uplifting musical number to re-imagine and re-invent the self. While Willy only breaks the fourth wall between the audience and the actors once in the play (and then only indirectly), he continually threatens its stability in the memory scenes, which take place on the apron downstage, outside of the realist set and closest to the audience. Willy moves back and forth between the two stages – his mind and the world – continually traversing the walls that should (according to the play at least) keep a more sane man contained.

Willy’s despair is rooted in the fear that as a theatrical character, if he runs out of stories, he will cease to exist. “The gist of it is that I haven’t got a story left in my head,” he tells Biff and Happy when he meets them in the restaurant. Biff wants to “hold on to the facts tonight,” and Willy refuses. (83) Willy simply cannot perform in the style demanded by the play. When

he turns to his memories for guidance, he loses himself in them and in doing so, he encourages the very artifice that the realist theater, and Method acting, are supposed to dispel. Willy's flaw is that he imagines he can return to a time when the windshield still opened. Even worse, he still believes that the open windshield is the gateway to freedom and opportunity. Willy perpetually returns to 1928, when car windshields still opened, when the fourth wall was still permeable, vaudeville was still a hit, when he still imagined he could connect with an audience, sell a dream, and re-invent himself at will. He is trapped by his faith in outmoded performance styles and genres. He believes in the power of a charming face, a strong voice, and a persuasive narrative. But Willy is incapable of achieving anything real with these theatrical hallucinations because the play insists on undercutting their power, on making them the product of insanity rather than brilliance. In *Death of a Salesman*, the breaking of theatrical walls, the following of musical dreams, the opening of windshields, can only represent a destructive concession to the illusory myth of American freedom and opportunity. Only in a tightly-controlled realist masterpiece can Miller exorcise his father's failure, America's failure, and his own guilt at ever having been duped into believing that dream himself. But by equating the all-encompassing illusion of realism to the truth, and rejecting Willy's theatrical hallucinations as psychosis, the play creates a fundamental contradiction between the politics of the form and the content.

Willy does not submit easily to the play's rejection of theatricality. Audiences love and sympathize with him not just because he is pathetic, and certainly not because he is common. Audiences connect with Willy because he is theatrical. He is the one character who believes that it is important to be well-liked, and while that gets him and his sons nowhere in the world, it goes a long way in the theater. Willy resists the play's insistence that the windshield is locked shut – he continually breaks through those walls, at the price of losing everything. Willy refuses to submit to the vision of hard, real authenticity that the play proposes and in doing so, he taps into the audience's own need to have faith in the promises of theatrical liberalism, even if those promises appear to be illusory. Willy is the one character who dares to acknowledge the audience and when he does so, the audience weeps for him. In the penultimate scene in the play, just before Willy's suicide, Willy sings his final song, in the guise of a conversation with his ghostly brother Ben. Willy has realized that his son still loves him, and with this knowledge he can die happily. The ghost of Ben convinces him to pass on his faith in the dream by killing himself and bequeathing the insurance money to Biff. Willy speaks to Biff, and to himself, as he

gears up for his final act. And as he does so, he makes it clear that he has been an actor all along:

WILLY: Now when you kick off, boy, I want a seventy-yard boot, and get right down the field under the ball, and when you hit, hit low and hit hard, because it's important, boy. [*He swings around and faces the audience*] **There's all kinds of important people in the stands, and the first thing you know . . .** [*Suddenly realizing he is alone*] Ben! Ben, where do I . . . ? (108, my emphasis)

Willy begins by reprising the pep talk he gave to Biff before his big football game, although it quickly becomes clear that the pep talk is directed at himself. Then suddenly, as if emboldened by his choice to resist the play's relentless rejection of theatricality, he breaks out of his interiority, faces the audience full front for the first time, and acknowledges them directly. "There's all kinds of important people in the stands." Willy has, for a moment, escaped the bounds of the play, but his brief revelation that there *are* actually people out there, watching him, is quickly repressed. Theatricality and anti-theatricality struggle for dominance here as the text shuts down Willy's impulse and he "suddenly realiz[es] he is alone." No, there is nobody out there, Willy. You are only imagining that audience out there. Desperate to hold on to his dream of a grand theatrical triumph, Willy opens the windshield for the last time, and drives off the stage forever, taking the last vestiges of theatrical liberalism off with him.

Or so it seems. At his funeral, just before the curtain comes down, Linda comments that at long last the mortgage is paid off and laments that Willy is not there to share in this milestone: "I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. [*A sob rises in her throat*] We're free and clear. [*Sobbing more fully, released*] We're free. [*Biff comes slowly toward her.*] We're free. . . We're free" (112) This "freedom" Linda evokes is generally taken as an ironic comment on the steep price Americans must pay – with their souls – for the freedom to pursue material success. Or as an acknowledgment that now that Willy (and his generation) is gone, the family – especially Biff, who has just asserted that he "knows who he is" – is finally free of the illusory dream of freedom Willy insisted on, the dream of self-fashioning. But are they? Just after the family exits the stage, there are two final, and contradictory, stage directions: "*Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage as over the house the hard towers of the apartment buildings rise into sharp focus.*" (112) The play ends with the battle for theatrical dominance raging on between the realism of those "hard

towers” and the theatricality of the melodic flute of Willy’s memory scenes. But the theatrical experience itself has one more scene to play. Willy does return to the stage, of course, in the curtain call. And as audiences roar with appreciation at the actor’s remarkable performance, Willy finally gets what he wanted all along. He is, without question, “well-liked.”

¹ Brenda Murphy, *Miller: Death of a Salesman*. Plays in Production Series. (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 70.

² See the Preface to *The Salesman Has a Birthday* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000) and the article “Attention Must Be Paid: Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and the American Century” by Peter Levine for an awe-inspiring list of the many ways in which the play has been canonized both in America and abroad.

³ Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting* (New York: Applause Books, 2000), 33.

⁴ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of CA P, 1981). For an illuminating critique and expansion of Barish’s notion of anti-theatricality see the special issue of *Modern Drama* on Modernism and Antitheatricality edited by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Fall 2001).

⁵ *Death of a Salesman* is a Jewish expression of a narrative that grew in popularity in the postwar period among Americans generally, especially among members of those groups whose position in American society was perceived to be uncertain. Theatrical liberalism had been embraced in the early twentieth century by those who most felt the need for the freedom and mobility it promised – the same groups that also, not coincidentally, were responsible for the American theater: Irish, homosexual, Jewish, and black writers and artists. The war, the revelations of the Holocaust and of the Stalinist purges, the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the advent of the Cold War and of the House Un-American Activities Committee investigations into the entertainment industry all combined in the 1940s to seriously damage the strength of theatrical liberalism among those who had been its most ardent fans. We see this theme of disillusion articulated in culturally specific ways across a broad spectrum of popular works of the period such as Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (written in 1941) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), Tennessee Williams’ *Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952).

⁶ Miller asks, with Jeremiah: “What wrong did your fathers find in Me that they abandoned Me and went after delusion and were deluded?” (Jer 2:5).

⁷ For an in-depth discussion of the American theatre and anti-communism, see Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film and Television* (New York: Cambridge, 2003) and David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* (U of Minn Press, 1002). On the Red Scare more generally, see Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998).

⁸ Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (New York, 1999), xii.

⁹ This was becoming an increasingly popular stance among Jewish writers in the later 1940s and early 1950s. I discuss universalism at length in the section on Bellow’s *Seize the Day*. See also both the novel and film of *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) for another version of Jewish universalism.

¹⁰ For a persuasive meditation on the overt or covert Jewishness of *Death of a Salesman*, especially in relation to the problem of assimilation, see Julius Novick, “Death of a Salesman: Deracination and Its Discontents.” *American Jewish History* 91.1 (March 2003) pp. 97-107. Novick also offers a useful overview of other critics who have discussed the Jewishness of Miller’s plays from a variety of perspectives.

¹¹ For the purposes of this condensed version, I offer only one example. The full chapter also discusses the work of sociologist David Riesman and theologian Will Herberg, among others.

¹² See especially Steve Vineberg, *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1991), chapter 5. See also Henry Bial’s discussion of the relationship between Method Acting and *death of a Salesman* in which he argues that the play can be considered Jewish because the actors in the play, using the techniques of the Method, drew on their own ethnic and religious backgrounds to create their characters. (*Acting Jewish* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005), pp. 49-58.

¹³ David Belasco, “Acting as a Science” in *Actors on Acting*, Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, eds. (New York: Crown, 1970), p. 580.

¹⁴ Belasco, p. 581.

¹⁵ Morris Carnovsky, "The Quest of Technique" in *Actors on Acting*, Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, eds. (New York: Crown, 1970), p. 614. While not all members were Jewish, the Group Theatre is understood to be the other site (besides the Broadway musical) of Jewish-influenced American theatre of the 1930s. Key members, including not only Carnovsky, but Clifford Odets, Lee Strasberg, Stella and Luther Adler, and John Garfield, brought particular Jewish experiences to the Group, especially the experience gleaned in the Yiddish theatre, and the plays of Odets, which formed the backbone of the Group's repertory, often focused on specifically Jewish characters and situations.

¹⁶ Lee Strasberg, "The Actor and Himself," in *Actors on Acting*, p. 623.

¹⁷ Kirk Williams, "Anti-theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism." *Modern Drama* 44:3 (2001) p. 285.

¹⁸ "The Question of Relatedness", p. 9

¹⁹ "Introduction to *Collected Plays*." Excerpted in The Viking Critical Library edition of *Death of a Salesman*. (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 156-57.

²⁰ Relatedness, p. 10

²¹ As did Brecht, Miller wants his audience to respond to the ethical problems in his play like a jury at a trial, but he aims to reach that goal not through the alienating effects of the self-conscious epic theatre, but through the all-encompassing illusion of psychological realism.

²² See, for example, the son who denies his father in order to achieve social success in the film *His People* and the daughter who denies her mother in the Anzia Yeziarska story "The Fat of the Land."

²³ For the most part, critics have accepted almost without question the importance of *Death of a Salesman* as "art" and as an ideal representation of American realism. Much of this critical discussion has revolved around a debate about whether or not *Death of a Salesman* can be called a tragedy. As Terry Otten has pointed out, in his masterful overview of the canon of Miller scholarship in *The Temptation of Innocence in the Dramas of Arthur Miller* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002):

. . . likely no modern drama has generated more such talk than Miller's classic American play. After two decades of strenuous debate had seemed to have exhausted the subject, critics began to complain about "the pointless academic quibbles" concerning whether or not *Death of A Salesman* is a "true" tragedy. . . . Yet, thirty years later and a half-century after the play's premiere, the question of its fitness as a tragedy continues to be a central critical concern. (26)

Otten goes on to describe how the critical obsession with the tragic nature of *Death of a Salesman* is a crucial part of a larger conversation among scholars of modern drama about "the viability of tragedy in the modern age and particularly in American culture." (27) He acknowledges that to a large extent, the impetus for this single-minded focus on the question of tragedy was provided by Miller himself, in his well-known essays "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949) and "The Nature of Tragedy" (1949), both of which were written to argue that Willy Loman is worthy of being a tragic figure, and in many subsequent essays and interviews over the years.

To call a play a tragedy is to deem it culturally valuable and artistically significant. Numerous scholars make clear the high stakes involved in the discussion, none more than Harold Bloom in his introduction to the *Modern Critical Interpretations* volume on *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988) when he writes "Whether it has the aesthetic dignity of tragedy is not clear, but no other American play is worthier of the term". (3) Both "dignity" and "worthy" imply their opposites: if not a tragedy, the play would be undignified and unworthy. The central question here seems to be: is this a work of art? Or is it "simply" American popular middlebrow culture? Scholars of American drama **need** *Death of a Salesman* to be a work of art because American drama has been repeatedly criticized for lacking plays that carry that weight and merit that approbation. A formidable presence in canon-formation himself, Bloom spends half of his introduction discussing why American culture has not produced serious drama, quoting Alvin Kernan who wrote in 1967: "with all our efforts, money, and good intentions, we have not yet achieved a theater". (2) The question underlying "Can America have tragedy" is of course the same question raised in numerous influential articles by Adorno, written at the very same time that Miller is developing his ideas about theater: does America have a culture equal to that of Europe? Is the American experience and the American public weighty enough, serious enough, to merit that sort of expression? It is not surprising therefore that theater scholars spend so much energy elevating American realism to the status of "serious drama." Read in this vein, Miller's essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" becomes not just a plea to take Willy Loman seriously, but a plea to take Miller's work seriously as art.

²⁴ *Timebends*, p. 109

²⁵ In the 1940s, musical theater was increasingly praised for conforming to realist standards so comparisons between the two forms becomes increasingly appropriate in the late 1940s. The use of musical numbers to represent dreams

or interior states was a popular device and many musicals had at least one such number. In late 1930s musicals, the “dream ballet” tended to express fantasies of the central characters. In *Babes in Arms*, Peter imagines in a dream ballet what he would do if he suddenly came into a lot of money, and in *Pal Joey*, as we have seen, Joey imagines his ideal nightclub. As Freudian psychoanalysis took hold in America, it became increasingly popular to use musical numbers to depict the subconscious. The most explicit representation of this phenomenon was in the Kurt Weill / Ira Gershwin musical *Lady in the Dark* (1941) which used the psychoanalysis of a young woman as a structuring device. Each number emerges out of a dream that the main character Liza relates to her psychiatrist. A few years later in *Oklahoma!* (1943) the dream ballet “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind” explicitly represents the character’s desires and fears. The success of the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* led the form to become almost ubiquitous, and finally a cliché, in musicals of the 1940s and 50s.

²⁶ See the first two chapters of my book *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004) for a number of specific examples of this theatrical style.

²⁷ The set was designed by Jo Mielziner, who also designed most of the Rodgers and Hart musicals, including *Pal Joey*, as well as the somewhat similar set for *Streetcar Named Desire*.