

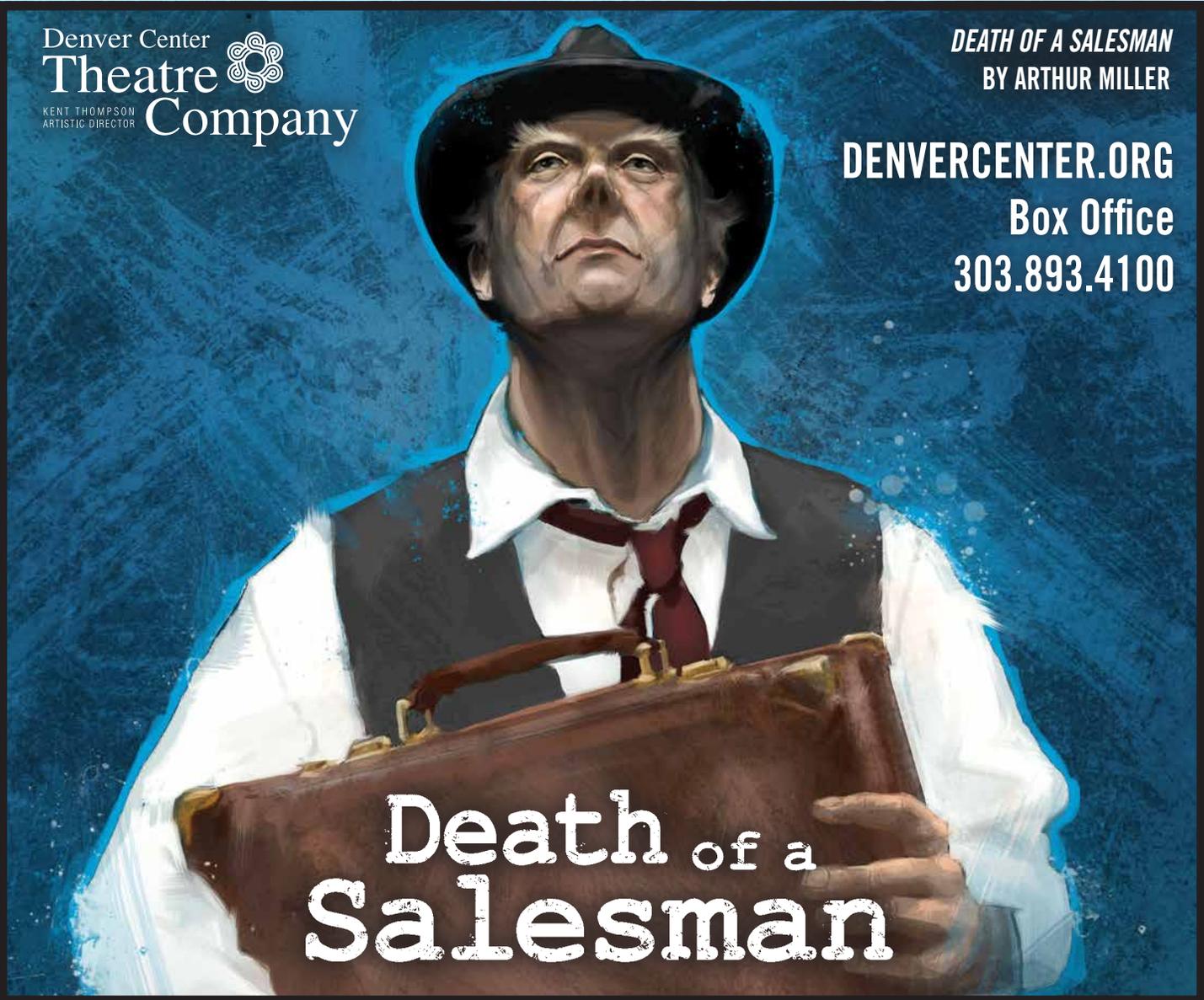
InsideOUT

PRODUCED BY THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Denver Center
Theatre Company
KENT THOMPSON
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

DEATH OF A SALESMAN
BY ARTHUR MILLER

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Death of a
Salesman

2013/14
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SYNOPSIS

CHARLEY: *A salesman has got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.*

—*Death of a Salesman*

Willy Loman, a travelling salesman, always believed that perseverance and personality were the keys to success in business as well as in life. At the age of 63, he has reached a dead end. He is exhausted from his long trips to New England for over a decade. He talks to himself and hallucinates, intermingling past and present. His sons, Biff and Happy, have not fulfilled their potential, although Willy thinks they are magnificent. Willy believes himself a successful salesman, an ideal father and a perfect husband until he finally must face reality. He shuttles between the dreams and promises of his past and the harsh truth of the present. The members of his immediate family are unable to communicate their love or reveal the despair they feel. The American Dream has escaped the entire Loman family. Willy is a common man caught in the crossfire of economic and human values. ■

THE PLAYWRIGHT ARTHUR MILLER (1915-2005)

Willy cannot face reality, and since he can't do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it.

—Arthur Miller, *Salesman in Beijing*, 1984.

Arthur Miller was born in 1915 in Manhattan near the lower edge of Harlem, which was at that time an upscale neighborhood. His father was a comfortable middle-class manufacturer of women's coats and his mother was a schoolteacher. The Miller family moved to Brooklyn in the early 1930s because the Great Depression had plunged them into great financial difficulty; those years of poverty and struggle influenced much of his writing.

After he graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, Miller spent the next two and a half years working as a stock clerk in an automobile parts warehouse until he had saved enough money to attend college at the University of Michigan. He paid for college with financial aid from the National Youth Administration and from money he earned as night editor of the *Michigan Daily* newspaper. While there, Miller began to write plays, several of which won prizes. Upon graduating from college in 1938, he returned home to New York where he married Mary Grace Slatter and had two children, Jane and Robert. While back home, Miller also joined the Federal Theatre Project, an arts program sponsored by the US government. However, the Project ended before his first play could be produced. A college football injury kept him from active service in the Second World War; instead, he worked as a fitter at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and wrote radio scripts; he also wrote two novels during this time—*Situation Normal* (1944), a volume of material about army life, and *Focus* (1945), a novel about anti-Semitism.

Miller had not given up on playwriting, however. In 1944, his play *The Man Who Had All the Luck* won a prize offered by New York City's Theatre Guild and received a Broadway production. The show, however, was not so lucky—it closed after only four performances.

It was not until three years later that Miller found success on the stage. His play *All My Sons* opened to positive reviews in 1947 and became a big hit with audiences. It established him as a significant new voice in the American theatre. The play also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Donaldson Award, voted upon by subscribers to *Billboard Magazine*.

Two years later, with *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller soared to new artistic heights; critics began to regard him as one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20th century. The hugely popular play won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

The next several years were very good for Miller. He wrote several hit plays, culminating with *The Crucible*, which opened on Broadway in 1953, at the height of Senator Joseph McCarthy's congressional investigations into the "un-American" activities of US citizens (which examined individuals' alleged involvement in the Communist Party). The early 1950s were a very tense time in American history; the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union caused many Americans to worry about the safety and future of the nation. *The Crucible*, set during the Salem witch trials, reflected the paranoia and hysteria of the contemporary time. As a result, Miller was denied a passport to Belgium to attend the opening of *The Crucible* there. Later, he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee to reveal the names of US citizens who were involved in Communist activities. Miller refused and was cited for contempt of Congress. The Supreme Court overturned this conviction in 1958.

The mid-50s also were turbulent times in Miller's personal life. In 1956 he divorced his wife and married actress and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, whom he had met in Hollywood in the early 1950s. This event brought him great notoriety and caused a media sensation, but in 1961 it ended in divorce. Miller then married photographer Inge Morath in 1962. They had two children, Rebecca and

Daniel. Miller continued to write until his death in 2005, although from the mid-1980s his work was valued more highly in London where critical and popular success was warmer than in the States. He continues to be revered as one of America's greatest playwrights.

Miller was the author of *The Misfits* (1961), a screenplay for his second wife, Marilyn Monroe, and *Timebends: A Life* (1987), an autobiography. His books of reportage with photographs by Inge Morath, his third wife, include *In Russia* (1969) and *Chinese Encounters* (1979). Among

Miller's other plays are *An Enemy of the People* (1950), *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *After the Fall* (1964), *Incident at Vichy* (1964), *The Price* (1968), *The American Clock* (1973), *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (1991), *Broken Glass* (1994), *Playing for Time* (1980), a TV drama), *The Last Yankee* (1993) and *Resurrection Blues* (2002). Miller won seven Tony Awards, an Olivier Award, an Obie Award, the John F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award and the National Book Award 2001 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. ■

Moss, Leonard. *Arthur Miller*. New York: Twayne Publishing, 1967.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The concept of the American Dream existed in 1630 when John Winthrop gave his “city on a hill” sermon to his fellow Puritan colonists as they sailed to Massachusetts. Though he did not use the word dream, he detailed his vision of a society in which everyone would have a chance to prosper. Later in the Declaration of Independence (1776), Thomas Jefferson asserted that everyone in America — excepting those who were enslaved — was entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

As America expanded in the 19th century, so did the notion that America was different from other countries; anything could be achieved there if a person dared to dream big enough and work hard enough. In 1830 Alexis de Tocqueville visited America from France and called this belief “the charm of anticipated success.”¹ Meanwhile, Henry David Thoreau (1854) wrote in his book *Walden* that if one dreams and endeavors to live his life as imagined, he would meet with success.

The words “American Dream” began to appear in newspaper articles in reference to hardy pioneers who headed west or to European immigrants who arrived in the United States seeking better homes and jobs. Credit is given to historian James Truslow Adams for popularizing this idea in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. He explained the idea as “The dream of a

land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”²

The “American Dream” means different things to different people. To some it is the faith that everyone who lives in the USA has the potential to prosper and become wealthy. To others, it's the belief that everyone in this country has the opportunity to pursue his or her great passion. To composer Woody Guthrie (“This Land is Your Land”) and Martin Luther King, the American Dream meant that every citizen is guaranteed equality, freedom and the right to be heard.

Others refuse to recognize the “dream” premise. Some individuals believe it has degenerated into a compulsion to amass property and possessions. Opponents or skeptics dismiss the dream as a cruel myth, noting the ethnic and economic inequality that persists in America. Comedian and social critic George Carlin once wisecracked, “It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.”³

Throughout the nation's history, the American Dream has weathered rocky times. It willfully ignores some of the less dreamy episodes in the nation's founding and history, such as battles over territory with Native

Americans and with Mexico. The Great Depression of 1929 destroyed the fortunes of many self-made millionaires and cost many in the middle class their homes and jobs. In 1934 Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched an array of social programs to help the impoverished, convincing Americans they could improve their lot in life.

After World War II, the economy, primed by military spending, saw America emerge as the wealthiest, most powerful society on the planet. As a result, many

growing families took out a mortgage and moved to the suburbs with a belief in perpetual upward mobility. If they worked hard enough, their offspring would have it better. This is what Willy believes, but his dream is never realized. ■

1. how stuff works.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/American-dream>

<http://asq.org/career/resources/articles/the-american-dream.htm>

<http://www.howstuffworks.com/american-dream.htm>

Samuel, Lawrence R. *The American Dream: a Cultural History*. Syracuse:

Syracuse University Press, 2012.

THEMES IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN

One of the major themes in the play is the gap between reality and delusion. Although everyone in the Loman family is unable to separate reality from fantasy, Willy has the greatest difficulty. He insists that he and his boys will succeed if they are “well-liked” and “well-dressed.” Willy dreams of a success that he will never achieve. He constantly exaggerates his own accomplishments and is totally unrealistic in his expectations for his sons. Ben, Willy’s dead older brother, continually appears in Willy’s troubled mind giving advice on how to make it big in business.

A second theme is the American Dream that Arthur Miller criticizes as a false illusion perpetuated by a capitalist society. Willy has worked all his life for the same company and at age 63 is fired because his sales are unprofitable. Willy is a victim of the youth culture that dominates the business world as well as changing times and technology.

The family is another important theme. Each generation has a responsibility to the other that it cannot fulfill. Biff and Happy are shaped by Willy’s flawed logic and his absences from home. Biff steals and Happy sleeps around; both lack strong moral values, having not been taught them by their father. Linda, the mother, loves

Willy despite his weaknesses, but she is left having to clean up the messes these men make.

The play suggests that physical or natural pursuits are the alternative to the business life. Willy is happiest (and most fulfilled) when he is building the front porch; Biff enjoyed working with cattle and horses on ranches, and Happy says “he can outbox, outrun and out-lift anybody in that store.” Perhaps Willy should have gone to Alaska and the two sons should have pursued a job in a rural setting. However, Willy’s determination to fulfill the “dream” prevents his sons from following their true calling.

The play has several motifs or symbols. The American West, Alaska and the African jungle symbolize the escape from the city, the promise of success and relief from failure. Seeds represent for Willy the opportunity to prove the worth of his labor, both as a salesman and a father. Diamonds represent tangible wealth. Ben made his fortune by finding them in Africa; Willy feels that his refusal to go with Ben led to his failure. Linda’s torn stockings remind Willy of his inability to adequately provide for his family and of his infidelity in Boston. ■

www.zeiterion.org/Salesman.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/salesman/themes.html>

Murphy, Brenda and Ibbotson, Susan C.W. *Understanding Death of a Salesman*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

THE MYTH OF SUCCESS

Willy's quest for success is central to the drama. Arthur Miller draws on American attitudes and types to create his character.

The importance of success was firmly entrenched in 17th century bourgeois England and came to this country with the colonists. This land of opportunity offered possibilities in owning property, resources and industrial progress such as railroads and steel mills. Indeed, spectacularly successful men such as Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan became public idols.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance (1842) fits into this pattern; "[success] was taken to be the sign of God's blessing and the reward of virtue." ¹ This desire for wealth and the drive for power were essential for the country's progress. In the 19th century Horatio Alger canonized the successful businessman into a popular literary hero in his rags to riches romances. In *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller inverts the traditional American success story.

Willy lives in a modest suburban home surrounded by massive buildings that block any view and blank out nature. The Loman name is descriptive because Willy is the "low man on the economic and social ladder." ² Willy's ideas have been shaped by a consumer society that believes primarily in business or monetary success.

Willy's commitment to the success myth has directed the education of his sons. Biff has failed math to pursue football and then loses his scholarships. Both Biff and Happy are lost and confused by their inability to get ahead. ■

1. Porter in Martine, p. 25.

2. Ibid, p. 28.

Martine, James J. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1979.

Porter, Thomas E. "Acres of Diamonds."

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

The Protestant work ethic emphasized that the way to contentment is through hard, honest labor, thrift and a pride in craftsmanship.

In the 19th century Americans read the works of Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899) who wrote rags to riches novels in which lowly heroes become wealthy through hard work and good luck. During the 1920s Dale Carnegie won fame for his self-help books "aimed at helping insecure people who lacked confidence and poise." ¹ In his 1936 book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Carnegie popularized the notion that anyone can be successful if he/she is well known and well liked. In addition,

Elbert Hubbard (1856-1915) created the concept of "positive thinking."

One of the problems Willy faces is that he is aging in a population that idolizes the young. Ashley Montague wrote in "The Cult of Youthfulness" that "to be young, to be beautiful, to be handsome—what else matters?" ² In "The Dangerous Age" by J.R. Sprague, he insists that anyone over 50 is past his prime in the business world.

The economic boom that followed World War II saw growth in mass production because of increased

development and a new understanding of technology. However, Arthur Miller recognized the dangers that lurked in technological advances and the pursuit of mechanical efficiency. A recurring theme in his writing is the proliferation of work that may satisfy efficiency but not feed the soul. In all this progress, a boss may lose the sight of concern for actual people.

A vivid example of this is the scene between Howard and Willy. ■

1. Murphy and Abbotson, p. 21.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Murphy, Brenda and Abbotson, Susan C.W. *Understanding Death of a Salesman*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

ARISTOTLE'S DRAMATIC THEORY VERSUS ARTHUR MILLER'S TRAGEDY OF THE COMMON MAN

The tragedy in a man's life is what dies inside of him while he lives.

—Henry David Thoreau

In his *Poetics* Aristotle elevates tragedy above history, because history simply relates what has happened while tragedy dramatizes what may happen. Tragedy is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that reveals what may happen at any time or place. It should arouse both fear and pity in an audience.

Plot, the arrangement of incidents, is the most important feature of tragedy. The plot must have a beginning, middle and end and must have a unity of action. The play must not be too brief and the plot should be complex. “There should be a “peripeteia” or turning point when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended to produce, while an “anagoris” is a change from ignorance to knowledge producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.”¹ This in turn creates the catastrophe that leads to the final scene of suffering or the end.

Character is the second most important feature in a tragedy. The characters should have certain specific qualities. The protagonist should be renowned or prosperous so that his fortunes go from good to bad; his character should be moral; he should be true to life; he should be consistent and idealized—and he should have an inescapable flaw (retranslated by some as “mistake”) that brings about his downfall.

In his seminal essay, “Tragedy of the Common Man,” Arthur Miller argues that the common man is as good a subject for tragedy as a nobleman is. “Modern psychiatry bases its analyses upon classic formulations such as Oedipus and Orestes complexes.”² From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is of an individual trying to gain his rightful place in society. A modern tragedy is based upon the fear of being displaced, torn away from the image we have of ourselves. Thus, Willy’s tragedy is that his image of himself, however distorted, is being destroyed. ■

1. *Ibid.*

2. www.nytimes.com/books

<http://www.2.cnr.edu/hime/bmacmanus/poetics.htm>.

http://ntimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller_common.html

THE SALESMAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Everyone lives by selling something.

—Robert Louis Stevenson

The sales landscape is changing and so is the salesman. For the last century, the sales industry transitioned from direct sales to retail sales to traveling salesman. But the growth of social media has trained consumers who know more about brands and demands an intelligent salesperson.

There are two schools of thought about traveling salesmen. Selling in the old days was largely a personality act; the key was knowing the customers and the product. But with restricted budgets and extended sales cycles, a traveling salesman seems quaint to most modern professionals.

“Successful businesses are those that cut costs and increase productivity, and technology has always been the path to that goal.”¹ Zvi Guterman writes in *Business Week*, “Many sales professionals today consciously minimize drive time and flight time, preferring video conferences and webinars.”²

On the other hand, there is the argument by Adam Caplan. “There will always be a place for the traditional, in-person sales call; it just looks a lot different today.”³ Trust is still learned face to face. But in today’s emphasis on efficiency, both seller and customer want to keep meetings focused and productive. The salesperson must pull out an iPad and using cloud-based technology, give a pitch using interactive sales aids that are loaded with product information, demos, images and videos. Businesses

know that customers are worth investing in and that means face time with increased productivity made possible by technological advances.

After the 1949 production of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman became something of an icon of business culture. The response of the business world was to try and erase him from the public consciousness. In the 1960s American businesses were trying to define a new salesman as “a man with a softer touch and greater breadth.”⁴ In the worsening economy of the 1980s, unemployed 30-year-olds were forced to live with parents while middle-aged people were forced to downsize.

“Willy Loman could again symbolize a widespread middle-class tragedy—people trapped by expectations of status that no longer fit the cruel realities of the labor market.”⁵ Many salesmen were put back on commission as Howard did to Willy. Much as many try to deny it, Americans may need Willy Loman to remind them of their fantastic dreams and darkest fears. ■

1. www.businessweek.com

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Murphy in Bloom, p. 124.

5. Ibid, p. 126.

http://www.businessweek.com/debateroom/archives/2011/06/death_for_the_traveling_salesman.htm

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Willy Loman*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005.

Murphy, Brenda. “Willy Loman: Icon of Business Culture.”

DEATH OF A SALESMAN QUESTIONS

PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

1. Have you read or seen *Death of a Salesman* before? What do you remember or what have you been told about the play?
Can the American Dream still come true today? Why or why not?
2. What does the term “American Dream” mean to you? Has the American Dream changed from generation to generation or is it still the same today as it was in 1950s?
3. How do you measure and define success?
4. Do you know anybody in the sales profession today? Do you consider yourself a salesperson in certain situations?

POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

1. How did the performance align with your preconceived idea or memory of the play? Were there any surprises?
2. What is the difference between reality and delusion? What was Willy Loman’s reality and what delusions did he create? How do the scenic, lighting, sound and costume design help to differentiate between reality and delusion?
3. What is the difference of being “liked” and “well-liked?” Why is being well-liked so important to Willy?
4. How does the definition for success vary from character to character? Do any of the characters achieve success?
5. Would you consider Willy a tragic hero? Explain why or why not.
6. How would you describe the relationships in the Loman family? What is the relationship between Willy and Linda? Between the brothers? Between father and son? Between mother and son?
7. Compare the relationship between Willy and Biff to their neighbors, Charley and Bernard.
8. What is the purpose of the character of Uncle Ben? Why does Willy talk to him?
9. How does Biff see himself and how does Willy perceive Biff? Why does Biff decide to tell the truth? What does Biff find out about himself and Willy?
10. Explain why you believe Linda is a strong or weak character.
11. Why does Linda say “attention must be paid” to her sons? Who and what is she referring to?
12. Why do you think Willy will not take the job from Charley?
13. What do you think happens to the Loman family after the end of the play? What happens to Biff? To Happy? To Linda?
14. What is the difference between the mood at the beginning of the first act and the beginning of the second act? What are the different factors (scenic, sound, lights, dialogue) that lead you to feel this way?
15. How does the family handle the suicide attempts? Could they have prevented the death?

DEATH OF A SALESMAN ACTIVITIES

PERSONAL NARRATIVE ABOUT SUCCESS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

1. Start with your personal definition of success and the American Dream. What are your indicators of success?
2. Write about a moment in your life about when you were successful? Be sure to include specific examples of what factors helped you to achieve this success? When did you know that you had achieved success?
3. Interview a parent or an adult about their definitions of success. Then ask them their definition of the American Dream. What are the similarities and differences between their definitions and your definitions?
4. Ask your interviewee, about a specific example when they were successful. What factors helped them to achieve this success? What do they think their parent's definition of success would be? What are the similarities and differences of the answers across the three generations?

Colorado PG Writing: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Colorado PG Writing: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

GROCERY LIST BUDGETING

1. Every week, you are in charge of getting groceries at the local supermarket for your family. You are given a budget of \$100 and must be able to prepare 10 meals. Create a shopping list that contains your ingredients and your food. Label which items are necessary and which items are not. Go to your local supermarket and write down the prices of the products on your grocery list. Make sure you compare prices for the different products and brands.
2. Are you able to purchase everything on your list? Are there some products that you have to sacrifice? Is there a way that you can stretch your budget and still purchase the items on your list?
3. What happens if your budget is reduced to \$75? What happens if it is increased to \$175?

Colorado PG Social Studies: Acquire the knowledge and economic reasoning skills to make sound financial decisions.

Colorado PG Social Studies: Understand the allocation of scarce resources in societies through analysis of individual choice, market interaction, and public policy.

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- **Sept 20, 6pm, Jones Theatre**

TALKBACKS - Engage in a stimulating dialogue with your fellow audience members and actors just off the stage to hear their insights and answers to audience questions. Talkbacks are moderated by trained professionals. Higher Education Advisory Council (HEAC) talkbacks are facilitated by faculty members from regional colleges and universities. Theatre & Theology talkbacks are led by Pastor Dan Bollman of the Rocky Mountain Evangelical Lutheran Synod and explore connections between a play's themes and theology.

- **Held in the theatre, post-show**
- **Oct 9, Oct 13 Talkback**
- **Sept 29, HEAC Talkback**
- **Oct 1, Theatre & Theology Talkback**

PAGE TO THE STAGE: DCTC@THE TC - Bring your lunch and join John Moore, former theatre critic for the Denver Post, in conversation with Anthony Powell (Director) and Mike Hartman (Willy Loman) as they discuss their collaboration in the Denver Center Theatre Company's (DCTC) production of *Death of a Salesman*.

- **Oct 8, second floor of the Tattered Cover LoDo (1628 16th St.)**

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For more information also check out our website at WWW.DENVERCENTER.ORG/EDUCATION

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Watch! *Salesman* a Documentary by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin

<http://catalog.denverlibrary.org/view.aspx?cn=442400>

Listen! *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth

<http://catalog.denverlibrary.org/view.aspx?cn=702396>

Download! *Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace

<http://downloadmedia.denverlibrary.org/>

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