

How fitting that half a century just seems to vanish as the vibrant new Broadway revival of *Death of a Salesman*, currently at the Eugene O'Neill Theater, makes the classic play feel as if it were written yesterday. Arthur Miller certainly believes in the flexible properties of time. In his 1987 stream-of-consciousness memoir, aptly titled *Timebends*, he creates a fluid matrix of time and memory claiming that

years prior to *Salesman* by a playwright equally fascinated with time-twisting. Instead, the director went back to the text. Everything that seems so startlingly contemporary about *Death of a Salesman*, particularly its expressionistic stagecraft, he found in the play Miller conceived and wrote in 1949.

Over breakfast last month — just prior to attending an audition at the Metropolitan Opera, where he's about to make his debut directing Carlisle

Floyd's *Susannah* — Falls talked about how he came to direct his first Arthur Miller play. Like most theatergoers, he was familiar with *Death of a Salesman* and he had seen several productions of the play, which has never been out of the popular repertory and is a basic school text both here and abroad. He vividly recalls his first experience of *Salesman* as a boy of 12, when he saw the 1966 CBS television version in which the two original stars,

GOLDEN CLASSIC

In its 50th anniversary production, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is revealed anew as an American treasure.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

"everything we are is at every moment alive in us." And in both *Mr. Peters' Connections* and *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*, his last two plays presented in New York, a central character makes detours into the past while living in the present. But it was in *Death of a Salesman* that Miller, age 33 at the time, first artistically expressed his view that the past is merely a dimmer present. And for his archetypal time-bending protagonist Willy Loman, time has no boundaries.

To bring the vintage Miller play into the late '90s, director Robert Falls has not taken the revisionist, heavily underscored approach that recently made a popular Broadway hit out of J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* — a moral thriller written just three



Robert Falls (l.) with his Willy Loman, Brian Dennehy.

Lee J. Cobb and Mildred Dunnock, repeated their roles as Willy and Linda. "I was completely devastated," he remembers. "It was probably the most influential play of my life; for the first time, I really understood what theater was about. I immediately went to the library and read all of the plays of Arthur Miller."

Falls' love affair with Miller and his seminal work waned over time. As a young student in the late '60s and '70s, he became attracted to experimental and avant-garde theater; during that same period, Miller fell slightly out of favor with the American critical establishment. Later, as a full-fledged director, Falls turned his attention to the two other writers in the American pantheon — Williams and O'Neill. He directed *The Night of the Iguana* at the Roundabout Theatre



ERIC V. EXT

Dream cast (from l.): Kevin Anderson as Biff, Dennehy, Ted Koch as Happy, and Elizabeth Franz as Linda Loman.

and *The Rose Tattoo* at Circle in the Square in New York; at Chicago's Goodman Theater, which he has headed since 1986, he directed *The Iceman Cometh* and *A Touch of the Poet*.

It was not until 1997 that Falls renewed his passion for Miller, after picking up a script of *Death of a Salesman* — the first time he actually sat down and read the play since his first encounter 31 years before. "I was overwhelmed once again, and struck by how fresh and immediate the play was," he says. The clinching factor that led to Falls directing the play at the Goodman last September, however, was actor Brian Dennehy. The director has had an artistic relationship with Dennehy for the past 15 years; they collaborated on both O'Neill productions. "I had never thought of Brian for the part of Willy Loman," Falls says. "I've always thought of him as too young and too vital — there is this enormous energy in him." But seeing the soon-to-be 60-year-old actor hobbling down a Chicago street one day — Dennehy has since had surgery to replace injured kneecaps — Falls became convinced that this was the actor for the role.

Dennehy's stature — six foot three

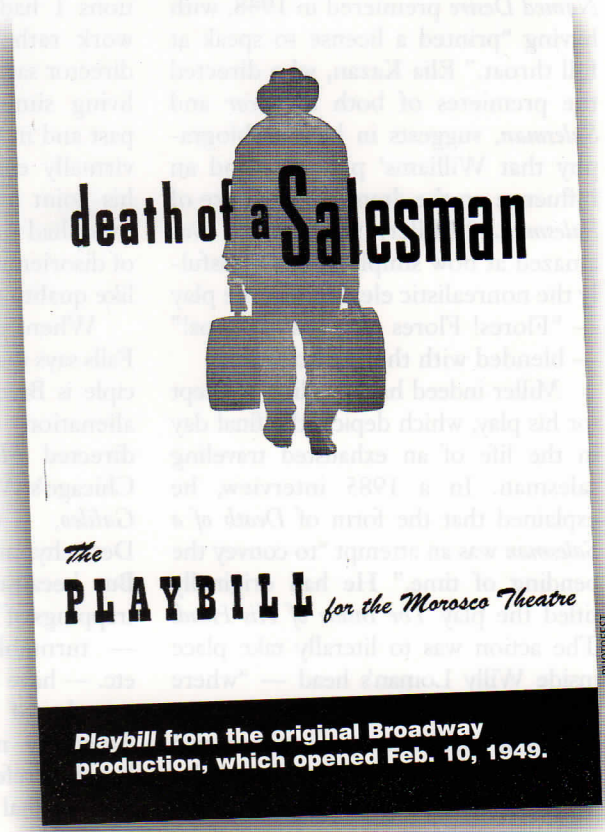
— and considerable girth inevitably brings to mind the image of Lee J. Cobb, whose television performance had so riveted the pre-teen Falls. Miller had originally conceived his salesman (who was loosely based on his Uncle Manny) as a small, bantam-like man. Dustin Hoffman in the 1984 Broadway revival came close to Miller's original vision, but actors of varying shapes and sizes (from George C. Scott to Hume Cronyn) have successfully made the part their own. Falls, a six-footer himself, says he favors a larger man in the role: "The fall of a large, vibrant presence seems to me to be more tragic and profound."

Inspired by Dennehy's presence, Falls says he sought to tap the "emotional violence" of the play. In previous productions, the direc-

tor maintains, the play has been presented with a sense of melancholy — cued by Miller's opening image of the salesman sadly walking into his home to the strains of a lonely flute. "This is a play, after all, where a man kills himself, not with a dose of sleeping pills but by getting into his car and driving violently into a tree or a wall," the director points out. "There is considerable emotional turmoil." To this end, Falls employs an atonal music score (composed by Richard Woodbury) that blends in traffic noise and blaring horns, and in his opening image, a hulking Dennehy stands in the doorway starkly lit

by a burst of white light.

Prior to *Salesman*, Miller had scored a hit on Broadway in 1947 with



PHOTOFEST



Mildred Dunnock and Lee J. Cobb in the original Broadway production (1949).

ter times were not conventional flashbacks, Miller insisted, but “a mobile concurrency of past and present.”

Time does indeed play strange tricks. To borrow from the title Miller gave a pair of one-acts in 1987, *Danger: Memory!*, *Death of a Salesman* tends to be remembered more for its realistic social drama than for its experimental qualities. Perhaps it’s because the naturalistic scenes played out in the Loman kitchen remain strongest in our minds (or maybe it’s all those “Willy Loman represents the failure of the American Dream” essays one had to write in school). The shock and delight of Falls’ new production is to rediscover the expressionist nature of Miller’s play. Here is a production that does justice to the play’s subtitle, “Certain

the emotionally charged yet conventionally written *All My Sons*. *Death of a Salesman* marked a radical departure from the naturalistic drama of the day. In his autobiography, Miller credits Tennessee Williams, whose *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered in 1948, with having “printed a license to speak at full throat.” Elia Kazan, who directed the premieres of both *Streetcar* and *Salesman*, suggests in his autobiography that Williams’ play also had an influence on the dramatic structure of *Salesman*. “[Miller] told me he was amazed at how simply and successfully the nonrealistic elements in the play — “Flores! Flores para los muertos!” — blended with the realistic ones.

Miller indeed had a radical concept for his play, which depicts the final day in the life of an exhausted traveling salesman. In a 1985 interview, he explained that the form of *Death of a Salesman* was an attempt “to convey the bending of time.” He had originally titled the play *The Inside of His Head*. The action was to literally take place inside Willy Loman’s head — “where the past was as alive as what was happening at the moment, sometimes even crashing in to completely overwhelm his mind.” Willy’s reminiscences of bet-

Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem.” Not only do you feel as if you are listening in, but since reality for Loman is nebulous, you are never really sure what is fact or what is fiction.

“I realized that most of the productions I had seen had presented the work rather objectively,” the director says. “Willy Loman is living simultaneously in the past and in the present — and virtually every scene is from his point of view — so I felt there had to be a severe sense of disorientation and a dream-like quality to the work.”

When directing classics, Falls says that his guiding principle is Brecht’s theory of the alienation effect. (He has directed *Mother Courage* at Chicago’s Wisdom Bridge and *Galileo*, which starred Dennehy, at the Goodman.) But because the innovative trappings of Brechtian theater — turntables, projections, etc. — have become part and parcel of the modern Broadway musical vocabulary, he prefers to go back to the original German word

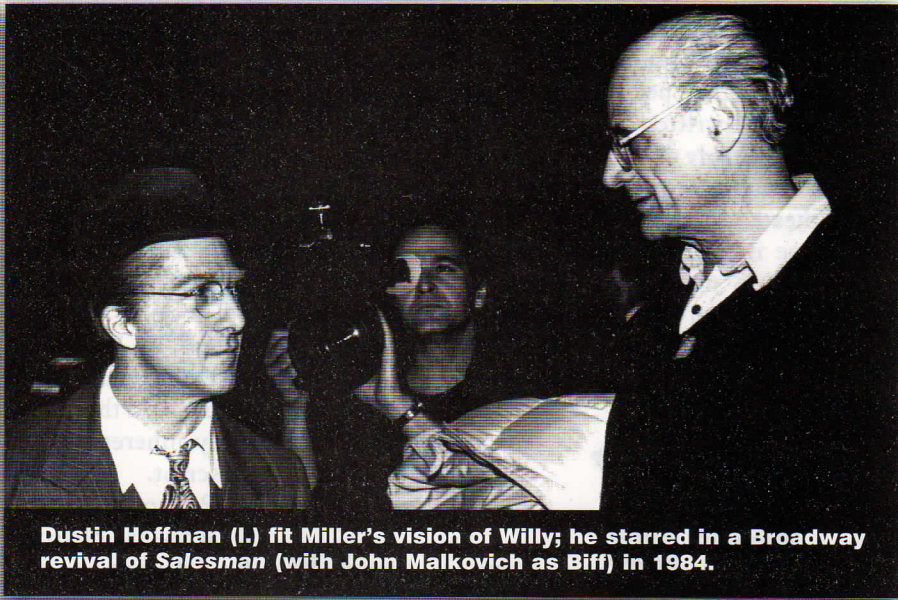
Verfremdungseffekt, which he literally translates as “to make strange.” To make *Death of a Salesman* “slightly strange in order that the audience can see it anew,” he took the bold step of “obliterating” all traces of the original set design by Jo Mielziner.

In his original draft of *Salesman*, Miller had half-playfully envisioned for the set the interior of an enormous skull in which Willy would be “crawling around, playing these scenes inside of himself.” In the eventual script he presented to Kazan for production, he suggested a minimalist setting with three unadorned, black platforms. The script, as Kazan noted, was “waiting for a directorial solution.” And for this, the legendary director gives full credit to Mielziner (who had also designed *Streetcar*). Kazan says that Mielziner’s concept of a spectral house standing behind all the scenes of the play, forever present in Loman’s mind even when the action shifts location from Brooklyn, was “the single most critically important contribution and the key to the way I directed the play.” Not surprisingly, Mielziner’s design has influenced practically every production of *Salesman* in the intervening 50 years.

“I felt I had to blow the dust off the play visually,” says Falls. “The house



Robert Falls vividly recalls seeing Dunnock and Cobb recreate their roles in a TV movie of *Salesman* (1966).



Dustin Hoffman (l.) fit Miller's vision of Willy; he starred in a Broadway revival of *Salesman* (with John Malkovich as Biff) in 1984.

had to be far more fragmented, impressionistic and dream-like." He hired a young designer, Mark Wendland, who was "completely unencumbered by tradition," according to Falls, and who "scared" him a little. (Wendland's recent work in New York includes the magical Central Park environment for Andrei Serban's production of *Cymbeline* last summer.) The director and designer soon discovered that there was a good reason for Mielziner's set having prevailed for a half century: It worked. "It's an extraordinarily difficult play to design," Falls comments, admitting that there were moments when he was ready to give up and return to the original tried-and-true set plan. But Wendland, he says, urged him to "keep digging and exploring."

The designer first boiled the play down to its essential images: a bed, a kitchen table and chairs, a desk, and — what is possibly a first for a production of *Salesman* — the red Chevy that triggers Loman's mental turbulence. Then, imagining the salesman as floundering in a kind of vortex with all the images from his life spinning around him, Wendland designed two movable boxes (standing in for the kitchen, the bedroom, the hotel room, etc.) and two turntables that are almost perpetually in motion. It's like a musical, comments Falls, who was recently tapped to reconceive Disney's *Aida*: Images shift virtually every 20 seconds, sometimes every 10. "We are both a little embarrassed that the set has received so much attention,

because our original idea was invisibility," Falls continues, smiling sheepishly. "We wanted to create an environment where you weren't even aware that there was a set." But you can hardly ignore the technical tour de force they've created; it's crucial for releasing Miller's play from the bonds of naturalism.

While *Death of a Salesman* is regularly performed all over the globe and throughout the United States, it has not been seen often on Broadway. In 1975, George C. Scott directed himself in the play at Circle in the Square; in 1984, Dustin Hoffman gave us his distinctive Willy Loman. Miller withheld permission for two subsequent New York-bound productions because, he says, a revival ought to say something new. Given the sterling performances (Dennehy is evenly matched by Elizabeth Franz as Linda and Kevin Anderson as Biff) and the innovative nature of the Goodman production, it's not hard to see why Miller gave it his blessing. Perhaps the 83-year-old writer couldn't resist the opportunity to do a little timebending himself and take a fresh look at his career-making work. "It's very moving," Falls reports. "Here's a man who wrote this play 50 years ago, and yet he rolls up his sleeves and comes into the rehearsal room like a kid working on a play for the first time." ■

GERARD RAYMOND interviewed Paula Vogel in the last issue of *InTheater*.

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