

Willy Loman and the Method

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A great new performance in a famous role illuminates corners of a dramatic work previously hidden in the shadows, and thus it always implies an annex to the body of critical material focused on the play. When Dustin Hoffman took on the role of Willy Loman, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, in Michael Rudman's Broadway revival in 1984, he suggested a way of looking at the character and the play that challenged Lee J. Cobb's justly famous portrayal in the original production, in 1949. Juxtaposed, the two performances demonstrate the distance between a classical reading of Miller's play, which he advocated strongly in his own critical writings within the decade of its unveiling, and a more contemporary, naturalistic approach—what we might call a revisionist *Salesman*. And since Hoffman is the first major Method actor since Cobb to make a stab at Willy, a consideration of the two performances also underscores the connections between the play and the history of American Method acting. In this essay I would like to discuss those connections and then compare the two interpretations, drawing on a viewing of Hoffman's work in September 1984 and on Cobb's 1966 television recreation of his stage performance. We are denied, unfortunately, a record of Cobb's original appearance in the role, in 1949, but his splendid recreation of the role in 1966 is, I think, a fair indication of one actor's interpretation; moreover, it represents a sufficient distance from Hoffman's, eighteen years later, to make a strong argument for the difference between the readings. (Because, ironically, the preserved version of Hoffman's performance—a television film by Volker Schlöndorff, shown in 1985—is in every way inferior to the stage production I saw, I shall draw on my impressions of Hoffman's performance in the theatre and not on the small screen. Schlöndorff's sentimentality undercut Rudman's conception, and Hoffman's failure—odd in an actor whose other major work has been for the screen—to scale down his performance for the camera made it difficult for anyone who had not seen him on stage to understand what he intended.)

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Though much has been written about the Method, what has remained largely undocumented is the extent to which it has influenced and has been influenced in turn by American playwrights. What *has* been generally acknowledged is that Clifford Odets, trained as an actor in the Group Theatre, wrote his early plays (1935-1940) to serve the Group's groundbreaking experiments in translating Stanislavski's principles of acting to professional productions in this country. (Americanized, Stanislavski's "system" became known as the "Method.") The Group Theatre actors, under the guidance of Lee Strasberg, sought to bring a new kind of psychological realism and emotional authenticity to the stage through intense improvisational preparation that emphasized a direct link between actor and character. Odets responded by grounding his characters in a lower-middle-class Jewish-American milieu most of the members of the Group Theatre knew in their bones, and by conveying it through richly cadenced, vividly naturalistic dialogue that broke away from the imitation-English drawing room rhythms common to most Broadway prose at that time.

By the time Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, the Group Theatre had been defunct for most of a decade, but Elia Kazan, who directed the original *Salesman*, was one of its alumni, and so was Lee J. Cobb. *Salesman* came in the first wave of the Actors Studio—Kazan was one of its founders—which offered a continuous workshop program in the Method to many members of the postwar generation that, in the course of revitalizing American acting, brought the Method to the forefront of American theatre, film and television. (Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, Julie Harris and James Dean were among the Studio's students in those years.) Arthur Miller's early plays illustrate the line from the Method-connected plays of the Group Theatre era to those of the Actors Studio years. According to Daniel Walden,¹ the two plays Miller wrote at the University of Michigan, *Honors at Dawn* and *No Villain*, showed a strong Odetsian influence, and that influence is evident, too, in the two critical and commercial successes that won him renown, *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman*. (Kazan directed both.) To begin with, Miller has inherited most of Odets's major themes. In both plays he is concerned with close family ties, as Odets was in *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost*: Joe Keller in *All My Sons* lives through his sons, indirectly causes the death of one (who commits suicide out of disillusionment with his father's ethics), and finally kills himself when he feels he has lost the love and respect of his children; Biff Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, which also culminates in the suicide of a father, has spent his life trying to live up to his father's inflated image of him. Both Biff and the unseen Larry Keller are heroic figures—the high school football star, the war pilot—who crash (like Odets' Ben Gordon [*Paradise Lost*] and Joe Bonaparte [*Golden Boy*]) because the values on which they have built their lives turn out to be rotten. (In Larry's case, it is his *father's* values that are threadbare, not his own, but Miller, a child as much of Ibsen as of Odets, always sees that the sins of the father are transmitted in full force to the son.) *All My Sons* returns to the Odetsian debate, most significant in *Golden Boy*, of commerce versus ethics: in *Death of a Salesman* Miller has translated this conflict into the issue of whether or not Americans ought to subscribe to the American Dream. We can see Odets's hand most visibly in *All*

My Sons, which—though it does not end on an optimistic note, for American plays seldom did in these dark postwar years—echoes the idealism of the thirties in its “brotherhood of man” credo.

A less obvious link between Odets’s early plays and Miller’s is both are populated by distinctly Jewish characters. It is less obvious because Miller attempts to generalize his men and women, to make them into something vaguely ethnic but superficially all-American—“crypto-Jewish,” to borrow Leslie Fiedler’s phrase.² Several critics have commented on the patently Jewish roots of the characters in *Death of a Salesman*, notably George Ross, who claims that the first Yiddish translation of the play (in 1951) feels more like the original text than the English-language original does;³ Morris Freedman, who sees the Gentile names of the characters and the language, free of Odets’s Yiddishisms, as symbols of the assimilation of American Jews in Miller’s generation;⁴ and recently Julius Novick, who reads *Salesman* as a sequel to *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which Willy Loman represents the transplanted Jew who tries—and fails—to assemble a new set of values his people can live by in a new world.⁵ The cadence of Miller’s dialogue bears out these responses:

With scholarships to three universities they’re gonna flunk him? (I)

Your father came to me the day you were born and asked me what I thought of the name of Howard, may he rest in peace. (II)

Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. (I)

Miller sprinkles his characters’ speeches with authentic examples of Jewish folk wisdom:

Biff, a man is not a bird, to come and go with the springtime. (I)

Can’t we do something about the walls? You sneeze in here, and in my house hats blow off. (I)

Who liked J.P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he’d look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked. (II)

One line of Willy’s actually reverts to an Odetsian metaphor found in *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost*:

You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit! (II)

Like Odets, Miller allows his characters to speak in the vernacular, illuminating their class origins and establishing rapid contact with an audience that recognizes their speech patterns immediately. Linda Loman talks in homilies: “Well, dear, life is a casting off” (I), “he’s only a little boat looking for a harbor” (II). Willy’s language is occasionally ungrammatical—“that boy of his, that Howard, he don’t appreciate” (I), “The average young man today . . . is got a caliber of zero” (I)—and (like Joe Keller’s) is often peppered with “y’knows” and “y’understands,” as well as with go-getter, self-help phrases like “make the grade” and “personal attractiveness.”

(Leonard Moss has pointed out the Lomans' pass at lifting themselves out of the lower middle class by sprucing up their usual vulgate conversation with the odd high-flown word: "vengeful," "feasible," "remiss," "crestfallen."⁶)

Another sort of kinship exists between Odets and Miller that is more crucial to a discussion of Method acting. In "Golden Boy," Odets's exploration of the tension between the impulse to create art and the desire for money that he recognized in himself (and spent his career attempting—unsuccessfully—to resolve), he introduced a new character, the gangster at war with his poet's soul, that would become a method archetype. Odets had left the Group Theatre for a brief stint in Hollywood and in effect brought a little of Hollywood back with him when he returned to New York to write *Golden Boy*: Joe Bonaparte, the violinist who abandons the promise of his musical talents by becoming a fighter and then taints himself further by getting mixed up with gangsters, is Odets's variation on the crooked anti-heroes James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson were playing in dozens of Warner Brothers melodramas during the Depression years. Odets wrote Joe Bonaparte for his protege, John Garfield, who didn't get to play it in the original production (because the Group's directors unwisely overrode Odets's wishes). But when Garfield abandoned the Group for a career in movies, the role accompanied him. In *They Made Me a Criminal*, *Dust Be My Destiny*, *Castle on the Hudson*, *Humoresque* (an Odets screenplay), *Body and Soul*, and to a lesser extent in almost every other picture he made in the thirties and forties, Garfield played a failed hero, a gangster with a tender, poetic soul.

In the fifties, Marlon Brando and James Dean, the most celebrated graduates of the Actors Studio, established their credentials in a series of parts that were in effect later incarnations of Garfield's troubled hoodlums. These were the angry young Americans who still represent, for most of us, the Method stereotype: Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (Brando, 1954), Johnny in *The Wild One* (Brando, 1954), Cal Trask in *East of Eden* (Dean, 1955), and Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Dean, 1955). Among the many critics who have written about *Death of a Salesman*, Lloyd Rose is unique in recognizing that Willy Loman, too, prefigures the 1950's rebels;⁷ he is, in fact, the missing link in the sequence that runs from Odets through Garfield to Brando and Dean. In "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," his trenchant essay on Odets's inspiration for Joe Bonaparte, the movie gangster, Robert Warshaw demonstrates that the gangster is an outcast, a rebel, just because he is successful:

. . . success is always the establishment of an *individual* pre-eminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw. The gangster's whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies *because* he is an individual; the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him, after all, a failure. . . .

At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, *all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success.⁸

Willy Loman represents Warshow's paradigm taken one bleak step farther. The gangster's success leads him inevitably to failure (a violent death), but Willy Loman is an outcast who has courted success and failed to win it. He is the first "rebel," perhaps, in American dramatic/cinematic literature who does not experience success on his way to failure. Willy's tragedy is *not* that he subscribes, to no avail, to a set of values that other men (like his brother Ben) have managed to live by, but that he does not understand that the very act of seeking success, of worshipping it, carries within it the seeds of failure (i.e., destruction). Though *Salesman* is usually read as an indictment of middle-class American values, it is in fact a cautionary tale about the dangers of the quest for success that, in the world Miller shows us, most middle-class Americans (Charley, Bernard) do *not* engage in. (Success means nothing to these men.) It warns us, as surely as those John Garfield-Warner Brothers gangster pictures did, not to try to stand out from the crowd. As a man "entirely at odds with the unwritten philosophies and laws of behavior that his society has established for itself,"⁹ Willy experiences the city, the seat of that society, as an adversary, suffocating him, just as for the gangster "the final meaning of the city is anonymity and death" (Warshow 132). Again we can see a link between Miller and Odets, who established the urban claustrophobia motif so familiar to American audiences when he wrote *Awake and Sing!*. For Miller the all-important city is both a just cause for Willy's rebellion (part of Miller still believes in the frontier dream Willy cherishes) and a symbol of the character's moral displacement. *Salesman*, which both justifies and condemns its protagonist from the beginning, may be most interesting for what Miller presents unconsciously, i.e., as a psychoanalytic examination of the playwright himself. But Miller's ambivalence toward his central character makes Willy a precursor of the conflicted, anti-social heroes of the next few years—young men who often behave in a repugnant fashion but who plead successfully for our sympathy. (Willy is not, of course, a young man, but Biff, who succeeds at last in rebelling against his father, is. In a sense, the Rebel Without a Cause of the fifties is a hybrid of Willy and Biff Loman.)

However, Miller had loftier ambitions for his protagonist; he wanted to stretch way beyond Clifford Odets. His unsuccessful efforts to de-ethnicize the Kellers and the Lomans by lending them such ethnically untraceable names is reflected in the banality of the language in both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, which has a resolute quality; Miller waves his characters' commonness of speech and lowbrow tastes like a flag. Consider this excerpt from the opening of *All My Sons*:

KELLER (indicating the sections beside him)—Want the paper?

FRANK—What's the difference, it's all bad news. What's today's calamity?

KELLER—I don't know, I don't read the news part any more. It's more interesting in the want ads.

FRANK—Why, you trying to buy something?

KELLER—No, I'm just interested. To see what people want, y'know? For instance, her's a guy is lookin' for two Newfoundland dogs. Now what's he want with two Newfoundland dogs?

FRANK—That is funny. (I)

Though it is true that Keller's lack of interest in the news indicates, as the audience will learn, the confined and self-centered world he lives in, this brief exchange between neighbors smacks of plain-folksiness; Miller always judges his characters, especially when they belong to Joe Keller's generation, but here the fact that he provides largely undifferentiated, unleavened dialogue for everyone on the stage suggests a defensive attitude toward these people's "smallness." He strives to transform their banalities into poetry (a feat Odets accomplished in his finest moments) by giving them symbolic weight, as in the opening lines of *Salesman*:

LINDA (hearing Willy outside the bedroom, calls with some trepidation)—Willy!
 WILLY—It's all right. I came back.
 LINDA—Why? What happened? (Slight pause) Did something happen, Willy?
 WILLY—No, nothing happened. (I)

No verbal interaction between Pinter figures could be more deliberate, more fraught with significance, but there is an absence of wit in Miller, and a lack of mystery: he underscores every word of this late-night conversation between two exhausted middle-aged, lower-middle-class (Jewish) Brooklynites and then, in the course of the play, spells out what each one means. In tandem with an Ibsenian reliance on objects as symbols (the tree in *All My Sons*, Biff's silver athletic trophy in *Salesman*), this insistence on commonplace dialogue constitutes what Robert Warshaw calls "mechanical realism,"¹⁰ and Miller employs it as a tool in building his "tragedy of the small man."

Much has been written about Miller's conscious efforts to discover an authentic American tragic form by scaling tragedy down to the common man.¹¹ In play after play he has tried to inflate drama by defining it as tragedy—in *All My Sons*, where Joe Keller's petty crime acquires the status of a sin against mankind; in *Death of a Salesman*, where Willy Loman stands in for all "low men"; in *A View from the Bridge*, which exploits some of the conventions of Greek tragedy; in *After the Fall*, where Miller lays down the shards of his own life, hoping to reflect all the major concerns of his country in his century (Freudian/familial issues, the Holocaust, business ethics, the death of the political left, the price of fame, sex and marriage) in a single psychoanalytic exploration. Whatever one thinks of his point of view, it is clear that the resoundingly successful *Death of a Salesman*, by proclaiming the nobility of the common man's struggle to preserve his dignity (which Miller sees as his link to the classic tragedies), cemented the popularity of the small-man-as-emblem drama that invaded not only the theatre of the late forties and fifties, but also film and television. It assured (for a time at least) the livelihood of such playwrights as William Inge and Paddy Chayefsky. It provoked Leslie Fiedler to cry out against these "gray . . . [images] of suffering inaction"¹² and Robert Brustein to describe the American theatre as a "crumbling structure."¹³ And it provided, incidentally, most of the texts for training the Actors Studio generation.

There is an undeniable force at the heart of *Death of a Salesman*, but it is surrounded by pretension. Miller is a naturalistic playwright with an eye for

the details of lower-middle-class life in the suburbs and an ear for the rhythms of Jewish speech, but he strives to be an Expressionist, inventing a symbolic Horatio Alger figure no actor has (in my experience) ever succeeded in playing, and by presenting the Loman family as "universal," i.e., non-ethnic, he denies his own trump card—the authenticity in his depiction of them. He writes a tremendously moving domestic drama and then couches it in a specious diatribe against the values inherent in the American capitalist system. And in any case, the intended leftist criticism of the American dream, which has kept *Death of a Salesman* just below *The Crucible* on the list of modern plays most popular in high-school English classes, is extremely confused: the more closely one approaches the text, the less certain one is of which target Miller has in his sights—the system that has victimized Willy or Willy himself for propagating that system. Miller builds his play around a man whose small-time bumbling, limited sensitivity and deficiencies in perception we can recognize in ourselves and in our families and friends, and then proclaims him a tragic character. Lloyd Rose insightfully interprets this last contradiction as the case of a playwright who "writes like a son, not a father . . . The double attitude of the play toward Willy—depicting him as selfish and foolish while insisting that he's noble and good—reads like a man's failed attempt to portray sympathetically the father he wants to forgive but can't" (132). Miller is caught in another double bind as well, clinging to his heritage (Clifford Odets) while struggling to reach beyond it (presumably to Sophocles or Shakespeare).

Lee J. Cobb's background dictates that he honor Miller's worst impulses. Coming out of the social conscience plays produced by the Group Theatre in the thirties, so many of them aborted efforts to translate the German Expressionist protest drama (1931—) and even the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht (*Johnny Johnson*) to the American stage using a naturalistic acting style, he would be more likely than a member of Dustin Hoffman's generation to respect Miller's stylistic inconsistencies—and his vaguely socialistic bent. Both the emphasis on the universality of the Loman family and the sentimental glorification (in this case, amplification and inflation) of the common man must have struck a chord in Cobb's sociopolitical and theatrical experience. It is not surprising, therefore, to see him remaining faithful to Miller's WASP whitewashing and playing Willy without any specific ethnic connections. And he gives the character the grand tragic dimension Miller seems to want. Hoffman does not.

The most immediately noticeable difference between these two men in this role is a physical one—Cobb is a large man and Hoffman is a small one—and in a sense the entire distance between their performances springs from that basic discrepancy in size. Cobb is always conscious of how he carries his oversized body; he gives an immense, heavyweight performance, playing Willy (in Lloyd Rose's words) "like a huge, wounded animal dying from a bullet he never heard coming . . ." (130). (In fact, according to Edward Dwight Easty,¹⁴ Cobb's preparation for the role relied heavily on a Method improvisation known as "the animal exercise," and the animal he chose to study for Willy was the elephant.) The famous opening image of Cobb walking through the door upstage center, bowed by the strain of carrying his

bags, setting them down and resting bent over the kitchen table as he mutters, "Oh boy, oh boy," suggests an aging, exhausted monarch, his eyes reduced to knots beneath mightily creased brows; and he has a way of looking down at other people (they are invariably shorter than he is) over his shoulder and shaking his head at their ignorance—at Charley, for instance, who urges him to take a job in his company rather than borrowing money from him every week—that indicates he has always felt a natural superiority to them. When his excitement speeds up his walk, when he bounds through his backyard crying out that his brother Ben has affirmed (he thinks) the values he has passed on to his sons, Cobb's trademark fashion of propelling himself on the balls of his feet gives the impression of a great deal of power balanced delicately on a path strewn with egg shells. And he is similarly conscious of his voice—a rich, stage-trained voice with an aristocratic Yankee accent that attains moments of Shakespearean grandeur on lines like his bewildered plea, "Why is he stealing? What did I tell him? I never in my life told him anything but decent things" (I). Cobb manifests weariness by playing against that physical and vocal enormity, losing control of his muscles, sagging under all that weight (planting seeds in his garden in Act II and talking to the image of Ben in his mind, he finally sinks onto the ground, propping his body up on one arm), experiencing difficulty in speaking entire sentences; he displays confusion by stretching out words ("under . . . current") and struggling with his gestures, as if they had met obstacles on the road to completion. There is no doubt that he is the tragic hero Miller envisioned: he is Lear on the heath.

Hoffman, on the other hand, is Lear's Fool mimicking Lear. When he enters the house at the beginning of the play, he stumbles under the weight of his suitcases, almost tripping over the doorway, and shoving them into the closet is an ordeal that makes him sigh. Flatfooted, he takes tiny steps when he walks, thrusting his toes into the air as if he were on snowshoes. He has a craggy, raw voice; as usual, Hoffman makes no attempt to hide his nasal quality, and here he accentuates his New York accent as if he were playing vaudeville. Everyone else in the production towers above him: Kate Reid, who plays Linda, looks as if she could carry him into the bedroom, and at one point in a flashback sequene, Biff (John Malkovich) actually lifts him and whirls him around. Rudman, the director, mines comedy out of the image of Willy's boys (Stephen Lang plays Happy) standing several full heads taller than Willy, and he uses the difference between Hoffman's and Malkovich's height to achieve some startling effects. When, at the end of Act I, Biff tells Willy repeatedly not to yell at Linda, he demonstrates his greater strength by finally standing up and ordering him to stop; forced to look all the way up his grown-up son's frame, Hoffman's Willy seems to shrink, and, rising quietly from his chair, he fades out of the room. In the climactic flashback scene in the hotel room in the middle of the second act, we see the point at which Willy ceases to have any power over Biff: when Biff, having discovered Willy's infidelity to Linda, begins to run out of the room in tears, Willy blocks his path, but Biff keeps going and in the process knocks his father down. The sight of Dustin Hoffman shouting, "I gave you an order! Biff, come back here or I'll beat you! Come back here! I'll whip you!" (II) with pitiful insistence from a prone position on the floor of a hotel room is a painful emblem of

ineffectualness. When this Lear rages on the heath, the storm drowns him out; he is certainly Miller's small man, as Lee J. Cobb could never be, but he violates Miller's idea of the play as a tragedy.

Alexander Knox once wrote, "Every young and revolutionary group of actors in the history of the theatre, and I think this applies with equal force in the shorter history of the movies, has seemed more natural than its predecessors."¹⁵ When we watch Lee J. Cobb's performance in this classic role and then Dustin Hoffman's, we are seeing the inevitable progress of Method actors closer and closer to the naturalistic ideal Stanislavski dreamed of. In their day, Group Theatre actors like Morris Carnovsky, Luther Adler and J. Edward Bromberg made startling amendments to American's approach to acting that would seem less startling to a contemporary audience weaned on Method acting, which is mostly what we see (however imperfectly practiced) at the movies and on television. These performers, after all, came out of a tradition of physical and vocal self-consciousness—theatricality—that preceded the Method in this country, and even an actor like Lee J. Cobb, who was a young man when he worked with the Group, never shook off that tradition completely. So occasionally his Willy Loman, compared to Dustin Hoffman's, seems to be a marvel more of technique than of sympathetic reproduction. That is not to say that he pulls Willy out of reach; when we see how intently he listens to James Farentino's Happy putting forth the idea of the Loman Brothers' sporting goods line, when we hear the warmth in his voice when he castigates Mildred Dunnock's Linda for mending stockings, we are reminded that it was the actors of the Group Theatre who brought a more vivid humanity to the American stage than had been seen before. But we are conscious of—and applaud—the fluidity of his transitions from one mood to another—for example, his backing down from the high emotion of his response to Happy's idea, to the humility of "Give my best to Bill Oliver—he may remember me" (I) after Biff has opposed him; or his shift from anger at what he cannot express or cope with, to an amused dismissal of it: "Don't be a pest, Bernard! . . . What an anemic!" (I), in reply to the boy's allusion to Biff's failing math. We admire his handling of the eccentricities of the dialogue (the ellipses, the melange of high-flown language and colloquialism), which he stylizes subtly. We admire, too, the scale on which he recreates Willy's frustration and bewilderment—like that of a man dragging himself home through a fog—when he confesses after he has been fired, "The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff" (II). Dustin Hoffman's Willy delivers the bad news as quickly as possible, anxious to swipe it out of the way so that he can hear about Biff's interview with Bill Oliver and (he hopes) feel better.

Most significant is Cobb's reading of the Dave Singleman anecdote that gives the play its title. He sniffs authoritatively as if to clear the path to the main artery of his story and builds the narrative line to a crescendo: "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!" Then he proceeds calmly, like a schoolmaster who was obliged to raise his voice in order to gain the undivided attention of his pupils and can now continue with the lesson. Throughout this scene we are conscious of watching a solo number, a piece of theatre; Cobb's unusual feat here is to absorb the

idea of an actor taking center stage into the character—that is, it's *Willy* who takes center stage. Hoffman is not interested in the beauty of the speech. When he reads it, he continually runs out of breath and even, it seems, out of emotional energy, concerned only with conveying Willy's physical and emotional exhaustion as he fights to meet one more dismal failure (losing his job), he deliberately undercuts the grandeur of this famous monologue. This is the kind of revisionist approach that aims to slice through the accepted doctrine about a role to a new (that is, previously unrecognized) reality underneath, and though not only Method actors practice it, perhaps I might suggest that it is evidence of the influence of the Method's concern with psychological realism on all kinds of acting. For example, actors who must deliver the most beloved passages in Shakespeare's plays often complain that these speeches are a burden, because celebrity has distorted them—they sit in the middle of a scene like bars of gold. When he played Jaques in *As You Like It* in 1977, Brian Bedford introduced "All the world's a stage" so casually that it was half over before we realized we were hearing a famous poetic fragment, and as a result, for perhaps the first time, we could really understand what the character was saying. Hoffman's approach to the Dave Singleman monologue has the same effect.

Cobb's performance brilliantly encompasses the *idea* of Miller's play, but Hoffman breaks through Miller's pretension to the *crux* of his play, and it is that—the real human being inside all of Miller's talk—to which he is faithful. Playing Willy as unquestionably Jewish, he recalls sentimental old men, second-generation immigrants, who pinch the cheeks of adults they knew as children and carry pictures around of their families; who occasionally forget a word or a name and then, self-deprecatingly, parody their error; who warn listeners of their annoyance at an interruption or a contradiction by commenting sarcastically on it in that time-honored folk-musical style, and then abruptly reach the end of their patience with an explosion out of proportion to the words that provoked it. Hoffman includes all these details. He seems to have based his portrayal on an uncle or a grandfather; it has the rock-bottom authenticity of life experience, without any apparent trace of stylization. When Hoffman says, "I slept like a dead one" (II), the archaic line no longer sounds out of place—by reverting to Willy's Jewishness, he tacitly acknowledges the debt to Odets (who has one of his characters use the same words in *Awake and Sing!*), suggesting that this old-country phrase might have been passed down to Willy by a member of his parents' generation. Miller must have intended Willy and Charley to suggest Lear and Gloucester on some level, but when Louis Zorich appears in Rudman's production, a patch of white fuzz stuck incongruously above his forehead while the rest of his hair retreats toward his neck, and sits down to play cards with Dustin Hoffman, these fussy old men bickering (in a production shot through with Jewish domestic humor) are Lear and Gloucester recast as Neil Simon's Sunshine Boys.

Death of a Salesman has never been so funny before, and it is the familiarity of Willy Loman (and indeed his entire family) that prompts us to laugh in recognition. Hoffman plays Willy as a card, a cut-up, a Jewish version of Uncle Sid in O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*, though finally sadder, more hopeless.

He mock-waltzes with his wife, mimics a Charlie Chaplin exit, recycles antique burlesque routines (he shoves his wife aside with a thrust of his buttocks and his hands fall surreptitiously onto her large breasts), and because Kate Reid is so much larger than Hoffman is, they suggest a Laurel and Hardy marriage—and an actual marriage, for once: we believe that *this* Willy has been to bed with his wife. Sometimes, like Laurence Olivier as Archie Rice in *The Entertainer*, Hoffman's Willy depends on music hall flourishes to pull him through awkward or horrific moments. When Howard fires him, he keeps a smile on his face and then, astonishingly, executes a little dance step (and immediately grows dizzy and has to reach his hand out to find his chair). When he played Willy Loman in the 1975 Circle in the Square revival of the play, George C. Scott also smiled often, a broad drummer's grin, but his smile was chilling, a warning of a coming eruption. Hoffman's is a brave-little-soldier smile; he has it when he tells his wife in the opening scene, "I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda" (I), when he criticizes Biff, when he recounts the Dave Singleman story, and it is a suitable accompaniment for the moment when, having lost his job, he sticks his hand out for Howard to shake to show him that there are no hard feelings.

Rudman retains this authenticity throughout the production. Stephen Lang's Happy (true to Miller's obvious intention in creating this character) is a junior version of his father—a clown whose cheerfulness and timing endear one to him on a first meeting and make one wary of him on a second. Both he and John Malkovich are square-looking and terribly ordinary, so that lines such as "That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises" (I) and "A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away!" (I) are clearly ironic; we see how deluded Willy is in his boys from the very beginning. These casting choices, which underscore Biff's struggle to counteract Willy's blindness and see himself for what he is, shift the emphasis from Miller's undigested treatment of the American Dream theme to the relationship between Willy and Biff, which is the play's strength in any case—making fresh sense of the climactic recognition scene between father and son near the end of Act II, in which Biff utters the famous cry, "Pop, I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" (When the handsome young George Segal speaks these words in Alex Segal's television production, it is impossible to believe him.)

If it is the business of great acting to make us see something we have never seen before, even in a play that is as much a part of our culture as *Death of a Salesman*, then Dustin Hoffman proves himself a great actor in this production. In Cobb's performance, Willy's suicide seems somehow noble, a wrong-headed sacrifice that redeems him just because it is a sacrifice for his son. When John Malkovich embraces Dustin Hoffman, Hoffman begins to weep silently, and he can scarcely form the word to express the discovery that his son still loves him. And then he clarifies the point that Cobb (as well as George C. Scott, and Fredric March in the 1951 movie version) glossed over: that, not knowing what to make of Biff's demonstration of love, he misinterprets it, in the Willy Loman fashion, as a sign of the boy's greatness: "That boy—that boy is going to be magnificent!" (II). Missing the entire substance of what Biff has been telling him, he rushes to his car, happy to die what we suddenly comprehend as an utterly valueless death.

Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg in the thirties longed to create a theatre that was free from compromise, and the approach to acting they advocated, grounded in emotional and psychological reality, was meant as an expression of that uncompromising spirit. Strasberg's fanatical insistence on true emotion, which he carried over to the Actors Studio in the fifties, fostered a modification of the Method that his critics complained undervalued or even distorted the text, while seizing a neurotic and uncouth reality as its focus. But in fact his approach was a logical extension of the Group theatre spirit, which strove to find a way to illuminate character through the holes in the text as much as through its strengths. Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Death of a Salesman* represents a dedication to the Method ideal: he serves the text by cutting through it to its essence and thus, in a sense, transforms it. This is not the *Salesman* we recognize from our high-school English classes, but we recognize a reality at the center of it that has eluded productions of this play for three and a half decades. However, the American theatre could not reach to Dustin Hoffman's achievement without building on Lee J. Cobb's; in a sense, what we see in Cobb's Willy Loman is a crucial step on the way to Hoffman's. Juxtaposed, these portrayals, one by an actor trained in the Group Theatre and one by a member of the third (post-Strasberg) generation of American Method actors, illustrate some of the distance covered in half a century of the Method in performance.

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Notes

1. Daniel Walden, "Miller's Routes and His Moral Dilemma: or, Continuity from Brooklyn to *Salesman*," in *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*, ed. James J. Martini (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979) 190.
2. Leslie Fiedler, "Jewish-Americans, Go Home!," in his *Waiting for the End* (New York: Stein and Day, 1964) 91.
3. George Ross, "Death of a Salesman in the Original," in Arthur Miller and Gerald Weales, eds., *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism* (New York: Viking, 1967) 259-60.
4. Morris Freedman, *American Drama in Social Context* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1971) 49, 52.
5. Julius Novick, "Salesman Redivivus," *The Threepenny Review* Fall (1984): 18.
6. Leonard Moss, *Arthur Miller*, Rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1980) 26.
7. Lloyd Rose, "Lost in America," *The Atlantic* Apr. 1984: 130-132.
8. Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," in his *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1974) 133.
9. Thomas Allen Greenfield, *Work and the Work Ethic in American Drama, 1920-1970* (Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 1982) 105.
10. Robert Warshow, "The Movie Camera and the American," in his *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1974) 173.
11. See Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in Miller and Weales, 143-150.
12. Leslie Fiedler, *The Collected Essays* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971) 397.
13. Robert Brustein, "The Keynes of Times Square," *New Republic* 1 Dec. 1962: 29.
14. Edward Dwight Easty, *On Method Acting* (New York: Allograph, 1966) 148.
15. Alexander Knox, "Acting and Behaving," *Hollywood Quarterly* Apr. 1946: 262.