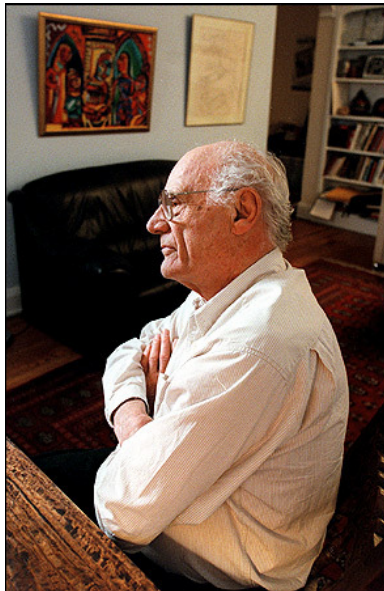


Death of a playwright: Arthur Miller 1915 - 2005

By Rupert Cornwell and Louise Jury, 12 February 2005

Arthur Miller, perhaps the greatest American playwright of the 20th century, died yesterday at the age of 89. He never won the Nobel Prize for literature, but few writers in any country at any time have so captured the universal themes of family and the transience of success - how ordinary, decent people can be overwhelmed by the great tides of events.



Miller's family were at his bedside when he died of heart failure on Thursday night, at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut. It was an old farmhouse he bought in 1958 during his marriage to the actress Marilyn Monroe, in the period of his greatest celebrity.

But he will be remembered above all for his plays, several of which have entered the canon of world literature. There was *The Crucible*, written in 1953 and part of the curriculum of every American school student. He based it on the 1692 witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, but it is an allegory for the hysteria and unjust persecutions of the McCarthyite hunt for communists of the period.

In his 1967 play *The Price*, Miller told the desperately painful story of a fortune lost and roads not taken, as two estranged brothers have to

dispose of the sorry remnants of their father's estate.

Earlier, there was *A View from the Bridge*, a tale of intrigue and betrayal in an immigrant Brooklyn family, which drew heavily on Greek tragedy.

Above all of course, there is *Death of a Salesman*, Miller's most famous work, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1949 at the age of 33. It captures the central strand of his drama - how ordinary families can be swept up and destroyed by social changes they are powerless to combat. "Dislocation, maybe, is part of our uneasiness. It implants the feeling that nothing is really permanent," Miller once said of his work.

The sentiment is caught exactly in a line from the play's protagonist. "I'm still feeling kind of temporary about myself," remarks Willy Loman, the eponymous salesman, victim of the capitalist system he so admired and trusted.

"I couldn't have predicted a play like *Death of a Salesman* would have taken on the proportions that it has," Miller once said. It had begun life as "a literal play about a literal salesman, but it has become a myth, not only here but in many other parts of the world".

Indeed, Miller's reputation if anything was even more exalted abroad, especially in Britain, where the theatrical world paid tribute to him last night.

The dramatist Harold Pinter told BBC News 24 he was "flabbergasted" by the news. "I'm pretty convinced he was writing until the day of his death. He was born with the pen in his hand."

David Hare, the playwright, said: "Arthur was the last of the three great theatrical voices of the American century - [Eugene] O'Neill, [Tennessee] Williams, Miller."

Nicholas Hytner, the artistic director of the National Theatre, said: "I have no doubt plays like *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*,

and *A View from the Bridge* will always stand with the masterpieces of Ibsen, Shakespeare and Sophocles."

At the end of his life, Miller was still writing. Only four months ago, another new play, *Finishing the Picture*, opened in Chicago, inspired by an incident during his time with Monroe. They married in 1956. Five turbulent years later they divorced and in 1962 she was dead. Last year he was seen with Agnes Barley, a New York artist 55 years his junior.



Willy Loman killed himself believing that his only remaining value to his family lay in a life insurance policy. "After all ... the years," he said, "you end up worth more dead than alive." The same fate, for very different reasons, may befall Miller. His life's output is already priceless. His death can only enhance its value.

Vocabulary

transience Vergänglichkeit
decent anständig
to overwhelm überwältigen
tide Gezeiten, Strom
celebrity Berühmtheit
crucible Schmelztiegel
estranged entfremdet
to dispose of sth. etwas veräußern
remnants Überreste
to draw on sich stützen auf
strand Handlungsstrang, Faden
to sweep up wegwischen
eponymous namengebend
to exalt verherrlichen
flabbergasted verblüfft
to enhance aufwerten