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Death of a Salesman's Dreams

By LEE SIEGEL

ARTHUR MILLER's "Death of a Salesman," now on Broadway in a Tony-nominated revival — and starring a heart-shattering Philip Seymour Hoffman as a Willy Loman for the ages — is the most devastating portrait of punctured middle-class dreams in our national literature. Yet as I sat through a recent performance, I wondered why the play was revived at all.

While "Death of a Salesman" has consolidated its prestige as an exposure of middle-class delusions, the American middle class — as a social reality and a set of admirable values — has nearly ceased to exist.

Certainly few middle-class people, or at least anyone from any "middle class" that Loman would recognize, are among the audiences attending this production. What was once a middle-class entertainment has become a luxury item. Tickets for the original run, in 1949, cost between \$1.80 and \$4.80; tickets for the 2012 run range from \$111 to \$840. After adjusting for inflation, that's a 10-fold increase, well beyond the reach of today's putative Willy Lomans.

Then again, in 1949, the top marginal tax rate was 82 percent. The drop in that rate to 28 percent by 1988 helped create a stratum of people who could afford to pay high prices for everything from inflated theater tickets to health care and college tuition.

Ever tightening financial straits for the average American and the erosion of social safety nets have given the lie to now quaint values like hard work. Perhaps elite intellectuals like Mr. Miller himself unwittingly created an atmosphere hostile to such middle-class attitudes. Mr. Miller later wrote in his autobiography, "Timebends," that he had hoped the play would expose "this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last."

Yet "Salesman" is full of empathy for Willy. Mr. Miller remembered worrying in 1949 that "there was too much identification with Willy, too much weeping, and that the play's ironies were being dimmed out by all this empathy." He recalls with somber pride that director, Elia Kazan, "was the first of a great many men — and women — who saw Willy was their father."

No wonder those first audiences' identification was so strong: they recognized ' humanity within his profit-driven job. Mr. Miller recalled that after performan



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(Part 1)
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play's first run, "some, especially men, were bent forward covering their faces, and others were openly weeping."

It's hard to imagine a similar reaction among audiences today. Not only have the industries that employed the salespeople, factory workers, middle managers and others in the plentiful, humbler realms of mid-20th-century capitalism begun to dry up, but today's capitalists no longer share Willy's belief that he could attain dignity through his work.

In 1949, Willy's desperate cry — "the competition is maddening!" — must have chilled theatergoers for whom competition still had a mostly positive connotation. In 2012, a fight to the death for shrinking opportunities in so many realms of life renders the idea of fair competition an anachronism. It is a sign of the times that sitcoms, in which trivial, everyday conflicts are comfortably resolved into neighborly harmony, are giving way to the Darwinian armageddons of reality TV. It is as if the middle class were being forced to watch the gladiatorial spectacle of its own destruction.

In our time of banker hustlers, real-estate hustlers and Internet hustlers, of suckers and "muppets," it is unlikely that anyone associates happiness and dignity with working hard for a comfortable existence purchased with a modest income. Even what's left of the middle class disdains a middle-class life. Everyone, rich, poor and in between, wants infinite pleasure and fabulous riches.

Mr. Miller's outrage at a capitalist system he wanted to humanize has become our cynical adaptation to a capitalist system we pride ourselves on knowing how to manipulate. For Mr. Miller, Willy's middle-class dreams put the system that betrayed them to shame. In our current context, Willy's dreams of love, dignity and community through modest work make him a deluded loser.

Perhaps there is a simple, unlovely reason "Death of a Salesman" has become such a beloved institution. Instead of humbling its audience through the shock of recognition, the play now confers upon the people who can afford to see it a feeling of superiority — itself a fragile illusion.

Lee Siegel is the author, most recently, of "Harvard Is Burning."

