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Arthur Miller Biography

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"The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out," Arthur Miller has said. "Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story. People elsewhere tend to accept, to a far greater degree anyway, that the conditions of life are hostile to man's pretensions." In Miller's more than thirty plays, which have won him a Pulitzer Prize and multiple Tony Awards, he puts in question "death and betrayal and injustice and how we are to account for this little life of ours."

For nearly six decades, Miller has been creating characters that wrestle with power conflicts, personal and social responsibility, the repercussions of past actions, and the twin poles of guilt and hope. In his writing and in his role in public life, Miller articulates his profound political and moral convictions. He once said he thought theater could "change the world." *The Crucible*, which premiered in 1953, is a fictionalization of the Salem witch-hunts of 1692, but it also deals in an allegorical manner with the House Un-American Activities Committee. In a note to the play, Miller writes, "A political policy is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence." Dealing as it did with highly charged current events, the play received unfavorable reviews and Miller was cold-shouldered by many colleagues. When the political situation shifted, *Death of a Salesman* went on to become Miller's most celebrated

and most produced play, which he directed at the People's Art Theatre in Beijing in 1983.

A modern tragedian, Miller says he looks to the Greeks for inspiration, particularly Sophocles. "I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his sense of personal dignity," Miller writes. "From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society." Miller considers the common man "as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were." *Death of a Salesman*, which opened in 1949, tells the story of Willy Loman, an aging salesman who makes his way "on a smile and a shoeshine." Miller lifts Willy's illusions and failures, his anguish and his family relationships, to the scale of a tragic hero. The fear of being displaced or having our image of what and who we are destroyed is best known to the common man, Miller believes. "It is time that we, who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time-the heart and spirit of the average man."

Arthur Asher Miller, the son of a women's clothing company owner, was born in 1915 in New York City. His father lost his business in the Depression and the family was forced to move to a smaller home in Brooklyn. After graduating from high school, Miller worked jobs ranging from radio singer to truck driver to clerk in an automobile-parts warehouse. Miller began writing plays as a student at the University of Michigan, joining the Federal Theater Project in New York City after he received his degree. His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, opened in 1944 and his next play, *All My Sons*, received the Drama Critics' Circle Award. His 1949 *Death of a Salesman* won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1956 and 1957, Miller was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee and was convicted of contempt of Congress for his refusal to identify writers believed to hold Communist sympathies. The following year, the United States Court of Appeals overturned the conviction. In 1959 the National Institute of Arts and Letters awarded him the Gold Medal for Drama. Miller has been married three times: to Mary Grace Slattery in 1940, Marilyn Monroe in 1956, and photographer Inge Morath in 1962, with whom he lives in Connecticut. He and Inge have a daughter, Rebecca. Among his works are *A View from the Bridge*, *The Misfits*, *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, *The Price*, *The American Clock*, *Broken Glass*, *Mr. Peters' Connections*, and *Timebends*, his autobiography. Miller's writing has earned him a lifetime of honors, including the Pulitzer Prize, seven Tony Awards, two Drama Critics Circle Awards, an Obie, an Olivier, the John F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Dorothy and Lillian Gish prize. He holds honorary doctorate degrees from Oxford University and Harvard University.

Throughout his life and work, Miller has remained socially engaged and has written with conscience, clarity, and compassion. As Chris Keller says to his mother in *All My Sons*, "Once and for all you must know that there's a universe of people outside, and you're responsible to it." Miller's work is infused with his sense of responsibility to humanity and to his audience. "The playwright is nothing without his audience," he writes. "He is one of the audience who happens to know how to speak."

--Rachel Galvin

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