

■ A Traveling Salesman in Beijing: Global Cultures Translated Through Theatre

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), sixty years after it was written, remains remarkably alive and is the work most Americans feel speaks directly to their lives and concerns today. But more remarkable than the play's durability in the United States is what it tells us about the remarkable power of theatre to bridge and transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries. In 1983, just a few short years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Miller was invited to direct his play in Beijing. The invitation came from two Chinese theatre luminaries, playwright Cao Yu, and actor Ying Ruocheng, who met Miller in 1978. The production was performed at the Beijing People's Art Theatre, and ran several months, after which it embarked on a national tour culminating in a televised production. Afterwards, it was re-mounted in Beijing with its original cast. Since Miller spoke no Chinese, the play was translated into Chinese by Ying Ruocheng, who also played the part of Miller's salesman, Willy Loman, and served as Miller's interlocutor when he spoke to the cast. How do we account for this play's spectacular success in a culture so apparently alien to that of 1940s Brooklyn as that of Beijing in the early 80s? This act of remarkable global translation is the subject of the present essay.

Keywords: *Death of a Salesman*, 'Salesman' in Beijing, Arthur Miller, cultural translation

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In 1983, the American playwright Arthur Miller was invited to direct his play, *Death of a Salesman*, in Beijing. The invitation came from two Chinese theatre luminaries, the playwright Cao Yu, and the actor Ying Ruocheng, who had met Miller on a previous trip to China in 1978. The production was performed at the Beijing People's Art Theatre, and ran for several months, after which it embarked on a national tour which culminated in a televised production. Following the tour, it was again mounted in Beijing with nearly the identical cast. Although Arthur Miller did not speak or read Chinese, his wife, the German born photographer Inge Morath, did. The play was translated into Chinese by Ying Ruocheng, who also played the part of Miller's salesman, Willy Loman, and served as Miller's translator when he addressed the cast in his capacity as director.

Although the production was tremendously successful, its success was by no means assured, or even likely. Indeed, the project could just as easily have failed. Following his return to the United States, Miller published a detailed account of the genesis of his production. This book, *'Salesman' in Beijing*, is not only fascinating for what it tells us about the making of theatre under highly unusual conditions, or the differences between Chinese and American rehearsal conditions and styles of acting, it is even more revelatory in what it tells us about the relationship between two very different cultures, brought together under a set of unique circumstances to explore a specific (quintessentially "American") work which might seem not only untranslatable linguistically but (even more important) impervious to the act of being communicated between cultures. The journey of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, undertaken in 1983, seems even more remarkable today, twenty-five years later, since the American and Chinese societies now seem far closer economically and culturally than they were when Miller directed his production. However, the lessons that Miller's production at the Beijing People's Art Theatre provide about the process of Global translation between cultures may (paradoxically) be even more valuable now than they were a quarter-century earlier.

The idea that it would be promising to stage Arthur Miller's classic drama *Death of a Salesman* in post-revolutionary China at the Beijing People's Art Theatre just a few years after the end of the Cultural Revolution seems (on the surface of it) almost ludicrous. Written in 1949, Miller's play is the quintessential *American* play about the *American* dream. It depicts the tragedy of Willy Loman, a traveling salesman of great dreams and vitality, a man who has voluntarily and completely embraced the American dream of success, only to find himself sinking in the quicksand of the increasingly materialistic culture of post-World War II America which discards men who no longer prove useful. In the first scene of the play, he returns home to Brooklyn, having failed to complete a business trip in a state of near mental and physical collapse, unable to keep his mind on the

road; "I have such thoughts, such strange thoughts," he says (14). He enters carrying two huge sample cases and is "tired to the death" (13). It is in keeping with Miller's notion of Willy as a tragic American Everyman that we never discover what in fact he is selling; as his name suggests, he is a "low man," a lost soul unable to ascend the ladder of corporate success and about to be flung ignominiously on society's scrap heap. In the course of the play, we meet Willy's selfless, adoring wife Linda who desperately sustains his dreams in the face of her growing awareness that he is suicidal, and his two sons, Biff and Happy, each of whom represents a different attitude toward his aspirations; the older son, Biff, a former high school football hero, has returned home to confront his father with his own broken dreams. Biff has failed at every job he has undertaken, and has even served time in prison for theft. Biff concludes by rejecting Willy's beliefs and ideals, arguing that "the man never knew who he was" (138) and apparently armed with a degree of self-knowledge, longs for a life of peace and renewal in the American west. The other son, Harold, is significantly nicknamed Happy, and concludes the play with a statement of fatuously unbridled optimism; "Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (139). Written at the height of American optimism following victory at end of World War II, Miller's play offers no easy answers and takes issue with America's sense of its own identity, critically examining the cost of a dream which worships success and cannot abide failure. As Willy observes to his employer, Howard, who has just fired him after more than thirty years at the firm; "You mustn't tell me you've got people to see—I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit" (82).

As powerful as Miller's play is as social criticism, it would be wrong to see *Death of a Salesman* merely in such one-dimensional terms; it is equally a psychological tragedy which exposes a man for his self-delusion and absence of self-knowledge. Willy is certainly a victim of society, but he is also a petty tyrant whose hypocrisy and lack of self-awareness are as much responsible for his fall as is the society which treats him so abjectly. Yet, the play is also partially sympathetic towards him as deluded dreamer; as his brother-in-law, Charley says at the end of the play in one of the play's most oft-quoted lines, "A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory" (138). In addition to its social criticism and psychological insight, Miller's play is also a remarkable for its theatricality, revolutionary in its day (especially on Broadway), for its non-realistic, expressionistic use of the stage to dramatize Willy's inner longings for an idyllic past and his eventual breakdown and emotional collapse. As Miller writes in his opening

stage directions, “an air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality” (11). The set is transparent rather than realistic; in scenes which take place in the “present,” actors observe imaginary wall-lines, while in other scenes which take place in the past or in Willy’s memory, they do not, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping ‘through’ a wall. This is not surprising for a play whose working title was “The Inside of his Head,” suggesting that Miller’s original objective was to create a portrait of a man’s emotional and mental life seen from within (Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism* 155). In each of its several aspects—subject matter (bourgeois capitalist society), style (psychological realism), and staging (expressionism) this play would appear to be completely unfamiliar to its Chinese audience in 1983. How then could such a play succeed in China? How would it be understood in its Chinese translation and under the playwright’s own direction through an interpreter? And how would it be received by an audience just a few short years after the end of the Cultural Revolution? On the surface at least, the decision to stage *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing seemed foolhardy and naive.

The reasons why this remarkably risky project might be expected to fail are easy to understand on a number of levels—politically, culturally and theatrically. In the period between 1966-76 with Jiang Qing at the helm, only Eight Permissible Plays were allowed to be performed in China. As a result, there was virtually no knowledge of American drama after Eugene O’Neill, no exposure to European drama after Maxim Gorky.

Although the theatre in China obviously possesses ancient traditions going back at least as far as the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), the genre of “Spoken Drama” (*huaaju*) is quite recent. Indeed, the first example of or Spoken Drama dates from 1907, and this production of “The Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven” (an adaptation loosely based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) was actually produced in Japan. Added to this cultural concern is the fact that Miller’s play is set in the unfamiliar world of Brooklyn, New York in the 1940s and earlier via flashbacks into a more remote past, and involves such unfamiliar (and un-Chinese) concepts as the job of traveling salesman (Willy’s profession) and the life insurance policy with which Willy hopes to redeem a lifetime of failure (and buy the success of his son) by committing suicide at the end of the play.

Perhaps as significant as such cultural concerns is the issue of acting styles which were so different in China in 1983 than they were in the west. When the German playwright Bertolt Brecht saw the actor Mei Lan-fang’s opera company perform in Moscow in the spring of 1935, he was so powerfully impressed by the techniques of classical Chinese acting that his essay, “Alienation Effects of Chinese Acting” remains one of his most influential essays, and key to his description

of his seminal notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. For Brecht, the Chinese approach to theatre was fundamentally antithetical to the western style he associated with Aristotelian drama. Whereas in the west, the actor is typically encouraged to “become one” with the role he is playing, the Chinese actor according to Brecht, “never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage’s characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place” (Willett 91-92). As a result, the Chinese performer “portrays incidents of the utmost passion, but without his delivery becoming heated” (Willett 93). This awareness of a separation between actor and role allowed Brecht to repudiate a fundamental premise of modern acting as developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky. For Brecht, the Chinese actor “is in no trance” and by virtue of his “distance” between himself and his role, is able to induce the possibility of social change in the mind of the spectator. While this arousal to social action was perhaps the most important purpose of theatre for Brecht, Miller’s need for realism (despite the expressionistic influence on the play’s scenic and lighting elements) demands a different style of acting, one in which the distance between the performer and his role must be eradicated to create the sense of psychological plausibility. What is appropriate to the techniques of Chinese Opera is completely inappropriate to the demands of the psychological realism on which Miller’s play depends. The notion of “indicating” or “playing” to the audience, techniques familiar to Beijing Opera with its array of stock characters and fixed grammar of gestures and facial expressions, metamorphoses into overacting when transplanted to the world of psychological realism. This difference in acting styles is further exacerbated by the Chinese performer’s understandable perception of the world of drama as having to do with “message” rather than the ambiguity upon which so much modernist literature, including *Death of a Salesman*, depends. This skepticism toward his play’s reception in China is amply noted in his journal about the genesis of the production; “I wonder if this is the harvest of so many years of indoctrination, when any play, indeed any artwork, has been regarded as hardly more than a thinly disguised political statement” (Miller, ‘*Salesman*’ in *Beijing* 95). The temptation to reduce a work of art to one thing, a single message, however understandable for the Chinese actor less than a decade removed from the Cultural Revolution, is in Miller’s terms, deadly when applied to his own work; “This message mongering is a deformation, a reductionism fatal to art” (Miller ‘*Salesman*’ in *Beijing* 187).

In practice, the tendency to overlook life’s complexities in favor of simple, straightforward message impacts important acting questions in *Death of a*

Salesman which depends on nuance and complexity even in our assessment of its central character, a deeply flawed, yet arguably sympathetic individual. As Miller notes in his account of the production, “I must probe farther to the deeper places where they really live their Chinese lives, and to do that I must tempt them to emerge and reveal more of their own references that parallel events and ideas in the play” (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing* 136). As director of his own play, Miller repeatedly attempts to find ways for his actors to “source” their characters from within, and some of the most interesting passages of *Salesman in Beijing* concern his attempts to find ways to have his actors (unaccustomed to this sort of process) begin to weave their own personal and political histories into the situations of their characters in the play. Thus, he discusses with the actor playing Biff that some of his frustration towards his father be played within the context of the emotionally tumultuous world of Cultural Revolution politics, where a leader’s ideological demands and expectations must be adhered to, however extreme. “She [Jiang Qing] also claimed to be acting out of devotion to China—But no matter how you tried to obey her and come up to the regime’s expectations, you had to see that objectively China’s economy was falling apart, her arts, commerce, the whole civilization going down the drain . . . Biff is trying to do something very similar—tear Willy away from his ideology to face himself and you . . . as a real individual who is at a certain time in his life” (Miller *Salesman in Beijing* 80). In another instance, Miller as director helps the actor playing Willy understand the motivation of a suicide which is intended as a way of helping his son by suggesting that “Willy’s credo here is Confucian, which teaches accomplishment in this world and the bequeathing of its rewards to one’s children. The inheritance is a central idea in Chinese psychology, which lays great emphasis on continuity itself . . . Thus, by a long circle through the East we arrive at Willy’s thrust toward immortality, his awareness that he has been writing his name on a cake of ice on a hot July day . . . in Brooklyn” (Miller *Salesman in Beijing* 189). Miller uses not only his literary and theatrical resources as author and director, but his sensitivity to the recent history of Chinese culture to excavate the psychology of 1940s America for his cast.

However, there are also moments in the journey in which the same issue of cultural difference (or opposing theatrical traditions) becomes almost comic in its radical disjunction. Throughout the process, Miller must examine whether or not his Chinese production of this quintessentially American play should be “Chinese” or “American.” On one hand, he cherishes the perhaps naïve and optimistic view that his characters are “human” regardless of their cultural and social entanglements; on the other, there is the question of an actor’s natural inclination to imitate, chameleon-like, the culture of the “other.” One of the most

fascinating (and revealing) episodes in Miller's narrative concerns the wiggers and costumers who assume and try to encourage an extreme "westernizing" of the cast's hair and attire. Not surprisingly, the actors are willing, even enthusiastic, about going along with this concept, particularly in the early stages of rehearsal; "There is no way around it. They want to imitate Americans, to play-act people they are not, when what I want is exactly who and what they really are—I do not say so, but supposing they were blacks: would they want to paint their faces white? . . . There really is no way to convince them excepting to play it straight and prove that the audience is willing and able to follow right along" (Miller, *Salesman' in Beijing* 182,184-85). This point summarizes Miller's unspoken objective for the production, as well as its greatest inherent risk: actors being actors, whether Chinese or western, there is inevitably the inclination to "play," "dress up," and imitate a character's external appearance, rather than the more laborious (and ultimately rewarding) process of discovering the character from within. As rehearsals progress, Miller himself becomes aware of an important opportunity; that by being true to the essence of the character instead of copying his or her appearance, "we may end up creating something not quite American or Chinese but a pure style springing from the heart of the play itself—the play as nonnational event, that is, a human circumstance" (Miller, *Salesman' in Beijing* 155). This raises a fascinating question for both the theatre practitioner and scholar interested in Global translation: does such a "nonnational" world truly exist? As rehearsals progress, Miller redefines his aim as discovering this American play in "some country of the mind—certainly not in any earthly geography" (Miller, *Salesman' in Beijing* 172). Perhaps this is indeed the ideal towards which we aspire whenever we perform any play from a different culture or historical period, be it Shakespeare, Ibsen or Cao Yu.

Although thus far I have considered some of the obstacles which made a successful performance of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing nearly impossible to achieve, there are other elements which must have made the exploration of Miller's utopian "country of the mind" much more easily accessible. At some level, it may be argued that *Death of a Salesman* is neither a social play about the American dream nor psychological study; rather it is an archetypal love story between father and son, and between son and father. In the words of one of the Chinese actors in the production, its theme concerns a father wanting his sons to grow up "to be dragons." Thus, as Miller notes, "there must surely be some exotic mysteries for them in this play . . . after all, the Chinese practically invented the family, which is the core of the play, and the social interrelationships with the family struggle have been a part of Chinese life for a very long time" (Miller, *Salesman' in Beijing* 44).

Despite the enormous cultural differences, China, even in 1983 was already showing signs of embarking on the market-driven economy we see flowering today. Rapid change was in the air, then as now. As Ying Ruocheng observed, ‘the truth is that we have both systems now, the commercial set and the socialist, cooperative set, all going on together’ (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing* 136). Miller’s play, then, despite its quaintly exotic 1940s Brooklyn location (whose specific atmosphere would be difficult for most twenty-first century Americans to access, let alone Chinese!) speaks directly to the tensions inherent in a society on the verge of extraordinary change from a socialist to a market economy. As Miller observes about the troubling new commercialization of life in China, “the question seems unsettling for them. Perhaps . . . it means progress but at the same time [it] is hardening them in their relations with one another” (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing* 137). In the original stage design by Jo Mielziner, the Lomans’ tiny home is overcrowded by “towering angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides” (11), so Chinese society, at precisely the time that Miller was rehearsing the play, was experiencing remarkable changes of one social order impinging on another. As Miller observed with great perceptiveness, “the whole psychological atmosphere is changing as we rehearse, and no one is sure of anything” (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing* 125-26).

One of Willy’s seminal speeches in the play harkens back to an earlier time. In it, he nostalgically recalls what made him decide not to follow his brother Ben to Alaska, and instead devote his life to becoming a salesman:

And I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he’d drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he’d go up to his room, y’understand, put on his green velvet slippers—I’ll never forget—and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. ‘Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? Do you know? When he died—and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston—when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. (81)

Willy concludes this speech by reflecting on a simpler time when “there was personality in it—There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality” (81). As China moved toward a market economy in the 1980s, the transition from one world to another was something that evidently resonated with its Chinese audience. How much more applicable would it be today as China’s

embrace of free enterprise makes it the world's next great economic superpower?

In assessing Miller's reflections on his production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, it seems clear that his insights and reflections illuminate more than differences between seemingly antithetical cultures or distinctive conventions of theatrical performance. Rather, in his quest for a truly "nonnational" theatrical event, Miller reminds us that every truly great work of art, however much it seems tied to a particular national and cultural identity or *Zeitgeist*, ultimately has the power to transcend and *connect* rather than divide. This is perhaps the great legacy of great art in any genre and at any time. In Miller's words, "The job of culture, I have always thought, is not to further fortify people against contamination by other cultures but to mediate between them from the heart's common ground" (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing* 249).

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旅行在北京的推銷員： 藉由劇場所譯出的全球文化

摘要

亞瑟米勒的《推銷員之死》在付梓問世六十年後，在大多數的美國人心 中，它還是生動地道出美國人真實的生活情況與他們所關注的事物。但是，這部作品除了它的流傳性之外，更值得注意的是，它也告訴我們戲劇作為一種溝通橋樑與超越文化及種族隔閡的不平凡力量。就在「文化大革命」結束的後幾年，亞瑟米勒被邀請至北京去執導自己的劇本。這項邀請是來自於兩位在中國戲劇上的傑出人物：劇作家曹禺以及演員英若誠。有趣的是，他們兩位在 1978 年與米勒碰面。這個舞臺劇作品在北京人民藝術學院演出長達數個月，接著開始全國的巡迴演出，以電視劇播出告終。後來在北京又以原班人馬再度搬上舞臺演出。由於米勒本身不會中文，因此英若誠不但將此劇翻譯成中文，也擔綱演出其中的推銷員一角——威利·羅曼，除此之外，他更是亞瑟米勒與其他演員之間的翻譯者。我們該如何去說明《推銷員之死》此劇所帶來的驚人成就，特別是在中國文化這種明顯與 1940 年的布魯克林文化以及北京八零年代早期文化不相容的現象呢？這種不平凡的全球化之翻譯現象正是本文所要探討的重點。

關鍵字：亞瑟·米勒；《推銷員之死》；《推銷員在北京》；文化翻譯