

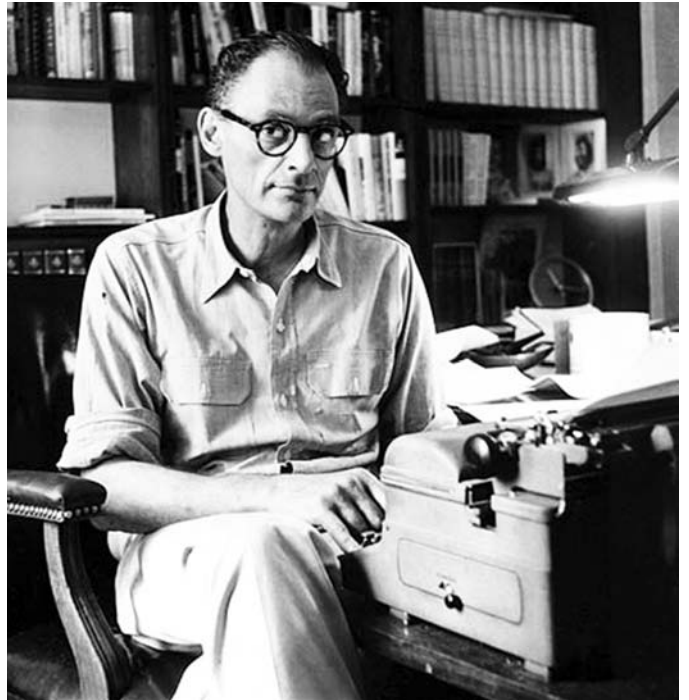
## THE PRICE HAS A PAST

*Despite my wishes I could not tamper with something the play and life seemed to be telling me: That we were doomed to perpetuate our illusions because truth was too costly to face.*

— Arthur Miller on *The Price*  
from *Timebends*, his autobiography

The price in *The Price* is not only the dollar value agreed upon for an attic filled with old furniture, but also the price exacted by decisions made earlier in life. Both brothers have made a decision in their younger years which still affect them. Victor, the cop, gave up hopes of a career in science to tend to his father whose life, fortune and health were shattered by the Depression. Walter, the physician, turned his back on the family in order to become a successful doctor. Both decisions had consequences; Victor became a policeman, married, did his duty and has accepted his lot in life. Walter's success has brought him a broken marriage and estranged children. Neither brother is happy and the chasm between them is too deep and wide to be forded in an afternoon. They are aided in the disposal and dispersal of their parents' furniture by 89 year old Solomon, a furniture appraiser. Solomon lives up to his biblical namesake and while not deciding who made the right decision creates a forum in which the sides and the differences can be judged.

The Depression and its casualties are never far from Miller's work nor are the ferment of the politics of his era. In some ways Walter and Victor could represent the two prevailing social movements of that era, capitalism and socialism. In this play, both systems are found wanting. Victor's sacrifice in providing the safety net for his broken father has been not only a possible career in science, which itself may be a chimera, but also a certain amount of self respect and the esteem of his loyal wife. For Walter, the pursuit of wealth and fame in the private health care industry has made him rich but at the cost of his marriage and the love of his children. Victor's self sacrifice doesn't make him feel noble. Walter's success doesn't make him feel satisfied. This is a ruminative moment for Miller. Famously leftist in his earlier years, by 1968, Miller seems to be saying there are no ideologies with all the answers.



ARTHUR MILLER AT WORK

*The Price* is a play in which everything of importance has happened before the curtain goes up. All the bad decisions and calamitous events are in the past. That past is palpably on the stage as represented by the richly detailed, expensive, plush heavily European furniture, all acquired before 1929. It's what is left of their parents' former lives. The memories the furniture evoke stir the passions of the play. The price that Solomon offers disappoints the brothers and Victor's wife. All these rich and weighty pieces have to be worth more. The past had to mean something. Solomon tells them that despite the heavy woods and fine craftsmanship, these tables and chairs and armoires have no use in the modern world. Taste has changed as has the size of apartments. Solomon, himself, seems to have been summoned from the past. At 89, he is barely keeping his business afloat in the modern world, his phone number is found in an old yellowing phone book. Maybe he is undervaluing the furniture as a way of jump starting his fading business. Time is running out for him, though. The only item he prizes above the others is a harp, perhaps presaging his approaching journey to the next life.

As L.P. Hartley wrote: *The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.* This is true in *The Price*. There was a time when the family had wealth and all it can provide. There were cars and balls and Ivy League dreams. The Crash ended all that. The past in *The Price* is so far from the present of the play despite the heavy influence it exerts. As the brothers act like archeologists in a ruin, finding ball gowns in a wardrobe or the still evident marks of long ago attic games, they can never recover the past or change it. These remnants are all they have, but they are happy to dispose of them. There is no sentimental attachment to these objects as there is, for them, no rosy memory of the past. It's an attitude they both share.

Although written 40 odd years ago and about the effect of events forty years before that, *The Price* is a very pertinent play for today. Once again an economic readjustment is forcing us to reassess our national goals. After an era of no regulation and easy credit, with houses instead of stocks being bought on the margin, the pendulum may swing back to an era of socially progressive policy. With fortunes vanishing and jobs disappearing, there may be another family like Franz who will have lifestyle curtailed and dreams deferred. What will another Solomon find in their attic forty years from now?



IN 1968 ARTHUR MILLER BROUGHT A NEW PRODUCTION TO THE WALNUT STREET THEATRE IN PHILADELPHIA. THE CAST PICTURE ABOVE CLOCKWISE FROM CENTER, HAROLD GARY, PAT HINGLE, ARTHUR KENNEDY AND KATE REID STARRED IN *THE PRICE*.

## CLASSICS UP CLOSE

*The Price* is the latest addition to the Globe's "Classics Up Close" series that has included such masterworks as Tennessee Williams's first major success, *The Glass Menagerie*, and Edward Albee's seminal work, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Whereas those two plays launched and solidified the considerable careers of both Williams and Albee, *The Price* is Arthur Miller's last major play, though he was to continue to write up to his death in 2005. *The Price* (1968) was also his most commercially successful play since *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. As different in tone and substance as these three titans of the American post-war theater are, they have written these classic plays with a Broadway stage in mind. All deal with large themes and are filled with varying degrees of power, poetry and passion. The "Classics Up Close" series takes these plays to a more intimate space so that the audience can be connected in a new way to these plays, all of which take place in single locations. *The Glass Menagerie* is set in "an alley in St Louis." George and Martha entertain Nick and Honey in "the living room of a house on the campus of a small New England college." In *The Price*, the Franz brothers confront their past on "the attic floor of a Manhattan brownstone." By being observers in that living room, or that alley or sitting among the antiques in that attic is to experience these works in a novel way. The distance has vanished and we are among them as they dissect a marriage or wait for the Gentleman Caller or bargain with the antique dealer. In one way or another, these are all family plays that deal with past disappointments and harsher present realities. While Williams is more poetic and Albee more acerbic, Miller is the realist.

In the 2009/2010 season the Globe will continue the "Classics Up Close" series with Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers*. While our previous "Classics Up Close" playwrights have been masters of the drama, Neil Simon is the post-war master of American stage comedy. *Lost in Yonkers* is a singular work of his; it is a drama, but one with comic overtones which arise organically from the wartime vicissitudes of the Kurnitz family in "an apartment that sits just above Kurnitz's Kandy Store." So another single location and another family. *Lost in Yonkers* won Simon his only Pulitzer Prize. Although the thrust of the story, how the iron hand of Grandma Kurnitz is loosened as the war brings dislocation to the family at large but also a whiff of new freedom to her damaged unmarried daughter, Bella, there are also pointed portraits of the extended family that bring humor to Grandma's realm above the candy store. "Classics Up Close" will bring us into this Yonkers apartment in 1942 to witness one family's present, compromised by the past, but with a new generation asserting nascent independence that presages the changes that will come with the end of the war.



ARTHUR MILLER

In 2001, Then NEH Chairman William R. Ferris spoke with Arthur Miller for *Humanities* magazine:

**FERRIS:** In many of your plays, from Willie and Biff, Joe and Chris Keller, to Victor Franz and his father's memory in *The Price*, fathers and sons are a theme. You grew up during the

Depression and you've said that you witnessed a lot of grown men lose themselves when they lost their jobs. You've also said your relationship with your own father was "like two searchlights on different islands." How has what you saw during the Depression influenced your work?

**MILLER:** Fundamentally, it left me with the feeling that the economic system is subject to instant collapse at any particular moment — I still think so — and that security is an illusion which some people are fortunate enough not to outlive. On the long run, after all, we've had these crises — I don't know how many times in the last hundred years — not only we but every country. What one lived through in that case was for America a very unusual collapse in its depth and its breadth. A friend of mine once said that there were only two truly national events in the history of the United States. One was the Civil War and the other one was the Depression.

**FERRIS:** I think that's so true.

**MILLER:** It leaves one with a feeling of expectation that the thing can go down, but also with a certain pleasure, that it hadn't gone down yet.

**FERRIS:** What is it about father-son relationships that provides such good material?

**MILLER:** The two greatest plays ever written were *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*, and they're both about father-son relationships, you know. So this goes back.

**FERRIS:** It is nothing new.

**MILLER:** It is absolutely nothing new. This is an old story. I didn't invent it and I'm sure it will happen again and again.

## NEXT UP AT THE COPLEY...

From the reality of Arthur Miller's antique-filled attic, our next attraction at the Copley, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, takes us to the ridiculous world of Charles Ludlam's Victorian manor house, filled with story elements gleefully ransacked from sources as diverse as *Rebecca*, *Gaslight* and *Wuthering Heights*, Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allen Poe and even Henrik Ibsen. In fact the opening lines of the play are from Ibsen's *Ghosts*. *Irma Vep* is Ludlam's best known and most produced play. Two protean actors are needed to play eight characters of both sexes. Part of the fun comes from the constant quick changes as, for example Nicodemus, the family retainer with a peg leg exits and in a flash the same actor returns as Lady Enid, the woeful second wife of Lord Edgar. Ludlam's theater group, The Ridiculous Theater Company specialized in subversive romps through theatrical traditions as diverse as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (*Stage Blood*), HG Wells, *The Island of Dr. Murnau* (*Bluebeard*) and the *Ring Cycle* (*Der Ring Gott Farblonjet*). *Irma Vep* is ostensibly a Victorian melodrama replete with a spooky manor house, howling wolves, mysterious apparitions and the beleaguered new wife of Lord Edgar who will never live up to the memory of his beloved first wife Lady Irma. While having fun with these elements, Ludlam allows us to revel in our love of these conventions. Ludlam was an expert filter of the Camp sensibility. The avant-garde theater of Ludlam's early career strove to alienate the audience. Ludlam instead exposed the ridiculousness inherent in popular culture by making us laugh and gasp, sometimes at the same time. As Susan Sontag said in her influential essay *Notes on Camp*: "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious." Ludlam not only dethrones the serious, but also pulls down its pants and gives it the raspberries.