

# Arthur Miller @ 100

by Richard Kostelanetz (December 2015)

We were all going slightly crazy trying to be honest and trying to see straight and trying to be safe. Sometimes there are conflicts in these three urges.

—Arthur Miller on the 1950s

Every time I hear his single most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, characterized as a critique of American capitalism or even of traveling salesmen, I cringe, because I know that isn't finally true. More pointedly, can we agree that the play exposes a business in which workers are fired easily, often for trivial hurtful reasons. The contrast is meant to be socialism, if not communism, where citizens have "job security."

In what biz, consider, does capricious termination occur more often than in traveling peddling? The answer is obvious: Show business, where not even stars are secure before the whims of producers. Right behind show biz, need I add (from personal experience), is writing for slick magazines. In both of the latter, the buyers depend upon the existence of a supply of talented supplicants that greatly exceeds demand for their services, coupled with competition among those desiring employment. Whenever an actor is fired, many are available to replace him or her. Likewise a newspaper reporter. Traveling sales, by contrast, is definitely not an overpopulated biz.

This thought suggests to me that Miller the playwright learned at firsthand about the Mechanisms of Capricious Termination from show biz and then from actors about the emotions of those fired. While applying this know-how to an occupation less familiar to him is not discreditable, because that's how creative writers and actors often work, what is not acceptable is the pretensions to a cultural critique that is essentially dishonest. Actors probably recall and then evoke the emotions of Willie Loman from their own experience of Capricious Terminations, making the Miller play important to them to a degree that others are not.

I'm reminded of another famous Miller play about the Salem Witch trials. To the claim that it was an attack on McCarthyism, there was this simple rejoinder:

Where there weren't any witches in 18<sup>th</sup> century Salem (MA), there were Communists in 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

For all of the claims made for Miller as the epitome of intellectual integrity, may I dissent with the reminder that a certain disingenuousness informed his work and thus, as a result, its reception.

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Individual entries on **Richard Kostelanetz's** work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.com, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. His many books are [here](#).

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