

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT SHOW

May 18, 1949 (catalog date)

Description: In this segment, ER discusses her opinion of the Arthur Miller play *Death of the Salesman*.

Participants: ER

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. Now that the play the *Death of a Salesman* has won the Pulitzer Prize, I suppose that many people all over the United States are familiar with its themes. It tells the tragic story of an American salesman who is obsessed with the idea of success and who meets with such devastating failure that finally he kills himself. It is really a heart-rending play, and personally, I found it very depressing. It is very well done, of course, as testified to by the fact that its author, Arthur Miller, won the Pulitzer Prize. And it is also beautifully acted by the entire cast, headed by Lee J. Cobb. I should probably apologize for having a different feeling about it from the judges, but I felt that from the medical point of view, it wasn't entirely realistic and I disliked so many things, I didn't think he was typically an American salesman at all. And yet, the people who were with me, one person was in tears and it quite evidently appealed to the emotional side of people, but I don't think I like spending an evening being harrowed. (1:26)

As an antidote to the tragedy and pessimism of the *Death of a Salesman*, I was amused at something I read in *The New Yorker Magazine* not long ago. *The New Yorker* states it has an idea for a play, a play to be called *The Apotheosis of a Salesman* and this play would be based upon the career of Mr. Paul Hoffman. Mr. Lee Cobb, who is performing his present role so ably, would play the part of Mr. Hoffman. Because *The New Yorker* points out in his stage make-up, he looks astoundingly like Mr. Hoffman as portrayed on the cover of *Time Magazine*. "Our play," says *The New Yorker*, "would record the life of a middle-class automobile salesman, a big, bluff, poker-playing fellow, from the time he quit college at seventeen, energetic and full of ambition, to work as a porter in an automobile agency to a weekend in the present when, after forty years of selling things, he comes home grey-haired and exhausted to be with his family." (02:34)

But Paul Hoffman, the hero of *The New Yorker's* play differs slightly from Willy Loman, the hero of *Death of a Salesman*. "He differs only," the magazine continues, "in that he has a handsome wife, six children, two daughters-in-law, several grandchildren, and a ward, all happy and thriving. In that he is a multiple-millionaire, currently on leave from the presidency of the Studebaker Corporation. In that within less than a decade, he's gone from heading the Automotive Safety Foundation to heading United China Relief to heading the Committee for Economic Development to his present eminence as head of the Economic Cooperation Administration for the Marshall Plan, and he is one of the half-dozen most important men in the world. He differs also in that after his weekend at home, he will fly back to see President Truman and check on new ways of dispensing five billion dollars a year and in that, at fifty-seven, he still feels pretty chipper and has much of his career before him." And then *The New Yorker* concludes, "we don't mean to suggest that the play would be better than Arthur Miller's or even as good, but with any kind of luck at all, it would be more cheerful." And of course, the wonderful thing about it is, that the cheerful version of it is a true story. Unfortunately, the unhappy fate of Willy Loman is also a true story in a way, but it is good to look at the other side of the coin and remind ourselves [ER coughs] that if tragedy and bitter failure are possible in this world, so too are fulfillment and rich success. And now, back to my daughter, Anna, in Hollywood.

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