

# Attention Must Be Paid, But For \$800?

A Financial Detective Story About Staging “Death of a Salesman” in  
1949 and 2012

by Peter Wayner

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# Shiv

You never hear the ones that get you, the ones that slip through all your defenses and explode right in the heart of it all. That's how it happened for Scott Rudin on the morning of May 2nd, 2012.

When he went to bed the night before, Rudin was one of Broadway's most respected producers, responsible for some of its most distinctive shows. While audiences loved hit musicals and happy revivals, critics and serious drama lovers craved the way Rudin's productions could engage their minds and hearts. Audiences didn't just walk out of his show whistling; they stayed up late debating the most essential questions of humanity.

When Rudin fell asleep the night before, he could sleep easily because he knew that his team was responsible for the biggest hit ticket of the season on Broadway. Against strong odds, he had brought together a successful revival of "Death of a Salesman," the tough and sad story of economic collapse. He cast Philip Seymour Hoffman as Willie Loman, the salesman who was sliding down the razor blade of life. Despite the difficult ending, despite the unflattering portrayal of American capitalism, Rudin had found an audience in the center of Times Square, in the center of the American economy. The show was sold out for the rest of the limited run and scalpers were said to be selling tickets for 8 to 10 times their face value.

It is not easy to bring happy stories about dancing cats or Disney princesses to Broadway and it's even harder to tell a serious, challenging, and brutally depressing story. Chorus girls and flashy dancing are easier to take after a hard day at the office, where the bosses and bosses's bosses alternate between callous indifference and brutal smackdowns. Who wants to pay money to relive the work day at night?

Rudin, though, had an inkling that there was an audience who wanted to think about the nature of the economy. The world on that morning of May 2, 2012 had its toes over the edge of the cliff again. The momentum was running out for the great burst of consumer capitalism that employed so many people,

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picked up so many restaurant tabs, paid off so many credit card bills and financed so many college educations. The booms ended in 2008 and words like “unemployment” replaced “IPO,” “startup” and “profits” in the headlines. By May 2012, the percentage of people “participating” in the labor economy – the government’s way of saying “employed” – was at the lowest point in 30 years, 64.3%. Pain stretched throughout the population, and one study suggested that more than 50% of people under 25 with a college degree were either unemployed or working in a job that didn’t require a college degree.<sup>1:2</sup>

So Rudin turned to “Death of a Salesman,” a play that Arthur Miller wrote just after World War II. When the play was first produced on Broadway in 1949, America was still struggling to find work for all of the soldiers and sailors coming home to a country where the main industry, armaments, was disappearing. The euphoria captured in Alfred Eisenstaedt’s iconic pictures of the sailor kissing a nurse in Times Square on VJ day was long over. The sailors were struggling to find work in a country that didn’t need sailors any more.

No one in 1949 could know that the boom years of the 50s were right around the corner for America. The weariness of the Great Depression was still in the back of everyone’s mind and the country wondered whether they had fought the great fight just so they could haggle over a few percentage points in contracts.

The play had a special resonance for Rudin. Kermit Bloomgarden, the man who brought the first Broadway production of Miller’s work to the Morosco theater in 1949, was also the man who gave Rudin his first real job in the theater. Rudin was born in 1958 and started as an assistant for Bloomgarden when he was only 16. Bloomgarden was near the end of his career, producing three plays in 1974 (“Equus,” “Ionescopade,” and “The Sea Horse”) and just one more in 1976 (“Poor Murderer”). In many ways, Bloomgarden passed the torch to Rudin.

On the morning of May 2nd, though, not much of this happy history mattered. The *New York Times* decided to run a bitter op-ed piece by Lee Siegel, the cultural critic who, like Miller, wondered whether the Americans deserved what the economy was dishing up.<sup>3</sup>

Siegel took one look at the new production of “Death of a Salesman,” shuddered, and then stuck in the shiv with his words. When Bloomgarden first produced the play in 1949, Siegel noted, tickets could be had for as little as \$1.80. Today, Siegel said, the play had been turned into a “luxury item” with tickets priced as high as \$840. The play had ceased to be middle-class entertainment for people like Willie Loman. It was as if the swells and grandees back at the country club had found a way to invite Willie Loman over for a drink and din-

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ner, just so they could feel good about themselves. Just so they could claim that some of their closest and dearest friends were down on their luck and facing the economic abyss.

“Instead of humbling its audience through the shock of recognition, the play now confers upon the people who can afford to see it a feeling of superiority,” concluded Siegel.

Rudin set out to bring a great American play back to life and to give the public more than dancing cats, and Siegel turned him into an errand boy of the rich, delivering economic oppression by pricing his tickets at \$840. No good deed goes unpunished.

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