

Discovery
Guide

P.L.A.Y.

(PERFORMANCE = LITERATURE + ART + YOU)

STUDENT MATINEE SERIES 2009-2010 SEASON



THE PRICE

WRITTEN BY ARTHUR MILLER DIRECTED BY TIMOTHY BOND



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Cover image:
Scenic designer
Scott Bradley's
scale model for the
Geva production

DEAR EDUCATORS,

I love the big questions – the ones that we all confront throughout the course of our lives, the seemingly unanswerable ones that demand answers all the same. And *The Price* is full of those kinds of questions. It asks questions about identity and profession, ambition and obligation, sacrifice and loyalty. It takes some of the oldest questions – what do I owe to myself? What do I owe others? How much am I willing to compromise? – and forces us to consider them all over again.

Arthur Miller was a fan of the big questions too. His works are full of situations just ripe for exploration and *re*-exploration, full of wonderful *what-ifs* and *what-thens*, perspectives forever shifting and mutating. *The Price* completely fits that bill. When you stop to consider each character's reaction to the mountain of furniture they encounter in the dusty attic and the memories they evoke, you realize that each of them makes a lot of sense, that there is logic and clarity to their viewpoints, that you may very well react the same way given the same set of circumstances. Or maybe you've already been in their shoes. Maybe you've had to endure financial hardship. Maybe you've had to deal with the care of a parent or a strained relationship with a sibling. Maybe you've had to reconcile the dreams of your youth with the realities of your present and the possibilities of your future (and who among us hasn't?)

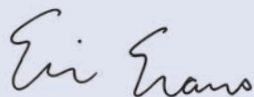
While working on this guide, a line from the recent Broadway production, *Passing Strange*, seemed to lodge itself in my consciousness:

Isn't it a strange thing to realize that your entire life is based on the decisions of a teenager?

It's a notion most likely beginning to occur to some of your students as they begin to contemplate colleges (to go local or out-of-town?), classes (what to choose as a major?), professions (jobs versus careers, security versus ambitions) and a host of other concerns stretched out before them. A notion that we make our decisions the best we can with the information at hand.

We thank you for making the decision to bring your students to see *The Price*. Maybe Arthur Miller can get them started on thinking about some of those big questions that he loved so much.

Sincerely,



Eric Evans
Education Administrator

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Victor
Franz

Esther
Franz

Gregory
Solomon

Walter
Franz

Participation
in this
production
and
supplemental
activities
suggested in
this guide
support the
following
NYS Learning
Standards:
A: 2, 3, 4;
ELA: 1, 2, 3
SS: 1

**“I LOOK AT MY LIFE AND THE WHOLE THING
IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO ME.” – VICTOR**

SYNOPSIS

Which characters base their negotiations on personal feelings and relationships? Who on financial advantage? Who seems to be focused on the future? Who on the past?

Would you trust Solomon? Why or why not?

These characters often talk about their choices or lack of choices.

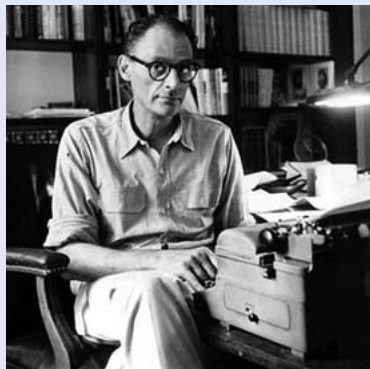
What do you believe is the worst thing that has happened to each character? Was it the result of a choice? Of passivity? With the benefit of hindsight, what choice do you think each would change?

“Forgive and forget” is a common adage: would the advice help any of these characters? Should all hurts be forgiven? Is it wise to forget?

In the attic of a brownstone about to be torn down is “the chaos of ten rooms of furniture.” In 1967 Police Sergeant Victor Franz returns to the top floor of his family home, where he and his father lived following the stock market crash of 1929 which ruined the family’s fortune. With the impending demolition Victor has called a used furniture dealer from the Yellow Pages to buy the collection. His wife, Esther, meets him in the attic; she asks if he has heard from Walter, his estranged brother, but Victor’s calls have not been returned. Esther implores Victor to bargain hard, since the money from the sale might buy him some time to figure out what he wants to do with his life following his retirement.

Gregory Solomon, almost ninety, arrives at last, and although he is daunted by the amount of furniture he agrees to buy the lot. As he studies the pieces, the two men learn a bit about one another, and also about the destroyed man who lived out the remains of his life in the attic. Solomon offers \$1,100, and just as he counts out the bills, Walter enters. Walter claims he doesn’t wish to interfere, but he and Esther second guess the amount Solomon has offered, claiming that a minimum of \$3000 would be reasonable. While Esther is initially disappointed in Victor’s bargaining, she’s encouraged by Walter’s new warmth toward them, and the suggestion that he won’t seek to split the purchase price with Victor. Walter further suggests that if Solomon simply appraises the goods at their highest possible retail value, they can make a donation, he can claim the deduction on his taxes, and the resultant \$12,000 or so will be “found money.”

Victor is hesitant; he can’t understand the overture from a man who wouldn’t communicate when he has tried to get in touch over the years. Walter explains that he was hospitalized after a breakdown, that he’s recovered in many ways, and is ready to make amends. He may even be able to offer Victor a job at his hospital, but Victor is still skeptical. Esther confronts Walter with his failure to give Victor the \$500 he needed to complete his degree years earlier. Walter insists that no one forced Victor to stay with their father; he reveals that their father still had savings, and that it felt wrong to sacrifice their own futures for him. Victor argues the obligation wasn’t financial: supporting their father when everything else was gone was an act of love. Walter believes there was never love in their family, and feeling an impasse, he leaves. Victor completes his transaction with Solomon, and as he and Esther depart, Solomon contemplates the task ahead. He discovers a “laughing record” that Victor was playing earlier, and sits down to laugh. ♦



Arthur Miller in the 1960s

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Arthur Miller was born in New York City on October 17, 1915. He started writing plays at the University of Michigan. His first successful stage venture was *All My Sons* in 1947 and he cemented his reputation as a playwright with *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. He won the Drama Critics Award for both plays and the Pulitzer Prize for *Salesman*. Other plays include *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and *After the Fall* (1964). In addition to being a playwright, he has also written screenplays (*The Misfits*), novels (*Focus*) and an autobiography (*Timebends*). ♦

“YOU WANTED A REAL LIFE. AND THAT’S AN EXPENSIVE THING. IT COSTS.” – WALTER

MILLER AND *THE PRICE*

What are the trademarks of a “well-made play?” Can you identify them in *The Price*? How do you feel these elements enhance or diminish your experience of a play?

If this play were indeed a musical quartet, what instruments would you choose to portray each character and why? Describe the style of the music they would create.

Have you read or seen other artistic responses to the Vietnam war which did not directly take Vietnam as their subject? Do those works have any similarities with this play?

How much time do you spend thinking about your own past or your family’s? Why is it important to you, or not?

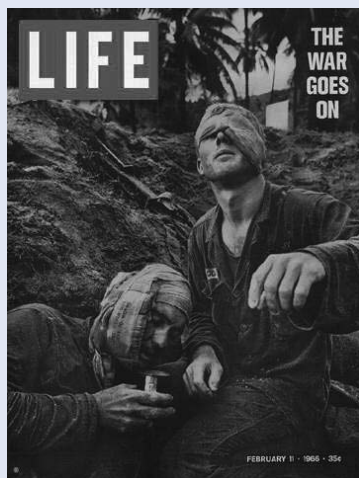
“*The Price* grew out of a need to reconfirm the power of the past, the seedbed of current reality, and the way to possibly reaffirm cause and effect in an insane world.”
– Arthur Miller

In his 1999 *New York Times* article “The Past and Its Power: Why I Wrote *The Price*,” Arthur Miller contends that by 1967, the year of *The Price*’s writing, “plays seemed to exist entirely in the now; characters had either no past or none that could somehow be directing present actions. It was as though the culture had decreed amnesia as the ultimate mark of reality.” Consciously deciding to create a “well-made” play (as more tradition-minded productions were sometimes derisively referred to at the time), Miller purposefully populated the story with characters deeply affected by the past – their own as well as that of their loved ones.



Production photo from Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, an example of the avant-garde theatre to which Miller was responding

This motivation to reconnect theatre-goers with a respect for the past came from two main concerns – the growing influence of the avant-garde in the arts throughout the 1960s and the American military involvement in Vietnam. The new theatre, Miller believed, had “abdicated the role of the artist” by embracing a sense of “absolute naturalism” and choosing to “tape record reality, [showing] glimpses of the surface of life” rather than explore the history and underlying causes of present conditions. By way of contrast, he considered *The Price* to be “the most specific play” he’d ever written, likening its characters to a musical quartet whose language was “composed ... [and] not caught through a keyhole.” Miller argued that avant-garde productions and their often background-free characters would only appeal to “the very safe and very rich,” those living “in a society where nobody’s killing anybody”



Cover of *LIFE* Magazine, February 11, 1966

Coupled with his critical view of the avant-garde was Miller’s fear that as “the dying continued in Vietnam ... [the theatre] risked trivialization by failing to confront the bleeding, at least in a way that could reach most people.” A vocal critic of the war in Vietnam, Miller advanced the notion that the conflict was actually the United States fighting a past informed by a “rigid anti-Communist theology born ... two decades earlier.” Only by pausing to recognize the horrific toll the war had taken on the American population and its psyche could the country extricate itself from the traps of past concerns. The Franz brothers, whose personal histories form the heart of *The Price*, are locked in a similar conflict, burdened by the unforeseen results of long ago decisions and unsure of how to cope with the painful realizations brought about by a confrontation over their shared history. But the past, Miller says, “looked at bravely, can liberate” ♦

“NOT THAT YOU HAD ANY OBLIGATIONS, BUT IF YOU WANT TO HELP SOMEBODY YOU DO IT, IF YOU DON’T YOU DON’T.” – VICTOR

MILLER AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

“The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out.” – Arthur Miller

The American Dream, the notion that with a combination of hard work, tenacity, ingenuity and perhaps a little luck, anyone can reap the rewards of success, is a fixture in many of Arthur Miller’s plays. Whether it is Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, or the Franz brothers in *The Price*, each, according to Miller scholar Steven R. Centola, “embraces the illusion ... of attaining the forever elusive, unquestionably mythic American Dream.” But what happens when the dream does indeed remain elusive? It’s a struggle Miller’s characters confront, one that Miller feels makes the “common man as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.”

If *Death of a Salesman* is the story of a man coming to grips with the illusions of success that have governed his life and *All My Sons* is the tale of a man realizing the effects that his choices regarding prosperity have had on others, then *The Price* takes its place alongside them as the story of two men reconciling the actions of their long-deceased father – who was devastated when his American Dream collapsed – with their own pursuits and dreams. The gap between actuality and aspiration is where so many of Miller’s characters reside:

“Every man has an image of himself which fails in one way or another to correspond with reality. It’s the size of the discrepancy between illusion and reality that matters. The closer a man gets to knowing himself, the less likely he is to trip up on his own illusions.” – Arthur Miller

Miller was also interested in a character’s intentional turning away from the pursuit of the vaunted dream, a refusal “to be swept away and seduced to the values of the society.” He called it “the price of integrity” and we can see some of this exploration in Victor’s apparent disdain for money. Victor earns his living as a police officer, a profession honoring responsibility and deference to authority for the good of others. Miller sees Victor as an embodiment of the “architecture of sacrifice,” the type of person upon which society depends for its sense of security and order.

Walter, conversely, is a financially successful surgeon in a field forever in search of individual brilliance. Walter, Miller contends, is the kind of person, “who invents new procedures because he is not bound by any reverence for what exists ... [the type who] adds something new to the way the world goes ... but [is] hell on their relatives.” Walter, recently divorced and barely in touch with his children, acknowledges as much:

“It all happens so gradually. You start out wanting to be the best, and there’s no question that you do need a certain fanaticism; there’s so much to know and so little time. Until you’ve eliminated everything extraneous – including people.”

It’s only after Walter has seen the downside of the American Dream, the “swamp of success and bankbooks” as he calls it, that he realizes the damage done by his “slow, daily fear [of] ambition,” the late-coming understanding that his fortune was gained at a cost. *The Price* suggests that the American Dream always demands compromise. What, it asks, is the cost of those compromises, and are its rewards worth the sacrifices? ♦

What makes a tragedy? Is this play a tragedy? Does it have tragic elements or characters?

Do you agree that most people feel a gap between the actuality of their lives and their aspirations? How do different people cope when they fall short of their aspirations?

Which, if any, of these characters do you believe truly know themselves? What makes you say so?



Recent photo from current news story

How would you define the American Dream? By your definition, which characters in the play seem to believe in that dream? Which appear to be actively pursuing that dream?

“IT’S NOT THAT YOU CAN’T BELIEVE NOTHING, THAT’S NOT SO HARD – IT’S THAT YOU STILL GOT TO BELIEVE IT. THAT’S HARD. AND IF YOU CAN’T DO THAT, MY FRIEND, YOU’RE A DEAD MAN!” – SOLOMON

THE GREAT DEPRESSION



Children protesting during the Great Depression

Victor, about to turn 50 in this play, would have been only 12 in 1929 when the market crashed, and 19 in 1936, when he asked for money to stay in school. Miller places Walter roughly five years older than Victor. Their father was probably in his early forties at the time of the crash, the married father of these two sons. Solomon, in contrast, tells us he was twenty-four years old when he left Russia (65 years ago) and would have already been 51 at the time of the crash.

Consider how their relative ages and life experience may have influenced these characters' experience of the depression years.

The formal advent of the Great Depression occurred in October 1929, when the New York stock market crashed. United States banks, which had depended heavily on their stock investments, rapidly echoed the financial crisis, and many institutions failed, dragging their depositors along with them. With investment receding, industrial production quickly followed, beginning in the industries that produced capital goods and extending quickly to consumer products fields. Falling production led to falling employment and lower wages, which in turn withdrew still more demand from the economy and led to further hardship. The depression fed on itself, and grew steadily worse, particularly over the first half of the 1930s.

In itself, the Great Depression was not entirely unprecedented. But the intensity of the Great Depression had no precedent in the brief history of industrial societies. Its duration was also unprecedented; in many countries full recovery came only after a decade, and only with the forced production schedules provoked by World War II. The fact that the depression came at the end of a decade that had already seen the effects of a world war only exacerbated the population's skepticism of the government and its ability to care for its citizens.

The Great Depression was more than an economic event, taking a psychological toll as well. It touched countless lives, creating hardship and tension that would be recalled even as the crisis itself eased. The emotional effects of these hardships would linger for decades. Loss of earnings, loss of work, or fears of that loss could devastate people at all social levels – from the nearly quarter of a million homeless teenagers who jumped on railroad cars in search of employment, to the farmers who slaughtered their livestock rather than let them starve. The Great Depression saw the immense popularity of the *Monopoly* board game (allowing people to enjoy imagined wealth), the increased importance of accessories in women's fashion and the invention of “the eviction game,” a scenario where nursery school children would move piles of furniture from one corner of a room to another in imitation of their frequently relocated families. The suicides of ruined investors in New York were paralleled by the vagrants' camps and begging that spread among displaced workers. The statistics were grim: by 1933, for example, nearly 25% of the entire United States workforce was unemployed. Graduating students could not find work, or had to resort to jobs they regarded as insecure or demeaning. Families were disrupted, as men felt emasculated by their inability to provide for their loved ones. Women often found it easier to gain jobs in a low-wage economy than their husbands did – while economically advantageous for the family, it was seen by some as a threat to traditional family roles. For many the hardship was desperately prolonged, with renewed recession around 1937 and with unemployment still averaging ten percent or more in many countries by 1939.

The Great Depression, not unlike the world war that preceded it, was an event that blatantly contradicted the optimistic assumptions of the later 19th century. To many, it challenged the notion that the government was capable of honoring its commitments to its citizenry, a challenge that still exists today. ♦

Article reprinted in part from http://history-world.org/great_depression.htm

“YOU KNOW HOW TERRIFIED HE WAS THAT HE'D NEVER EARN ANYTHING ANYMORE.” – WALTER

THE CURRENT ECONOMY

Whom do you know that has been affected by the recent economic downturn? How so? Are you or your family making different choices based on current conditions?

Are you following the political discussions about how the government should respond? Do you trust the government to help? Do you feel you have enough information to understand the options? What would you like to learn more about?

Look for stories about the economy's impact on individuals. Some examples:

Couples who can't afford divorce
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/30/us/30/divorce.html>

75% of one town working at the same business until it closed
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112493600>

Students protest a 32% undergraduate tuition increase in CA
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/20/education/20tuition.html>

"There is a topical relevancy in this story because of the toppling of the father due to the Great Depression. The seismic shifts that can occur in a family visited by financial devastation is an extremely relatable topic right now in America."

– director Timothy Bond

By virtue of its enormity and scope, the Great Depression is the standard against which all American economic downturns are measured, not only in financial terms but also on the national mood and temperament. The current economic climate is no exception. "The Federal Government," Solomon tells Walter, "is not reliable," a common sentiment found in current editorials, essays, articles and newspaper letters. Consider, for example, this recent posting from the blog for the news channel CNN:

"If you think it's bad now, just wait. If the [government] keeps spending us into financial ruin, the Great Depression will look like a cake walk!"

This post could, at first glance, be viewed as an overstatement since an unemployment rate of less than today's estimated 9%, for example, would have been welcomed news during the Great Depression when the rate held steady at approximately 25% and roughly half of the banks in the country closed. It does, however, give voice to the unease among many Americans suspicious of the government's perceived inability to handle the current economic situation. It also hints at the psychic toll such financial failures exact on individuals and the ways in which those pressures are handled.

SOLOMON: My God. What was the matter with him?

VICTOR: Well, my mother died around the same time. I guess that didn't help. Some men just don't bounce, that's all.

SOLOMON: Listen, I can tell you about bounces. I was busted in 1932; then 1923 they also knocked me out; the panic of 1904, 1898 ... But to lay down like *that* ...

VICTOR: Well, you're different. He believed in it.

SOLOMON: What he believed?

VICTOR: The system, the whole thing. He thought it was his fault, guess.

Arthur Miller often spoke to the emotional weight of economic disruptions, recalling the Depression as "only incidentally a matter of money. Rather, it was a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the façade of American society." It is an emotional weight that is still felt today as we debate the merits of government bailouts of failing corporations (and in some cases, industries) while contending with the repercussions of companies grown so large that their collapse, despite poor performances and questionable business decisions, is considered financially unthinkable. We discuss the morality of giving banks money while families struggle to pay bills, while others face retirement without savings and still others lose their homes. Are these personal catastrophes as "great" as those of the "Great" Depression? ♦



Young girl protesting the current employment climate.

“ – THERE'S ALWAYS A RAT RACE, YOU CAN'T STAY OUT OF IT.” – SOLOMON

www.usinflationcalculator.com

is a handy reference for calculating some of the key monetary figures mentioned in the play.

Walter reveals that at the time Victor and their father were living in deepest poverty, their father had asked Walter to invest \$4000. In 1936 that figure would have represented the equivalent of almost \$62,000 today.

Compare the cost of living now. Would such savings represent poverty, security, or wealth?

Solomon estimates that their dining table was purchased for \$1200-\$1300 in 1921 or 1922: about \$16,000 today.

Why might someone choose to keep such furniture in an attic, while taking food from the garbage and cooking on a hot plate? How might such a change in lifestyle affect him?

What would the \$500 in tuition money that Victor was refused represent today?

If the choice were between loyalty or success, which would you choose for yourself?

WHAT IS THE COST OF LOYALTY?

“The price we pay,” says sound designer Jon Herter, “in so many non-monetary resources is staggering as we age and live.” How we allocate those non-monetary resources – time, energy, effort – is central to the story of *The Price*. Where, the play asks, do we draw a line between what we owe ourselves and what we owe others? It is a line that both Victor and Walter encounter as they decide how to care for a father emotionally and financially destroyed by the Great Depression. Consider the following exchange between them:

WALTER: I told you that I was going to finish my schooling come hell or high water, and I advised you to do the same. In fact, I warned you not to allow him to strangle your life ...

VICTOR: Who the hell was supposed to keep him alive, Walter?

WALTER: Why did anybody have to? He wasn't sick. He was perfectly fit to go to work.

VICTOR: Work? In 1936? With no skill, no money?

WALTER: Then he could have gone on welfare. Who *was* he, some exiled royalty? What did a hundred and fifty million other people do in 1936? He'd have survived, Victor.

VICTOR: ... the icebox was empty and the man was sitting there with his mouth open.

When Walter reveals that their father had a large sum of money saved away and didn't need their financial contributions, he acknowledges that the real reason for their continued support was in recognizing their father's overwhelming fear of once again experiencing poverty. Victor, forced to face what he'd sensed for years, finally admits his real motivation – his desire to give his father, burdened with feelings of betrayal by the government, a sense that there were still things in the world worthy of his belief. “He couldn't believe in anybody any more,” Victor says, “and it was unbearable to me!” But was this loyalty deserved? It is a loyalty, Walter counters, with little basis in the family's history. “What was unbearable,” he says, “is not that it all fell apart, it was that there was never anything here ... there was no love in this house. There was no loyalty. There was nothing here but a straight financial arrangement ... what never existed here cannot be upheld.”

Director Timothy Bond, in his own considerations of the play, contends that there are no proper answers to the questions of responsibility and loyalty raised in *The Price* – each brother is simply acting in accord with his own beliefs. The brothers, Bond proposes, “may be seen as being on opposite sides ... [but] it's not a question of positive or negative, but rather that each carries a price. Responsibility always does – in the accepting and in the shirking.” ♦



Victor (Richard McWilliams) and Walter (Tony DeBruno)
Photo by T. Charles Erickson

“YOU HAD A RESPONSIBILITY HERE AND YOU WALKED ON IT ...” - VICTOR

WHAT ARE MEMORIES WORTH?

“Anyone who has been a father, a son, a brother, a wife, a husband or grown up in a family will understand the family dynamics in this play.”

– director Timothy Bond

As you enter the theatre you’ll see the play’s set, a recreation of an attic filled with furniture and other accumulated items, all stored wherever space can be found. The building is scheduled to be demolished. It is a room that has not been entered in sixteen years, a room, says lighting designer Thomas Hase, that looks “frozen ... as time passes around it.” And into this room enters Solomon, an appraiser charged with assessing the value of the assembled items. It is Solomon’s job to determine the market value of the items, uninfluenced by the memories invoked by loved ones. As Solomon discusses the furniture with Victor, who has requested his services, he cautions Victor that “with used furniture you cannot be emotional.” A businessman must contend with certain realities not always considered by the sellers. Solomon, as he measures a large piece of furniture, explains as much to Victor:

SOLOMON: What does that read?

VICTOR: Forty inches. So?

SOLOMON: My boy, the bedroom doors in a modern apartment house are thirty, thirty-two inches maximum. So you can’t get this in –

VICTOR: What about the old houses?

SOLOMON: All I’m trying to tell you is that my possibilities are smaller!”



Jacobean style chest-of-drawers

One of the most prominent items in the attic is a harp, what Solomon considers “the heart of the deal.” It once belonged to Victor and Walter’s mother and stands as an abandoned emblem of what she claimed was a once-promising musical career. Each brother, however, views the instrument through his own experiences. To Victor it is a memory of a parent whose face he can no longer visualize. Walter considers it a lost opportunity for Victor to continue his education, knowing that it could have been sold at any time in order to pay for his college tuition. Each has assigned it a value outside of its present monetary worth. And it is from this situation which decisions must be made before the building’s imminent destruction.

Victor, Esther and Walter have not considered these items or the monetary value of them in years – it takes an outside source to provide what Solomon refers to as a “modern viewpoint ... because the price of used furniture is nothing but a viewpoint, and if you wouldn’t understand the viewpoint [it] is impossible to understand the price.” Solomon must also navigate the tangled relationship between the brothers who have not seen one another in nearly twenty years. He knows the power of family dynamics and tensions to make people lose perspective and objectivity. “The average family,” he tells Victor, “loves each other like crazy, but the minute the parents die is all of a sudden a question of who is going to get what ... five hundred dollars they’ll pay a lawyer to fight over a bookcase it’s worth fifty cents – because, you see, everybody wants to be number one.” ♦

In this production, the one indication of passing time comes from the skylight at the top of the attic, as the daylight fades. How does the gradual change in light influence your experience of the story?

The harp’s presence on stage becomes a symbol of the deceased mother. What item on stage seems to serve as an emblem of the father? Are there other objects that communicate as symbolic artifacts?

Modern American families divorce, move for work, and relocate away from their hometowns more often than was common in the mid-20th century. Will this change how we preserve and pass down our memories today? How do you believe you will leave memories for your descendants?

Is competition a factor in Victor and Walter’s relationship?

“WE’RE GIVING THIS FURNITURE AWAY BECAUSE NO ONE CAN SAY THE SIMPLEST THINGS.” - ESTHER

IS PROFESSION IDENTITY?

Do appearances matter? What outward signals do you give about how you live your life? Do you want people to notice the way you dress or the things you own? Why or why not?

How will you choose your profession? What factors are within your control? How confident are you that you will find a career that is a good fit? Does the decision frighten you?

How important is your choice of profession relative to other choices in your life? Are other priorities more important to you? Do you think those priorities will change as you grow older?

Do your family's expectations play a role in your decision-making? Whose perspective do you trust, and why?

Above: Costume designer Laurie Churba's renderings for Victor and Esther

Do we judge someone by the profession they choose? What do we understand about their status? Their motivations? Do they hold their position out of duty or desire? Choice or necessity? Consider how Victor describes his decision to become a police officer:

But I had to drop out to feed the old man. And I figured I'd go on the Force temporarily, just to get us through the Depression, then go back to school.

He deferred his true interest – science – for what he considered to be the greater good of his family. Even at the time of his hiring, Victor seemed to understand the compromise he was making, laughing when Esther jokes that “when you opened that box with your first uniform in it ... how we laughed ... if anything happened you said you'd call a cop ... it was like a masquerade.” Costume designer Laurie Churba echoes the sentiment when she says that “Victor's mandatory uniform tells the story of his life” of duty, obligation and sacrifice.

Walter's choice to become a surgeon, conversely, was an early one and one he pursued with determination. He was, he says, motivated by a desire to avoid the poverty of their father and a need to “to pull off the impossible [and] to shame the competition.” Walter's success has afforded him a sense of freedom unknown to Victor, claiming that “for first time, I do medicine, and that's it ... my days belong to *me* now ...” It was a success, he says, that was encouraged and validated by their father, “Why else,” he asks Victor, “would he respect me so and not you?”



Esther, too, grapples with the consequences of her husband's career decisions, having abandoned her own aspirations as a poet to become a housewife and mother. With her son off to college, Esther turns to alcohol and the adoption of stray animals to fill her days despite Victor's encouragement to find a job. She wonders aloud to Victor why “everyone must know your salary” when he tells her that he'll be wearing his uniform instead of a suit for an anticipated night out. “You look distinguished in a suit” she tells him. She compliments Walter on the quality of his coat. Designer Churba says that Esther knows her own outfit is simple but hopes to “dress it up [so] that she might look wealthier than she is ... the simplicity of the suit is a definite indication of her life.” Victor's retirement and the money from the sale matter greatly to Esther – she is desperate for them to reinvent themselves, tired of the roles that she feels have trapped them.

It is only the elderly appraiser Solomon who has found a career which gives him some sense of joy, telling Victor and Esther that the only “beauty to this lousy business, you meet all kinda people.” “What happens to people,” he continues, “is always the main element to me. Because when do they call me? It's either a divorce or somebody died. So it's always a new story. I mean it's the same, but it's different.”

Almost ninety years old, Solomon believes his days of work are behind him. He has sold the bulk of his inventory and is surprised by both Victor's call and the immense load of furniture. But the lure of working again invigorates Solomon, telling Victor as they survey the contents of the room, “the trouble is I love to work ... you forget what kind of life it puts into you ... it's a regular injection.” It is Solomon who acknowledges just how much of each of their identities are connected to their professions, stating simply “I'm a dealer, he's a doctor, and he's a policeman, so what's the good you'll tear him to pieces.” ♦



“BUT IT'S NOT A DREAM – IT'S THAT YOU'VE GOT TO MAKE DECISIONS BEFORE YOU KNOW WHAT'S INVOLVED, BUT YOU'RE STUCK WITH THE RESULTS ANYWAY.” – VICTOR

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**“IT ALWAYS SEEMS TO ME THAT ONE LITTLE STEP MORE AND SOME
CRAZY KIND OF FORGIVENESS WILL COME AND LIFT UP EVERYONE.
WHEN DO YOU STOP BEING SO ... FOOLISH?” – ESTHER**

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