The New York Times

THEATER

The 99% Onstage: Attention Must Be Paid

By BEN BRANTLEY NOV. 3, 2011

WAS that the ghost of Willy Loman I spotted in Zuccotti Park the other day, swapping grievances with the spirits of Joe Hill and Woody Guthrie? Probably not. Willy, the title character of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," went to his grave paying lip service to — and perhaps even still half-believing in — the American dream. Anyway, being part of a public protest would have embarrassed a guy who put his trust in the conquering power of a smile and a shoeshine and who wanted, above all, to be well liked.

But it was hard not to hear the voice of Willy's widow, Linda, among the motley sign carriers in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, as they sounded their disparate watchwords. You remember Linda. She's the one who said of her husband, who seemed to have turned invisible to himself after he lost his job, "Attention must be paid to such a person." And whatever you say about the lack of formal demands and strategies within the viral movement known as Occupy Wall Street, you can't deny that its participants are unified by one overriding desire: They want attention paid to them.

When "Death of a Salesman" returns to Broadway next year, in a new production starring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Willy Loman may emerge as even more a man of our time than he seemed to be of his when the play first opened in 1949. And if the current state of New York theater is any indication, he'll have lots of

company on other stages. Willy, after all, remains the American drama's most poignant example of a man driven to despair when he loses his job and is made — to use a word more in fashion now than then — redu portrays him. Willy out of work is Willy stripped of dignity, weight and even identity.

The feelings of shame and existential unease that were expressed again and again on a recent October night at Joe's Pub, the cabaret in the Public Theater in Manhattan, would surely have been familiar to Willy Loman. It was there that the Civilians, a documentary theater company, were trying out an early version of "Let Me Ascertain You: Occupy Wall Street," a collage assembled from interviews conducted in the preceding weeks with people who had been spending their days (and often nights) in Zuccotti Park.

These people ranged widely in their social and economic backgrounds. Embodied by actors (often the same ones who had interviewed them), they included a former creative director from children's television; a student at a college in Brooklyn; two card-carrying Teamsters; a self-described professional activist from San Francisco; a 64-year-old supporter of the Tea Party; and a lively variety of young people who were collectively described as "urchins," which is probably preferable to "homeless," which most of them were.

Yet however much they may have shrunk initially from the Civilians' microphones and notepads, the versions of them that showed up in Joe's Pub seemed to expand and blossom as they responded to questions. As they should have. Wasn't the reason they had gathered in the park — they, the proud and shamed representatives of the neglected 99 percent of the American economy — to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed?

Some of these people did talk about their status as symbols of a vast majority of this country's population. But none who spoke pretended to be selfless, by which I mean someone without a self. These were definitely individuals with lives as distinct and different as fingerprints. And here they were, on a stage in a spotlight — well not them, but actors playing them, who gave official form and maybe a glimmer of star shine to their individuality. A couple of them, by the way, when asked what they

dreamed of for their futures, admitted that what they really wanted to be were celebrities.

When the dialectic of the haves and the have-nots becomes that of the seen and the unseen, it translates naturally to live theater, which is all about commanding and competing for attention. Plays in New York haven't been noted for their sweeping social consciousness in recent years (or even decades). But in the past couple of seasons the theater has seemed to remember the inherent dramatic value within the dialogue, or lack thereof, between classes.

David Lindsay-Abaire's excellent "Good People," which opened on Broadway last winter for a limited run, is a love story manqué between a man (Tate Donovan) who has escaped the poverty of South Boston and his former girlfriend (Frances McDormand), who is still a prisoner of it and — like Willy Loman — suddenly out of a job. She has been aware of his existence as a successful doctor. (She's seen his picture in the papers.) But he has managed to forget hers altogether, or pretended to, anyway. And when their lives collide, it's only for a fractious instant before they retreat again to their separate sides of the economic divide. She is an inconvenient memory for him and likely to be erased as much and as quickly as possible.

Only a maid, imported from the urban projects, is on hand to represent the working class in the affluent Connecticut home portrayed in Adam Rapp's "Dreams of Flying Dreams of Falling," which ended its Off Broadway run last week. But this go-for-broke satire — brazenly descended from Edward Albee's surreal and unforgiving family-portrait plays — is clouded with a sense of revolution waiting in the wings (or the basement).

As characters at a dinner party swap chit-chat laden with status symbols and price tags, the weather, we learn, has turned apocalyptic, with a sky that seems poised to fall. And did I mention that one of the main characters is a disgraced Wall Street hotshot who has brought his clients to ruin? A young woman at the dinner table ominously chants what might be his epitaph: "All the money's funny, and the sunny days aren't so sunny."

A similar weather report might be made of Terence Rattigan's "Man and Boy," which has been revived by the Roundabout Theater Company. This 1963 drama

centers on Gregor Antonescu, a charismatic businessman of the 1930s, inspired by the notorious tycoon Ivar Kreuger and played (brilliantly) by Frank Langella. Gregor's financial improprieties are about to cause both the collapse of his empire and, it would appear, the fortunes of many of his clients. (Perhaps it's worth noting here that the protagonist of "Chinglish," David Henry Hwang's play about an American businessman in China, is a casualty of the Enron scandal.)

As Gregor tries to stave off financial ruin, Mr. Langella emphasizes the incredible shortsightedness and narcissism that accompanies his character's genius. His only concern is winning what he sees as a great game — for its own sake and his own glory. And even his own long-estranged (and attention-starved) son, in whose shabby New York apartment Gregor seeks refuge, is merely a pawn in that game.

The personal consequences to others of his recklessness don't exist. Oblivious and terminally self-centered, Mr. Langella's charming, destructive Gregor might be the very model of the reckless financier as envisioned by the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Another myopic financial genius is the subject of a one-man show by Mike Daisey currently at the Public Theater. It is called "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," and yes, it is about the recently deceased founder of Apple. Mr. Daisey, a longtime fan and user of Mr. Jobs's products, is fascinated by the intelligence — and pure force of will and tunnel vision — that it took to develop them.

But in addition to charting the rise and rise of Mr. Jobs, Mr. Daisey chronicles his own journey to a Chinese factory town where many Apple products are made. And his monologue unfolds as portraits in counterpoint of the famous Mr. Jobs and of the unknown workers who manufacture his inventions under conditions that often cripple their bodies.

Mr. Daisey interviewed these Chinese workers himself (with a translator). He was surprised to discover how much they wanted to talk to him and how delighted they were by the prospect of an artist using his voice to give an international microphone to theirs. In other words, they were pleased that, finally, attention was being paid.

A version of this article appears in print on November 6, 2011, on Page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The 99% Onstage: Attention Must Be Paid.
