The summer of 1936 was the hottest ever on record, and during those sweltering days and nights a small group of playwrights and dramatic literary agents worked secretly to form a new company, intended to inject much-needed competition into the monopolized world of theatrical licensing.

This unique coalition of playwrights and literary agents hammered out an agreement which was intended to be the basis for a new company, a company which would, at its core, be in service to the playwright. Thus, Dramatists Play Service was born.

Nearly every prominent playwright of the era entrusted the Play Service with his or her plays, handing their plays over to the fledgling organization for no advance payments. George Abbott, Maxwell Anderson, Rachel Crothers, Russel Crouse, Edna Ferber, Moss Hart, Lillian Hellman, DuBose Heyward, George S. Kaufman, Clifford Odets, and Eugene O'Neill are just some of the legendary names who helped set DPS on its way.

Throughout its history the Play Service continued to be uniquely positioned as a company that, foremost, served playwrights and bolstered the industry’s agents — and the agents, of course, are driven by their clients, the playwrights. Today, DPS’s Board of Directors consists of four writers (Donald Margulies, Lynn Nottage, Polly Pen, and John Patrick Shanley) and four agents (Joyce Ketay, Mary Harden, Jonathan Lomma, and Patrick Herold).

The cooperation which was demonstrated by those visionaries back in 1936 — yes, I think it’s appropriate to call them that — is something which I think all of us in the theatrical community can aspire to today. Theatre has always been a cooperative venture, on both the creative side and the business side. If the playwright, director, designers, and actors don’t see eye to eye, you’re going to have a disaster on opening night. If the agent can’t make a deal with the producer, the show’s not going to go on.

When I was a high school student in Alexandria, Virginia, and dreaming of a life in the theatre in New York, I had a teacher who took pity on me and got me plays that I couldn’t find in the library. He ordered the plays from DPS. I remember the excitement of receiving those distinctive Acting Editions. That excitement of receiving a new Acting Edition is something I know still happens all over the country, and the world. People will always be hungry to see and read plays, and to write them, direct them, and perform them. It’s humbling and thrilling to me to know that I’m now part of an organization which exists to serve that need — and that was indeed created specifically to nurture the art of playwriting.

Peter Hagan, President

A version of this article appeared in The Dramatist, the official journal of the Dramatists Guild of America.
‘Tis the season of Arthur Miller. Fall of 2015 marked the hundredth-year anniversary of his birth (and is the decade anniversary of his death); January 22nd, 2016 was the 60th anniversary of the premiere of The Crucible; the 2015–2016 Broadway season mounts two of his plays, A View from the Bridge and The Crucible, both directed by Belgian director-auteur Ivo van Hove; Signature Theatre revived Miller’s Incident at Vichy; and articles expounding the playwright’s place in the canon have appeared in the arts journal mainstays.
dramatist, Arthur Miller mines individual velleity for its root in social forces. He directs light into the shadowed cave of the economic ideologies, the jurisprudence, and the classist/racial hierarchies that affect each of us on a daily basis, and whose destructive effects have shaped modernity. For Miller, examining these forces was not a political position but the most human perspective possible.

His protagonists are conflicted men, to be sure: often from these men and their internal turmoil springs the chaos that drives the drama, that wrecks their worlds. John Proctor sets Abigail’s terrorizing in motion by promising her something he knows he will not give. Joe Keller in All My Sons had several opportunities to preempt tragedy and in each moment chose to remain silent for his own (financial) protection. Internal struggle against external circumstance is the basic construction of great tragedy; unlike in Greek drama, however, or Shakespeare, these characters’ internal struggle is not Miller’s interest. For Miller, the conflict is utterly false: These characters have allowed a corrupted society to shape their worldview, and therefore their deontology, however emotionally and materially damming, is merely the corruption being resisted by their conscience — or, by their humanity. Society’s casual disregard for the individual has created complacent, and complicit, men, who appear to function properly in their communities, and indeed believe in their own rightness of abilities and social standing. But such functioning, Miller shows us, does not mean they are successful. To function well in a fundamentally unjust social order is to be blind to injustice. The great tragedy of Willy Loman is that he will not and cannot see the dissolution of his own functioning, put upon him by the socioeconomic structure to which he is no longer a productive (money-earning) laborer.

Positioned against the protagonist’s ambivalence is another character, a secondary player, who observes brutality unleashed and cuts the righteous swath through it. This character bears witness in the background, watching his comrades or loved ones stagger under the socio-political forces. These characters, too, are trapped by the dehumanizing system, but they recognize such a system is created by men. They understand the damage is not divine but mortal, oppression of men by other men. It is not, in other words, out of anyone’s hands. It has been made by human hands and must be resisted by human hands, if only by their own. And when, for the protagonist and the audience alike, there is no more time for conflicted reflection, no more space for attempts at individual maneuvering or mobility, when what has been done can’t be undone and has, in its doing, destroyed lives, this character ascends to mete out whatever justice is left to be salvaged from the maelstrom. One thinks of Marco in A View from the Bridge, himself and his family the victims of Eddie’s last desperate play to keep Catherine from marrying Rodolpho: “All the law is not in demand to be revered; sexual attraction is his perversity, not Catherine’s. Abigail is desiring, loving, curious, rebellious, cunning; Goody Proctor is both pious and jealous. Maggie is flighty and silly, yet knows precisely what the world, and Quentin, is trying to beat her into being. In short, these women are real women, trapped in a world not of their making that they nonetheless bear the emotional brunt of, a world of men—children playing out their inchoate desires and living by convoluted ideas of truth, success, happiness, justice.

In a later-life interview, Arthur Miller recounts attending the unveiling ceremony of a monument to those hanged as witches in Salem. Miller recalls that at the event’s press conference, “[there] were all the big newspapers and wire services, and I realized in talking to them, they kept referring to [the deceased] as ‘witches.’ The idea being that you shouldn’t hang witches, you shouldn’t kill witches … And I said, ‘Hey, wait a minute. These people weren’t witches.’ There was a dead silence came, I said, ‘These were innocent political victims of a manufactured holocaust …’

HE DIRECTS LIGHT into the shadowed cave of the economic ideologies, the jurisprudence, and the classist/racial hierarchies that affect each of us on a daily basis.

A View from the Bridge
by Arthur Miller

So you see, this is not a phenomenon from 1692, or 1952 … It is right now.”

As across America the discourse of what kind of society we are and how to best continue our own becoming escalates beyond cacophonous chaos into calamity (and, perhaps, insanity), the incisiveness of Miller’s political, moral compass is an imperative antidote. His plays inform us all how to best be an American citizen: to demand, even as our own bodies are crushed with the pressure of resisting injustice, more weight.
The Anniversary Collection

This year, Dramatists Play Service celebrates its 80th Anniversary!

To mark the occasion, we’ll be offering a special Anniversary Collection: A limited edition of definitive titles from each decade in our company’s history, with introductions by prominent theater professionals written just for this collection!

1936–1946 ★ YOU CAN’T TAKE IT WITH YOU by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman
1946–1956 ★ THE CRUCIBLE by Arthur Miller
1956–1966 ★ CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF by Tennessee Williams
1976–1986 ★ CRIMES OF THE HEART by Beth Henley
1996–2006 ★ INTIMATE APPAREL by Lynn Nottage
2006–2016 ★ ALMOST, MAINE by John Cariani