

THE THEME OF PAST

The distant past is not as innocent as, in memory, he would wish it to be. It represents betrayal, for his father had deserted the boys, as his brother, Ben, had deserted Willy, going in search first of his father and then of success at any price. Betrayal is thus as much part of his inheritance as is his drive for success, his belief in salesmanship as a kind of frontier adventure whose virtues should be passed on to his sons. In the notebook that Miller kept while writing the play, he saw Willy as waiting for his father's return, living a temporary life until the time when meaning would arrive along with the person who abandoned him, as Vladimir and Estragon would await the arrival of Godot. That idea is no longer explicit in the text, but the notion of Willy leading a temporary life is. Meaning is deferred until some indefinite future. Meanwhile he is a salesman, traveling but never arriving. When the stage designer Jo Mielziner received the script, in September 1948, it called for three bare platforms and the minimum of furniture. The original stage direction at the beginning of the play spoke of a travel spot which would light "a small area stage left. The Salesman is revealed. He takes out his keys and opens an invisible door." (385) It said of Willy Loman's house, that "it had once been surrounded by open country, but it was now hemmed in with apartment houses. Trees that used to shade the house against the open sky and hot summer sun now were for the most part dead or dying."³ Mielziner's job was to realize this in practical terms, but it is already clear from Miller's description that the set is offered as a metaphor, a visual marker of social and psychological change. It is not only the house that has lost its protection, witnessed the closing down of space, not only the trees that are withering away with the passage of time. In Mielziner's hands the house itself became the key. What was needed was a solution,

in terms of lighting and design, to the problem of a play that presented time as fluid. The solution fed back into the play, since the elimination of the need for scene changes (an achievement of Mielziner's design), or even breaks between scenes, meant that Miller could rewrite some sections. As a result, rehearsals were delayed, out of town bookings canceled, and the opening moved on, but the play now flowed with the speed of Willy's mind, as Miller had wished, past and present coexisting without the blackouts he had presumed would be required. Mielziner solved one problem—that of Biff and Happy's near instantaneous move from upstairs bedroom in the present to backyard in the past—by building an elevator and using an element of theater trickery: “the heads of the beds in the attic room were to face the audience; the pillows, in full view since there were to be no solid headboards, would be made of papier-mâché. A depression in each pillow would permit the heads of the boys to be concealed from the audience and they would lie under the blankets that had been stiffened to stay in place. We could then lower them and still retain the illusion of their being in bed.” (Mielziner, 33)