

THE THEME OF PAST.

Death of a Salesman differs radically from his more traditionally constructed first Broadway success, *All My Sons*, while still focusing on father-son relationships. It is technically innovative, with its nearly instantaneous time shifts. It is also lyrical, as Miller allows Willy's dreams to shape themselves into broken arias. And whereas the earlier work had echoes of Ibsen, this play was generated out of its own necessities as Miller discovered a form that precisely echoed its social and psychological concerns. In 1948, Miller, fresh from the achievement of *All My Sons*, built himself a shed on land he had bought in Connecticut. It took him six weeks. He then sat down to write *Death of a Salesman*. He completed the first half in a single night and the whole work in a further six weeks. He began the play knowing only the first two lines and the fact that it would end with a death, the death of the man who became Willy Loman and whose last name came not from any desire to link his fate with that of the common man, but from Miller's memory of that name being called out in a scene from the film *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*: "What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come." (179) The name was fine with the producers; the title was not. They were convinced that the word "death" would keep audiences away. And, indeed, Miller himself considered other titles, including *The Inside of His Head* and *A Period of Grace*, the latter a reference to the practice of insurance companies that allow a policy to stay active beyond its effective termination date, as Willy had lived on beyond the death of his hopes. But the title remained, and far from audiences staying away they sustained it for 742 performances. *Death of a Salesman* begins with the sound of a flute (and there were some twenty-two minutes of music in the original production),

a sound which takes Willy back to his childhood when he had traveled with his father and brother in a wagon. His father made and sold flutes. He was, in other words, a salesman, though one who, unlike Willy, made what he sold. It is a tainted memory, however