

THE GENERATIONAL GAP.

The collapsing of the gap between youthful hope and present bewilderment, which this stage illusion made possible, generates precisely the irony of which Willy is vaguely aware but which he is powerless to address, as it underscores the moral logic implicit in the connection between cause and effect as past actions are brought into immediate juxtaposition with present fact. Other designers and directors have found different solutions, as they have to Mielziner's use of back-lit unbleached muslin, on which the surrounding tenement buildings were painted and which could therefore be made to appear and disappear at will, and his use of projection units which could surround the Loman house with trees whose spring leaves would stand as a reminder of the springtime of Willy's life, at least as recalled by a man determined to romanticize a past when, he likes to believe, all was well with the world. Fran Thompson, for example, designer of London's National Theatre production in 1996, chose to create an open space with a tree at center stage, but a tree whose trunk had been sawn through, leaving a section missing, the tree being no more literal and no less substantial than Willy's memories. With comparatively little in the way of an unfolding narrative (its conclusion is, in its essence, known from the beginning), *Death of a Salesman* becomes concerned with relationships. As Miller has said, he "wanted plenty of space in the play for people to confront each other with their feelings, rather than for people to advance the plot."⁴ This led to the open form of a play in which the stage operates in part as a field of distorted memories. In the 1996 National Theatre production, all characters remained onstage throughout, being animated when they moved into the forefront of Willy's troubled mind, or swung into view on a turntable. The space, in other words, was literal and charged with a

kinetic energy. Elia Kazan, the play's first director, observed that "The play takes place in an Arena of people watching the events, sometimes internal and invisible, other times external and visible and sometimes both." 5 The National Theatre production sought an expression for this conviction, finding, thereby, a correlative for that sense of a "dream" which Miller had also specified in his stage directions. It is the essence of a dream that space and time are plastic and so they are here. Past and present interact, generating meaning rather as a metaphor strikes sparks by bringing together discrete ideas. The jump from reconstructed past to anxious present serves to underscore the extent to which hopes have been frustrated and ambitions blunted. The resulting gap breeds irony, regret, guilt, disillusionment. In part Willy taunts himself by invoking an idyllic past, in which he had the respect of his sons, who were themselves carried forward by the promise of success, or by recalling betrayals which he believes destroyed that respect and blighted that promise.