

THE END RESULT

If Willy is not a pure victim, then neither is his wife, Linda. The critic Rhoda Koenig objects to Miller's treatment of women, "of whom he knows two types. One is the wicked slut. . . . The other . . . is a combination of good waitress and a slipper-bearing retriever." Linda, in particular, is "a dumb and useful doormat."⁹ It would be difficult to imagine a comment wider of the mark. As Miller is apt to remind actresses in rehearsal, Linda is tough. She is a fighter. Willy is prone to bully her, cut off her sentences, reconstruct her in memory to serve present purposes, but this is a woman who has sustained the family when Willy has allowed fantasy to replace truth, who has lived with the knowledge of his suicidal intent, who sees through her sons' bluster and demands their support. In part a product of Willy's disordered mind, in part autonomous, Linda defines herself through him because she inhabits a world which offers her little but a supporting role; she is a committed observer incapable, finally, of arresting his march toward oblivion, but determined to grant him the dignity which he has conspired in surrendering. That she fails to understand the true nature and depth of his illusions or to acknowledge the extent of her own implication in his human failings is a sign that she, too, is flawed, baffled by the conflicting demands of a society which speaks of spiritual satisfaction but celebrates the material. Despite her practical common sense she, too, is persuaded that life begins when all debts are paid. It is she who uses the word "free" at the end of a play in which most of the central characters have surrendered their freedom. Linda's strength—her love and her determination—is not enough, finally, to hold Willy back from the grave. Yet this does not make her a "useful doormat," but a victim of Willy's desperate egotism and of a society which sees his restless search as fully

justified and her tensile devotion and love as an irrelevance in the grand scheme of national enterprise. For Mary McCarthy, always suspicious of American playwrights, a disturbing aspect of *Death of a Salesman* was that Linda and Willy Loman seemed to be Jewish, to judge by their speech cadences, but that no mention was made of this in the text. “He could not be Jewish because he had to be ‘America.’ . . . [meanwhile the] mother’s voice [is] raised in the old Jewish rhythms. . . . ‘Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person.’ . . . (‘Attention must be paid’ is not a normal American locution; nor is ‘finally,’ placed where it is; nor is ‘such a person,’ used as she uses it.)”¹⁰ Forty years later Rhoda Koenig objected that “although the characters are never identified as Jewish, their speech patterns constantly proclaim them to be so. Willy answers a question with another question; his wife reverses normal sentence structure (‘To fix the hot water it cost \$97.50’).” She adds, somewhat curiously, that “as a result, Jews can enjoyably weep buckets of empathy without worrying that Gentile spectators will consider Willy’s money-grubbing a specifically Jewish failing.” Speaking on behalf of what she calls “my people,” by which she seems to mean Americans in general and New York Jews in particular, she associates money-grubbing with Jews and identifies a characteristic of Willy Loman that is invisible in the play since it is not money he pursues but success. Indeed, Miller has said that “built into him is—distrust, even contempt, for relationships based only on money.” (Beijing 135) Insisting that Miller’s “coded ethnicity” was a product of the more anti-Semitic climate of the 1940s and ’50s, she is seemingly unaware that in 1945 Miller had published a highly successful novel, *Focus*, which directly and powerfully addressed the subject of American anti-Semitism. In other words, when he wished to create Jewish characters, he did and without hesitation, and at precisely the moment she supposed he was least willing to do so. Ironically, a road

production of the play, which opened in Boston starring Mary McCarthy's brother, Kevin, and a number of other Irish-American actors, was hailed as an Irish play. The fact is that Miller was not concerned with writing an ethnically specific play, while the speech patterns noted by McCarthy and Koenig were an expression of his desire to avoid naturalistic dialogue. Indeed he wrote part of the play first in verse, as he was to do with *The Crucible*, in an effort to create a lyrical language which would draw attention to itself. He wished, he explained, not to write in a Jewish idiom, or even a naturalistic prose, but "to lift the experience into emergency speech of an unashamedly open kind rather than to proceed by the crabbed dramatic hints and pretexts of the 'natural.'" (182) Over the years Miller has offered a number of intriguing interpretations of his own play. It is about "the paradoxes of being alive in a technological civilization." (*Theater Essays*, 419) It is "a story about violence within the family," about "the suppression of the individual by placing him below the imperious needs of . . . society." (*Theater Essays*, 420) It is "a play about a man who kills himself because he isn't liked." (*Conversations*, 17) It expresses "all those feelings of a society falling to pieces which I had" (*Theater Essays*, 423), feelings which, to him, are one of the reasons for the play's continuing popularity. But the observation which goes most directly to the heart of the play is contained in a comment made in relation to the production that he directed in China in 1983: "Death of a Salesman, really, is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America." (*Beijing*, 49) Turn to the notebooks that he kept when writing the play, and you find the extent to which the relationship between Willy and his son is central. They wrestle each other for their existence. Biff is Willy's ace in the hole, his last desperate throw, the proof that he was right, after all, that tomorrow things will change for the better and thus

offer a retrospective grace to the past. Willy, meanwhile, is Biff's flawed model, the man who seemed to sanction his hunger for success and popularity, a hunger suddenly stilled by a moment of revelation. Over the years, neither has been able to let go of the other because to do so would be to let go of a dream which, however tainted, still has the glitter of possibility, except that now Biff has begun to understand that there is something wrong, something profoundly inadequate about a vision so at odds with his instincts. He returns to resolve his conflict with his father, to announce that he has finally broken with the false values offered to him as his inheritance. Two people are fighting for survival, in the sense of sustaining a sense of themselves. Willy desperately needs Biff to embrace him and his dream; Biff desperately needs to cut the link between himself and Willy. There can be only one winner and whoever wins will also have lost. As Miller explained to the actor playing the role of Biff in the Beijing production, "your love for him binds you; but you want it to free you to be your own man." Willy, however, is unable to offer such grace because "he would have to turn away from his own values." (Beijing, 79) Once returned, though, Biff is enrolled in the conspiracy to save Willy's life. The question which confronts him now is whether that life will be saved by making Willy confront the reality of his life or by substantiating his illusions. To do the latter, however, would be to work against his own needs. The price of saving Willy may thus, potentially, be the loss of his own freedom and autonomy. Meanwhile the tension underlying this central conflict derives from the fact that, as Miller has said, "the story of *Salesman* is absurdly simple! It is about a salesman and it's his last day on the earth." (Theater Essays, 423) Miller may, in his own words, be "a confirmed and deliberate radical" (Conversations, 17), but *Death of a Salesman* is not an attack on American values. It is, however, an exploration of the betrayal of those

values and the cost of this in human terms. Willy Loman's American dream is drained of transcendence. It is a faith in the supremacy of the material over the spiritual. There is, though, another side to Willy, a side represented by the sense of insufficiency which sends him searching through his memories, hunting for the origin of failure, looking for expiation. It is a side, too, represented by his son Biff, who has inherited this aspect of his sensibility, as Happy has inherited the other. Biff is drawn to nature, to working with his hands. He has a sense of poetry, an awareness that life means more than the dollars he earns. Willy has that too. The problem is that he thinks it is irrelevant to the imperatives of his society and hence of his life, which, to him, derives its meaning from that society. Next door, however, in the form of Charley and Bernard, is another version of the dream, a version turning not on self delusion and an amoral drive for success, but hard work and charity. What Miller attacks, then, is not the American dream of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, but the dream as interpreted and pursued by those for whom ambition replaces human need, and for whom the trinkets of what Miller called the "new American Empire in the making" were taken as tokens of true value. When, on the play's opening night, a woman called Death of a Salesman a "time bomb under American capitalism," Miller's response was to hope that it was, "or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last." (184) The play, of course, goes beyond such particularities. If it did not it would not be played as often as it is around the world. At the same time it has a distinctly American accent and places at its heart a distinctly American figure—the salesman. In choosing a salesman for his central character Miller was identifying an icon of his society seized on equally by other writers before and since, not least

because a salesman always trades in hope, a brighter future. In *The Gilded Age* Mark Twain sees the salesman as a trickster, literally selling America to the gullible. Sinclair Lewis chose a car salesman as the key to his satire of American values, as, decades later, John Updike was to do in his *Rabbit Angstrom* books. The central figure in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* is a salesman, as is Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Rubin Flood in William Inge's *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. David Mamet's *Glengarry, Glen Ross* once again featured real estate salesmen, the symbolism of which is obvious. But what did Hickey sell, in *The Iceman Cometh*? He sold the same thing as Willy Loman, a dream of tomorrow, a world transformed, only to discover that meaning resides somewhere closer to home. Willy's real creative energy goes into work on his house ("He was a happy man with a batch of cement"). But that is not something he can sell. What, then, does he sell? There were those who thought that a vital question, including Mary McCarthy and Rhoda Koenig (for whom his failure to offer this answer was a certain sign of the play's insignificance). But as Miller himself replied, he sells what a salesman always has to sell, himself. As Charley insists, "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell." As a salesman he has got to get by on a smile and a shoeshine. He has to charm. He is a performer, a confidence man who must never lack confidence. His error is to confuse the role he plays with the person he wishes to be. The irony is that he, a salesman, has bought the pitch made to him by his society. He believes that advertisements tell the truth and is baffled when reality fails to match their claims. He believes the promises that America made to itself—that in this greatest country on earth success is an inevitability. Willy Loman is a man who never finds out who he is. He believes that the image he sees reflected in the eyes of those before whom he performs is real. As a salesman he

stages a performance for buyers, for his sons, for the father who deserted him, the brother he admired. Gradually, he loses his audience. First the buyers, then his son, then his boss. He walks onto the stage no longer confident he can perform the role which he believes is synonymous with his self, no longer sure that anyone will care. *Death of a Salesman*, Miller has said, is a play with “more pity and less judgment” than *All My Sons*. There is no crime and hence no ultimate culpability (beyond guilt for sexual betrayal), only a baffled man and his sons trying to find their way through a world of images—dazzling dreams and fantasies—in the knowledge that they have failed by the standards they have chosen to believe are fundamental. Willy has, as Biff alone understands, all the wrong dreams but, as Charley observes, they go with the territory. They are the dreams of a salesman reaching for the clouds, smiling desperately in the hope that people will smile back. He is “kind of temporary” because he has placed his faith in the future while being haunted by the past. Needing love and respect he is blind to those who offer it, dedicated as he is to the eternal American quest of a transformed tomorrow. What else can he do, then, but climb back into his car and drive off to a death which at last will bring the reward he has chased so determinedly, a reward which will expiate his sense of guilt, justify his life, and hand on to another generation the burden of belief which has corroded his soul but to which he has clung until the end. When a film version was made, Columbia Pictures insisted (until a threatened lawsuit persuaded them otherwise) on releasing it with a short film stressing the wonderful lifestyle and social utility of the salesman. They might be said to have missed the point somewhat. However, in one respect they recognized the force of the salesman as a potent image of the society they evidently wished to defend. He sells hope. And to do that he must first sell himself. However, the success of the play throughout the world, over a period of

nearly fifty years, shows that if Willy's is an American dream, it is also a dream shared by all those who are aware of the gap between what they might have been and what they are, who need to believe that their children will reach out for a prize that eluded them, and who feel that the demands of reality are too peremptory and relentless to be sustained without hope of a transformed tomorrow.