**FIG.1** Miller had originally envisioned the action all taking place inside a giant head, reflecting his working title for the play: *The Inside of His Head*. Luckily the director, Elia Kazan, and designer, Jo Mielziner, talked him out of this! Kazan’s direction and insight, coupled with Mielziner’s original set and lighting design were big contributors to the play’s initial success. **FIG. 2** As Brenda Murphy explains, the designs “combined translucent scenery, expert lighting effect, and sets that went, as the eye travelled upward, from drab realistic interiors to light, delicate frameworks that were mere suggestions of buildings” which she terms “subjective realism,” an excellent description of what Miller was trying to achieve; creating something midway between the real and the purely subjective (usually the realm of expressionism).

Miller wanted a set that would convey aspects of both the claustrophobic present and the idealized past within the same space, and Mielziner obliged with an inventive use of scrims (essentially a sheer curtain over the front of stage on which light could be projected) and other lighting techniques, in a design that would also allow all the scenes to be played out with only minimal stage management to keep it flowing. **FIG. 3** At times he would screen images of the surrounding looming apartments closing in on the Lomans to convey a sense of the hostile environment they navigate, but these could be changed to dappled light through healthy green trees as if through the power of Willy’s restorative memory **FIG.4** Mielziner saw this lighting change as “liberating the house from the oppression of the surrounding structures and giving the stage a feeling of the free outdoors.” Alex North provided music that added another layer of symbolism—with an initial simple refrain on a flute to convey both Willy’s dream of a more pastoral life and the distant memory of his peddler father who had made and sold flutes for a living. Linda had a gentle lullaby at the close of Act one to calm her husband to sleep (the tune echoed in a jazz version to introduce the Woman Willy has been seeing in Boston), and another brighter tune introduced Biff and Happy about to appear as young boys.

Against these ethereal sounds, backdrops, and scrims (that are used to help convey what is happening in Willy’s mental space), to ground the play and force home its reality, the Lomans’ living space was shown to be ultra real—even down to giving Linda an actual working stove on which she can cook the breakfast, and including other well-worn household items. Two iconic objects were included at Miller’s stipulation: Biff’s football trophy in his parent’s bedroom, and a fridge (a careful reproduction of a typical model from the 1929 Sears & Roebuck catalog); two items that ambivalently represent Willy’s early hope for achievement; each now undercut by disappointment and breakdown. Only three chairs are set around the table—perhaps to ensure no-one sits with their back to the audience—but also to carry a subtle reminder that only three people in this family truly count! (one could argue the odd one out being either Happy or Linda).

While they had to remove eleven seats out of the front row to accommodate for the extra space, the extended forestage was essential to allow for breakout space to play the scenes beyond the Loman’s house (so the house could remain standing throughout—a constant reminder of Willy’s sole real achievement—as Linda explains in the requiem, they have finally paid off their mortgage). One scene flows into another as walls are essentially transparent and a table does duty as the family eating space, an office desk, or to evoke a restaurant scene. There was some trouble working out how to get the two sons (Biff and Happy) quickly down from the bedroom **FIG. 5** so that they could swiftly appear in changed outfits on the forestage as their younger selves. An actual elevator was installed in the back to facilitate this (and Miller expanded Willy’s monologue about simonizing the car).

Kazan persuaded Miller to accept the rather hefty actor Lee J. Cobb as Willy Loman, even though Miller had written the part for a small man (like his Uncle Manny on whom he’d based the part). They had to change a couple of lines, such as one where Willy jokes about being called a shrimp, to being called a walrus, but Cobb made Willy his own and it would not be for a couple of decades that anyone slight would play the role. His initial performance won him rave reviews; Brooks Atkinson describing his rendition as “heroic.” **FIG. 6** In his need for support, Cobb played Willy as being almost aggressively physical with other people, constantly grabbing and slapping—gruffly assertive in his desperation to be loved. Here he wraps his arms around Biff to try and win back his regard.

Mildred Dunnock’s Linda was played as the ultimate enabler in her clearly obsessive regard of her husband; continuously nurturing and totally loyal. **FIG 7** While she is sweeter in Willy’s guilt-driven memories, in real time she can be tough (as shown with her sons), but she is dedicated throughout to Willy, and profoundly worried. She tends to his coat in his absence, caring for it as she does him.

Several reviewers saw Biff, played with initial uncertainty but growing cool by Arthur Kennedy, seem to grow stronger as his father weakens, and offering the tragic heart of the play in his repudiation of the cult of success. **FIG. 8**. He is the real hero here who finally perceives the problem (unlike Willy who continues in his fantasy even to death)—though for Miller it remained Willy who should be the central protagonist.

Hap is played by Cameron Mitchell as a typical New York playboy, constantly combing his hair and adjusting his hat--his dynamics with others often indicated by his constant exchange of cigarettes—one time passing a cigarette he is smoking on to his brother, another knocking his cigarettes on the floor to get Miss Forsyth’s attention.

**FIG. 9** Kazan saw Thomas Chalmers’s Ben as the embodiment of success, and as a character who only appears in what Kazan called “Willy’s daydreams” he is romanticized into a god-like figure (rather than as a representative of the absent father Miller had originally envisioned). Miller made changes accordingly, and North wrote a trumpet piece to accompany this forceful Ben onto stage.

Charlie, played by Howard Smith, while an evident nice guy, is made to seem faintly ridiculous in the daydreams as opposed to reality, as that is Willy’s preferred vision of him. In the real world Charlie displays concern for Willy and an easy relationship with his son, in contrast to Willy’s awkwardness.

**FIG. 10** While they had originally planned to have a gravestone rise from beneath the stage for the final requiem scene, the impulse toward abstraction won out, and a simple bouquet of flowers on the stage was used to represent the gravesite, with a projection of autumnal leaves to create an aura of death (in juxtaposition to the spring leaves at the start). The men give a stone-faced Linda a private moment of grief by turning their backs.

Kazan had cried when he first read the play, Willy reminding him of his own father (a carpet salesman). For him the play was about how people have become too aggressive toward one another, each trying to get the better of the rest rather than helping one’s fellow man (or woman)—and this is ultimately a dehumanizing way to be. But he also saw at the play’s core—a love story between Willy and Biff. Willy for him is tragic as he has built his life on a false premise, believing he only has worth in the eyes of others, and so dooms himself.

When the play premiered on 10 February, 1949, at the Morosco Theater in New York City. Enthusiastic reviews swiftly made it the “must see” play of the season, and Miller garnered nearly every award available, including the Pulitzer. Robert Coleman of the *Daily Mirror* called the play, “emotional dynamite,” and reported that “sobs were heard throughout the auditorium, and handkerchiefs were kept busy wiping away tears.” Brooks Atkinson declared it “superb,” “deeply moving,” and a “wraith-like tragedy,” insisting that Miller had “looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hopes and anguish to the theatre.” Richard Watts asserted that “Under Elia Kazan’s vigorous and perceptive direction, ‘*Death of a Salesman’* emerges as easily the best and most important new American play of the year.”

Salesman has had many revivals, including several on Broadway, but for my second contrasting production, I chose the one at Yale Repertory Theatre in 2009, under the direction of James Bundy. **FIG. 11** What made this one intriguing was that it was performed with an all-black cast, though in the end that turned out to be less interesting than other aspects of the production.

The set, designed by Scott Dougan, displayed some interesting aspects, most notably lines of blankly staring windows that bordered the stage, placing the Lomans into a gold-fish bowl, in which we might imagine their every move being scrutinized by whoever was behind those lighted shades. Little wonder Willy is so concerned with how the Lomans appear to the world as they are quite literally on constant view. This made the family’s disintegration a very public affair. When Willy fully moves into his daydreams the light in these windows went out, suggesting that the past had become a safer refuge, away from prying eyes. At times these windows were also muted by mottled green lighting, to suggest the dappling of sunlight through trees, trees we know have been torn down long ago, so that the continued presence of this dappled light revivifies the continuing influence of Willy’s dreams in a similar fashion to Mielziner’s leafy scrim.

Surprisingly, just about the least noticeable aspect of this production turned out to be the all-black cast. When asked if having an African-American cast, changes the play, Charles S. Dutton, the actor playing Willy responded: “Well, I happen to think it’s the same play. . . . The fact of the matter is there’s always a suspension of disbelief in every play, so the reality is that a black Willy Loman would not have been hanging out at Slattery’s in Boston in 1949. He’d have been hung. To be rewritten you’d be in Roxbury somewhere. But who would bother to do that? I look at this not as a black-cast version. I look at it as a black cast in Arthur Miller’s play. So you get much more universality. After all, there were hundreds of thousands of middle-class black people in the 1940s.

Everyone here (including Ben, Howard and Charlie) is on an equal ethnic playing field, and Miller’s saga of a hard-working, hard-talking man who struggles to get his due in a society that no longer values him (if indeed it ever did), apparently fits the African-American experience as truly as it turned out to fit the Chinese in 1983 Beijing. While John Lahr insists this all-black rendition fails because “This sense of expectation and entitlement was simply not shared by African-Americans in 1949,” this might only help point to what makes Willy Loman more than a dime a dozen after-all, his sense of entitlement despite the odds.

No lines were cut to accommodate the color of the cast in Bundy’s production, and all quite honestly held the ring of truth in the mouths of these actors. Of course no Mayor of Providence in 1949 would have sat down and drunk coffee with a black Willy Loman, but then who is to say this was not just another of Willy’s fabrications, indeed, it makes this possibility more obvious. Just as the decision to omit Biff’s football trophy from the set might suggest that even this small victory may be equally fabricated to raise the family’s stature in Willy’s mind. **FIG. 12** One suspects that Dutton’s sweetly blustering Willy Loman has never been much of a success at anything, and it is not so much a color issue as a personality one; a tendency through personal insecurity to be misled and mistaken.

Dutton plays Willy for much of the play with a wide-eyed enthusiasm; a kinder and more loving Willy than played by Cobb, one who genuinely admired and loved his wife (despite his dalliances), and who felt a deep guilt over his affairs. While the dismissive remarks that get Biff so riled up remain, they feel less barbed than a general whine over life itself, or born of an enthusiasm that could not brook distraction, rather than indicative of disdain. More of a cuddly teddy-bear, Dutton recalls Biff’s glory with prideful tears, jovially laughs when he tells his son that he should return the football he stole, and kisses his wife with affection on several occasions. Before Willy leaves to kill himself at the close, Dutton gently caresses the door to the room where Linda sleeps and weeps a goodbye to his darling wife that fraught with emotion.

**FIG. 13** When Willy enters at the production’s start, worn out, wiping his face and head, and muttering “One day . . .” it is clear that here is a man for whom that day has never happened, and what is more, for whom it never will happen. As anguish and guilt over his failures mount--first when he recalls The Woman from Boston while actually holding his wife, and later after Howard has callously tossed him out--we get a sense that he is being driven to confront thoughts that reside inside his head. To display this, Bundy has echoes placed on the speakers’ lines as Linda and Bernard call for Biff, and Linda tries to deflect Ben’s offers. In these dream-like scenes Willy stands facing front, painfully holding his head as if trying to quell the discordant voices of what could have been turning points in his past. But what is also increasingly apparent, the more we see inside Willy’s head, the more we are led to understand that much of what is there is itself misleading. While Dutton’s Willy is gradually being forced to live in the past because the present has become untenable, the past he creates for us is evidently as fake as his dreams for the future.

While there remains a sleaze factor about Billy Eugene Jones’ Happy in this production, he is also somewhat humanized and less self-involved, as we see him sneaking a cookie and milk before taking his mother’s laundry, and habitually trying to mediate between his battling family members. **FIG. 14** So often Happy becomes as overlooked by the audience as by his family, but here we **see** him, and we get a sense of why he acts like he does, in compensation for a family that consistently ignores him as he struggles to gain their attention. One of the biggest laughs in the production is at his parents’ utter refusal to even acknowledge his declaration that he is getting married.

Ato Essandoh’s Biff, on the other hand, even though now taller than his dad, seems to be a case of arrested development, a kid who has not been able to mentally grow up because he has been so unnerved by his father’s betrayal. We see that despite knowing Willy’s secret, Biff remains in awe of his father, as when at one point the director has him grab Willy’s arm to defend his mother and yell the line, “Stop yelling at her.” At this point he gazes downwards, unable to make eye contact, while there is a protracted silence to underscore his discomfort at having offered such a challenge to his father. He maintains this uncertainty throughout.

Meanwhile, Kimberly Scott’s more upbeat Linda constantly strokes her husband, with both her words and her hands. He is clearly central to her existence. She is no doormat, as seen when she forcefully puts her erring sons in their place, but, similar to Dunnock’s Linda, she loves her husband without condition.

While the action mostly takes place stage right, in the kitchen, stage left in Willy and Linda’s bedroom, and on a dais that raises stage center to become the boys’ room, **FIG. 15** the center back of the stage forms a walled enclosure painted to look like a summer sky, in which are placed the trunk of a large tree and the front of a period car, both painted white. These ghostly images suggest both the idealism and unreality of the past Willy imagines. His nostalgic longings for better times are further undercut by the unusual presentation of Ben by Thomas Jefferson Byrd, who slips quietly in an out through a secret door in the “sky.” **FIG. 16**

Byrd moved awkwardly around the stage, lisping his lines in a strange accent while he struck stylized poses in a rather uncomfortably distracting presentation. At times there was an echo placed on his speech to distort it even further. Since Ben is the character on stage who best represents Willy’s memory, then this strange distortion of his characterization might be intentional. Willy tends to view the past with an upbeat tendency, but this Ben is simply too weird to be credible for an instant. He becomes a fiction created by a man desperately seeking something to support long held beliefs that are being severely tested. And as Ben hisses his lines and jabs at Biff with his walking cane, we can tell that he is a dangerous fiction to boot. Ben, in his all-white garb, represents more the destructive amoral force of a Moby Dick than a helpful angel, representing the site of Willy’s destructive obsession with wanting to be successful, an obsession through which he has damaged his whole life.

**FIG. 17** Willy essentially destroys himself in the hopes of forcing Biff to pursue business in the same materialistic rat race that hung him out to dry. For all of his insistence on what he felt was right, Willy Loman was wrong, and his way of living essentially destructive, and Bundy pays attention to that; there is no spark of hope in his funereal Requiem, as Scott’s more emotional Linda clutches the flowers to her chest; only despair. Charlie’s erstwhile “nobody dast blame this man” speech may allow us to feel pity for the deceased, but it should also evoke a little fear as well. Charley’s approbation is not just of the man, but of the whole rotten system Willy espoused.