

## *Death of a Salesman* (Miller 1949/Schlöndorff 1986)

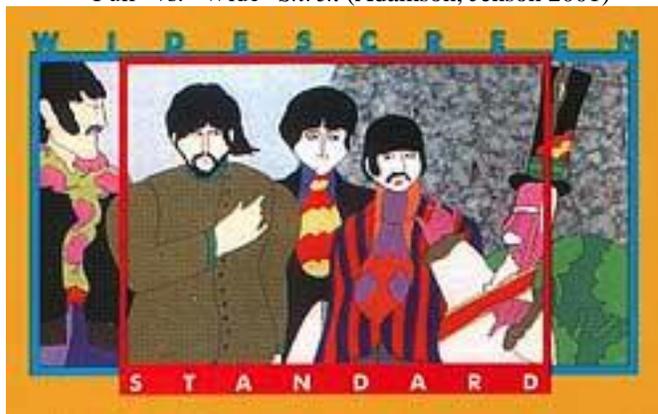


### **Square or Rectangular?**

This superb CBS made-for-broadcast television version of Arthur Miller's finest play first aired 9/15/85, and therefore its aspect ratio matches the square box it was designed for 1.33 : 1. The **aspect ratio** of a film represents the relation or ratio of the image's width to its height. All films up to 1950 were shot in the "academy ratio," also known as "standard." Filmmakers then began to compete with television by offering viewers varying versions of "widescreen," such as the "European widescreen" ratio of 1.65:1, the "American widescreen" of 1.85: 1, and the extreme "Cinemascope" of 2.35:1, which required three separate cameras responsible for recording one third of the final image that was then spliced together. Films shot in widescreen, but presented in "Full Screen" go through a process known as "**pan & scan**," whereby the rectangular widescreen image is scanned to fit and fill the square television screen. Should glaringly essential visual information arise on the extreme left or right sides of the screen, an "automatic pan" is inserted in post-production. Since panning often signifies either discovery of new information (left) or reiteration of what is known (right), such non-directorial, automated pans play havoc with the look and interpretation of the film.



“Full” vs. “Wide” *Shrek* (Adamson, Jenson 2001)



“Standard” vs. “Wide” *Yellow Submarine* (Dunning 1968)

Fig. 1

### **The Vertigo shot and tomb-like global image pattern**

Death is announced, or at least foregrounded almost immediately after the title credits end with the screeching of tires, blaring of the car horn and a very slow lap dissolve from the close-up of Willy at the wheel superimposed over the front hall door of his Brooklyn home. So this front door is already connected with his death via the sounds of a near car crash.



Fig. 2 Slow lap dissolve from close-up of Willy at the wheel superimposed over the front hall door

Later the “angel of death,” Uncle Ben (Louis Zorich) enters the front door with luminous white light coming from beyond that door. When Ben makes his last exit, bidding Willy to follow, the doorway is flooded with white light, matching the ghost’s white suit and hat. This white light/death connection is cemented near the end of the film when the screen fades to white and remains so for several seconds after Willy crashes and dies.



Fig. 3 The luminous white light of death associated with its ghostly angel

The hallway resembles the tomb-like global image pattern in *Vertigo*, and carries the same deathly message. In fact, as Willy says his last goodbye to Linda, and makes his way down the hallway for the last time before he kills himself in his car, Cinematographer Michael Ballhaus effects a version of the vertigo shot, apparently zooming out as he pushes in toward the door. Ballhaus, who began in Germany in the late 1960’s shooting films for Rainer Werner Fassbinder, soon became a favorite of Martin Scorsese (*The Color of Money* 1986, *The Last Temptation of*

*Christ* 1988, *Goodfellas* 1990, *Gangs of New York* 2002, *The Departed* 2006), and Ballhaus goes on to employ vertigo shots in *Goodfellas* and *Quiz Show* (Redford 1994).



Fig. 4

The tomb-like global image pattern from *Vertigo* and the vertigo shot

The white light technique is extended to each Brooklyn flashback featuring Willy and his boys. Willy mentions this nostalgic light during his suicide debate with his brother's ghost: "Oh, Ben, how do we get back to all the great times? Used to be so full of light, and comradeship, the sleigh-riding in winter, and the ruddiness on his cheeks." The first time Willy flashes back we see a romanticized close up of Biff, and later in the backyard the white tombstones of a cemetery are visible just beyond the Loman fence further solidifying the film's stylized white death.



A romanticized Biff close up inaugurates the flashbacks "so full of light"



Fig. 5

A cemetery just beyond the fence

While many of these flashbacks begin rosy and chock full of good times, they conclude with a remembered reality crashing in.

### The American Dialectic: Christianity vs. Capitalism

There is a privileged moment in the play during the flashback of Biff's "boxing match" with his Uncle Ben where the conflicting ideologies of the two elder Loman brothers surface. After one of Biff's pulled punches lands too close to his Uncle's face, the worldly elder simultaneously raises his umbrella as a warning and offers his other hand to shake. The script has Ben say: "Good boy! (*Suddenly comes in, trips Biff, and stands over him, the point of his umbrella poised over Biff's eye.*) "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way." The addition in the film of the handshake nicely corresponds to the false kindnesses of the business world. Biff taking Uncle Ben's hand aligns him with "fighting fair" and with his father's repeated advice to, above all else, "be well-like and you shall never want." As Biff represents Willy's kind, turn-the-other-cheek ideology, so Ben practices his capitalist "dog-eat-dog/whatever the market will allow" philosophy by tripping up Biff unfairly. In this one moment Arthur Miller dramatizes the fundamental contradiction at the heart of America—part Christian and part Capitalist. Willy has practiced a version of "love thy neighbor" in his quest to be well-liked and will die as a sort of Christian martyr, sacrificing his life in hopes of redeeming Biff's trust in him by means of the twenty thousand dollar insurance pay off. Willy's misguided Christian principle has made him a failure in the business world in direct opposition to his brother Ben who has taken what life has thrown his way (ending up in Africa rather than Alaska), and by exploiting African mine workers he has made a fortune. The history of Ben's fortune serves as a perfect reflection of America's history of building its prosperous country out of the lives and blood of its African slaves. Ben attempts to honor Willy's request to teach his boys the right things by demonstrating this episode of "tough love," winking at his little brother in confederacy, but it is a lesson Willy is incapable of repeating and explaining.



Fig. 6      Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way.

## Boston Flashbacks



Fig. 7

There are two flashbacks not afforded the romanticized white-washing, and those are the two concerning Willy's Boston mistress, Miss Francis (Kathy Rossetter), "The Woman." The first is particularly complicated in that it occurs *within* a frame flashback. Willy first thinks of her during a particularly vulnerable, guilty moment (already in the flashback discussing how business needs to pick up), Willy flashes further back to Miss Francis as he confides in Linda about the F.H. Stewarts salesman calling him fat, "something about—walrus." The word "short" is substituted for fat and walrus is changed to "shrimp" to match Dustin Hoffman's diminutive size (5'6"). With Willy bemoaning his looks in the hall mirror, Linda assures him: "Willy darling, you're the handsomest man in the world." The Woman's laughter begins to interrupt his wife's loving, comforting words, and soon Willy steps into his Boston fantasy flashback. Schlendorff and Ballhaus add stylistic flourishes to the introduction of this first Boston flashback. As Willy stares into the hall mirror, the camera dips down and then back up again as the lights behind Willy's reflection dim and then reveal the Woman (out of focus) emerging from the bathroom door, and that is the other trick. The "reflection" of Willy is a projection of a sequence previously shot. When Dustin Hoffman stands in front of the "mirror," he mimes the opposite movements of his projected self to insure the mirror illusion.

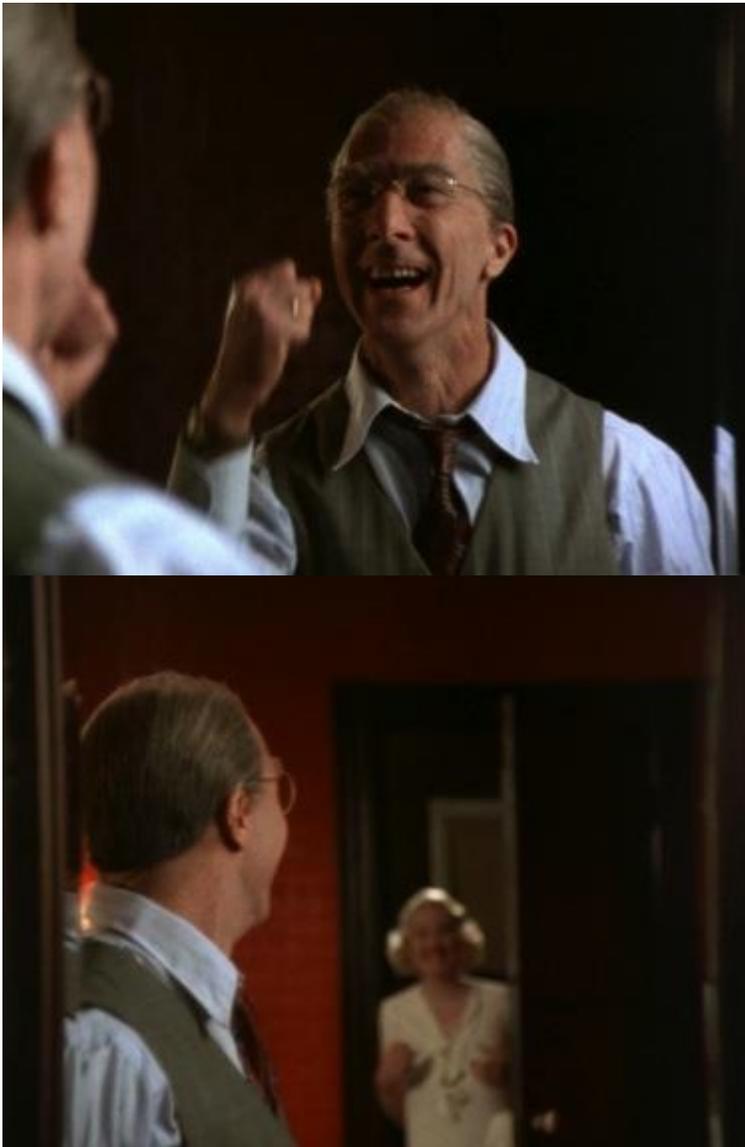


Fig. 8 Unwhitewashed flashback within a flashback: The Camera nods to the audience and then the mirror trick

The other Boston flashback occurs to Willy while dazed in the Men's room of Frank's Chop House. As Willy makes his way to the Men's room, he walks in a circle around the back room, and Schlöndorff manages a theatrical representation of how Willy integrates flashing back into everyday reality. The director brings up the image of Young Bernard just the other side of Frank's Chop House window who calls out "Biff flunked math!" crowned as he is by the restaurant's red and blue neon sign.



Fig. 9 Willy integrates flashbacks into everyday life

The booze and loose women Happy has corralled, the resurgence of the memory that Biff flunked math, along with more bitterness and disappointment from Biff's failed meeting with Oliver, sparks this revelatory flashback. Filtered through Willy's guilt-ridden memory, Biff witnesses, in stylized slow motion, the Woman's graceful night-gowned twirl from the bathroom onto the bed, as she momentarily reveals a bare breast. The over-cranking lends not only grace to this mysterious woman, but a nightmarish effect to Willy's most painful memory of all exposed. Remember the subtitle of Miller's play is *Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* and was originally titled *Inside His Head*. Every flashback, therefore, is completely mediated through Willy's consciousness.



Fig. 10 Biff's Primal Scene in Slow Motion according to Willy

Perhaps the reason these two flashbacks are rendered in even lighting and do not share the romantic luminous whitewash of Biff's moments is that there is nothing pleasant nor romantic here—one sequence is experienced out of self-punishing guilt as his wife supports him, and the other harks back to that fateful night Biff witnessed as a young adult a version of the primal scene featuring his father cheating on his mother and revealing forever to his son his phoniness.

### **Coming of Age**

The father's phoniness is contrasted sharply in this gut-wrenching scene by John Malkovich's performance as the son. His tears and mucous are unmistakable as his father's dishonesty breaks his heart, and on confronting his father with "You fake!" the spit and tears visibly fly. Just as the inadvertent spit-take from Billie Whitelaw's performance of Mouth in Beckett's *Not I* breaks through, so the bodily fluids of Malkovich help authenticate his presence.



Fig. 11 Mucous and tears help authenticate Biff's presence: "You Fake!"

Biff shares with Holden Caulfield both a literary birthday (1949) and the adolescent fixation on authenticity found in most *bildungsroman* and other coming of age stories. A *bildungsroman* (literally "education novel") is the name literary critics assign to a novel concerned with the education of and coming of age by a young person. In many of these stories concerning young men, the boys enact a version of Freud's Oedipal complex, highlighting not a murder of their fathers, but certainly a confrontation, a reckoning. Shortly after his most famous play opened at The Morosco Theatre in New York, Miller declared a belief in "modern psychiatry" during a discussion of the Oedipus complex in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" that appeared in *The New York Times*, February 27, 1949. The play gives us three such oedipal moments: First when Biff confronts Willy's phoniness and adultery in Boston (in the film replete with the son physically shoving his father to the ground.) Second, on the first night home, discussing the Oliver proposal, Biff tells Willy to stop yelling at Linda. Willy feels threatened by his upstart son, "What're you, takin' over this house?" In the film, as Willy violently points at Linda telling

her “Don’t take his side all the time, goddamnit!” Biff grabs Willy’s arm and points back at his father, demanding “*furiously*: Stop yelling at her!” Third, when Biff confronts Willy with the rubber tube and the truth, claiming: “All right, phony! Then let’s lay it on the line . . . No, you’re going to hear the truth—what you are and what I am. (In the film Biff rolls up his sleeves.) We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!” Biff soon starts for Willy, is blocked by Happy, “*Biff seems on the verge of attacking his father,*” breaks from Happy, and violently grabs Willy “*at the peak of his fury.*” Biff serves as a kind of *sprachenfigura* (spokesperson) for Arthur Miller. He’s the truth teller, he’s the one who has seen through Willy’s false ideology and tells him so.



Stop yelling at her!



We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!

Fig. 12

When using a performance of a text in order to aid one’s interpretation of that text, a fruitful question to pose is: What choices do directors, actors, and other collaborators make to add to the meaning of the film and/or play? What gets taken out, and what gets put in?

## One Last Kiss

One of the things added in Schlöndorff's production is Biff kissing Willy on the neck as a kind of punctuation mark to his intense confrontation and crying scene. This makes for a great interpretative jumping off point of the play, the kiss reveals something central: *The love affair between father and son*. In her upbraiding of Biff for what she perceives to be his abandoning of Willy at this most desperate time, Linda reveals the depth of that love: "What happened to the love you had for him? You were such pals! How you used to talk to him on the phone every night! How lonely he was till he could come home to you!" In Christian Blackwood's documentary of the making of the film, *Private Conversations: On the Set of 'Death of a Salesman'* (1985), we discover Arthur Miller deeply involved in discussions with the director and actors, and we also witness a playful kissing game between the actors portraying Willy and his sons.



Arthur Miller deeply involved with Schlöndorff & Hoffman



Fig. 13

Actors play kisses for all.

The addition of the kiss, though a potentially controversial veering away from the script, clearly pleases the author and is in keeping with the heart of the play. Although the kissing game is filmed without explanation, one can imagine it is an informal rehearsal technique demonstrating the actors' awareness of the significance of their addition.



Fig. 14 An unscripted kiss at the heart of the play about the love between a father and a son.

## Trapped

Arthur Miller writes in his stage directions: “On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands.” In the film, the trophy is placed in front of the mirror on the bureau in the parents’ bedroom. Each day as they groom and dress themselves they are reminded of Biff’s long gone glory days. Willy gestures to it for all to see as he delivers the line: “A young man with such personal attractiveness gets lost?” Miller clearly felt this trophy is significant and needs to be legible to the audience. It is evident that the trophy is like a chain of expectation Biff feels around his neck. He pleads to Willy just before he lunges at him during the final confrontation: “I’m not bringing home any prizes any more, and you’re going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!” The web-like shadow cast across the encroaching sloped ceiling in the boy’s bedroom visually expresses this trapped feeling. As Biff delivers his speech that begins “I don’t know what the future is. I don’t know—what I’m supposed to want,” he is shot standing near enough to a mirror that the audience views him, his reflection and the pair of boxing gloves draped over the top right corner. Mirror shots depicting double images of characters can confer a variety of judgments such as vanity or duplicity, but in this case the shot helps depict Biff’s confusion, his being torn over what he desires and what his father desires. The boxing gloves hang there as another reminder of Biff’s athletic prowess, yet the fighting, dog-eat-dog spirit necessary for success in the business world is gone, out of commission.



Trophies



Entrapping web of window frame caused by stylized lighting



Mirrors and boxing gloves entrap Biff

Fig. 15

### **Fired!**

The Loman name gets resurrected in Alan Ball's script for *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999) as the name of Lester and Caroline's neighbors who move out in part because Caroline cuts down their sycamore tree ("Willy: They massacred the neighborhood.") She argues with Lester that she was within her rights since "a substantial portion of the root structure was on our property." Here again the Chekhov dictum applies—you do not invoke one of the most famous family names in American drama if you do not want parallels drawn, and there are plenty. Lester combines Willy's dead end job situation with the private revolution occurring within Biff. In fact, there is an almost direct quote of Willy's firing at the hands of Howard, and Lester's at the hands of Brad. Lester's first meeting with Brad resembles Willy's office visit as they both sit alone, dwarfed in the large office and towered over by the boss.



Fig. 16 Lester Burnham of American Beauty is a modern day Willy Loman with a twist

Lester has already begun to “look closer” and effectuate his morphing into the questioning Biff character early on in the film, but it comes to a head in his second meeting with Brad where he launches a sort of Willy Loman Revenge Attack, turning the tables of power to his side by threatening to blackmail the company and the efficiency expert hired to fire him. *American Beauty* is not alone in rewriting one of the more infamous firings in modern theater, *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) also presents jujitsu Loman Revenge with the Narrator blackmailing his boss. In some sort of 50<sup>th</sup> year celebration of *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the firing scenes from these two 1999 films are uncannily similar, not to mention remarkably similar sentiments expressed in 1999’s *Office Space* (Judge).



Fig. 17 Two 1999 Willy Loman Revenge Attacks—jujitsu rewritings of the firing scene

### **Free and Clear**

One of the ironies of the play is that Willy kills himself the day before Linda makes “the last payment on the mortgage.” As she earlier explains, “After this payment, Willy, the house belongs to us.” Arthur Miller highlights the etymology of the word “mortgage,” literally “death pledge,” beyond terminating the financial commitment, by stressing the death equation several times. Willy understands: “Figure it out. Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there’s nobody to live in it.” The mortgage can stand as a lifetime contract, a Faustian bargain of servitude. An ad for the disgraced, now defunct mortgage company Ameriquest (before it was sold to Citigroup, and stopped issuing home loans altogether), used as its catchphrase: “Proud Sponsor of the American Dream.” Briefly the namesake of the Texas Ranger’s major league baseball park, the Ameriquest ad oddly enough and erroneously displayed a baseball field with an inverted home plate among its images of Americana. Clearly the American Dream, first and foremost, is owning a house. The mortgage company holds you for

25-30 years, and not until you completely pay off the debt can you finally be “free.” As Linda stands over the entombed body of her husband, who in the end believed he was “worth more dead than alive,” the play and film ends with its “Requiem,” the bitter farce of Linda’s recurring freedom theme echoing as the curtain falls or the film fades: “First time in thirty-five years we were just about free and clear . . . We’re free and clear. We’re free . . .” The irony is compounded by the fact that the insurance inspector has testimony about Willy’s attempted suicides, and will certainly contest honoring the \$20,000 policy. In what seems to be an inconsequential, “throwaway” line, Linda tells Willy she bought “a new kind of American-type cheese today. It’s whipped.” Why the line about “whipped cheese”? He is the American “whipped” by the “system.” Arthur Miller makes it clear there are neither throwaway lines nor throwaway names.

### **What’s In A Name?**

Like most authors, Miller chooses carefully the names of his characters, seizing the opportunity to convey significance, and Willy *Loman* as in the “low man on the totem pole” is only the most obvious. In “Tragedy and the Common Man” he declares: “I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.” Most observers glean the common man/low man connection, and probably pick up on the ironically named discontent and neglected, hapless son, Happy. The name of the central son, Biff, escapes most of us since its meaning as a “whack or blow” is no longer common usage. The oedipal son Biff delivers a severe blow to his father by holding onto the knowledge of Willy’s phoniness, evidenced by his infidelity, and by confronting him with the truth of the rubber tube and their true “dime a dozen” identities. Perhaps the name of the Loman’s neighbor, “Uncle Charley,” conveys the same “curveball” meaning that term carries in Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt*, although this Uncle Charley is a curve to Willy’s overbearing child-rearing expectations: “WILLY: [on learning Charley’s son is traveling to Washington to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court] And you never told him what to do, did you? You never took any interest in him.” In order to unpack the name of the lisping Math teacher, Mr. Birnbaum, who refused to give Biff the extra four points he needs to graduate necessitating Biff’s fateful trip to Boston, we first need a little German: “*baum*” in German means “tree,” therefore the name of the man in the middle of Biff’s first and everlasting failure, Birnbaum, translates as burning tree or woods. Now recollect Willy’s metaphoric alarm before admitting to his sons in Frank’s Chop House his great humiliation of being fired: “the woods are burning, boys, you understand? There’s a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today.” The woods connect not only with the pastoral utopia set up in the Stage Directions which tell us the paternal flute and its recurring melody signify “grass and trees and the horizon,” but of Willy’s opportunity with Ben who has “bought timberland in Alaska” and needs “a man to look after things for me. WILLY: God, timberland! Me and my boys in those grand outdoors!” Biff has the same desire: “Men built like we are should be working out in the open.” The name “Birnbaum” reveals how well crafted and deep this play is, and reinforces the claim that is well written work, there is no such thing as a throwaway line. A brief glance at the women’s names requires more of a stretch, however. “Linda,” in Spanish, is “lovely or pretty.” The two “whores,” as Linda calls them, suggests the quickly recruited “Letta” will “let a” man do with her what they will. Her cohort, “Miss Forsythe,” is a femme fatal carrying a scythe like the Grim Reaper. The name of Willy’s Mistress, Miss Francis, suggests the post-World War exoticism and loose living stereotypical of France. There is one name nearly everyone forgets, students rarely recall it when quizzed, and

that is Dave Singleman, the 84 year old acquaintance of Willy's who actually "died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston." Willy bases his career choice on the success of this man, believing he can repeat this single man's leisurely effective style, but perhaps Dave is so named to underscore he is not an *everyman* to be imitated, and further, he is successful because he remains unmarried, or married to his job. The throwaway line test can be extended out to the smallest, seemingly most inconsequential detail—allow me to try two more. The "green velvet slippers" connote the salesman's ease and comfort and are the color of money; Frank's Chop House is where Biff instructs Willy to meet him. It is in this familiar restaurant where Biff will be both "frank" with Willy, and true to his name, he will attempt to "chop" down Willy's illusions.

### **Chip Off The Old Block**

Over Willy's grave Charley rhapsodizes about the salesman when he explains that, "He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out their in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine." What is a Salesman? What do they make? Nothing. Karl Marx would claim they perform "alienated labor," in that they are alienated from the things they sell, since they do not make the things they sell. Willy's father, who made, played and sold flutes, haunts this play with his melody and his unmediated success. His work was the opposite of alienated labor. What is it that Willy sells? We are never told, because Willy sells himself. Dave Singleman's name indicates that his dream is not for every man; Willy fails to realize this. Uncle Ben seems to represent Miller's critique of capitalism through his entrepreneurial pursuits, that is, his undoubted exploitation of African workers in his diamond mines. But it is one-sided to dismiss this play as anti-American or anti-American Dream—we should not forget about the quite successful and benign Charley and his hard-working, successful son, Bernard, who tells his clients and their juries the law.

There is significant blocking of actor's movements during the Requiem. **Blocking** is the positioning of actors on stage or on screen, usually by the director. In response to Linda asking the others to "Go on," so she can say goodbye to Willy, Charley, Bernard, and Happy move off stage left and Biff goes off alone stage right. **Stage left** or **stage right** indicates the position on stage (real or implied) where the actor is situated when facing front (the audience). Biff has just argued one more time with Happy that Willy didn't know himself and had the wrong dream, and his position is blocked over and away from the others. After a cut to a close-up of Linda's bewailing, we return to the master shot and see, like Huck Finn, Biff has already "lit out for the territory;" he is gone.



Fig. 18 Significant blocking sets Biff apart, then he rightfully disappears

A curious change occurred when Schlöndorff's TV film was transferred to DVD. During Willy's first flashback, as Bernard is teased and laughed back into his house, he crosses in front of Willy's Chevrolet, and in the broadcast and VHS version Biff honks the horn as a prank in order to frighten Bernard into his house. There is an audio edit in the DVD version and the use of the horn becomes inaudible. Perhaps Schlöndorff felt this unscripted bit of tomfoolery was a bit much and mischaracterized Biff as cruel. There is no question that the film splits its sympathy for both Biff and Willy, and rightly so.



Fig. 19

The DVD transfer contains a new audio edit perhaps to soften Biff's persona