

The opening stage directions

Read through the stage directions that follow and then discuss the following questions in a partner. Write detailed answers to each question:

A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises.

Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. The air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living-room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens on to the apartment house at the side.

Extract from: *Death of a Salesman*, © 1949 Arthur Miller

1. Why does Miller specify that a flute should be played? Think about the sound a flute makes: is it harsh; jolly; sexy; melancholy; something else? Why does he write that it, 'tell[s] of grass and trees and the horizon'? Think about where the play is set and what Willy is preoccupied with.
2. Why does Miller refer to Willy as 'the Salesman' here? What does it suggest about Willy's role? Does it imply that Willy symbolises or 'stands for' something more than his own personal experience?
3. What effect do you think the 'towering, angular shapes' have and why are they behind the house?
4. What does the 'blue light of the sky' suggest and why does it only fall on the house and the forestage? Why is the surrounding area 'an angry glow of orange'?
5. How is the house made to appear, 'small, fragile-seeming'? Why does Miller present it in this way? It is not enough to write that it, 'makes Loman seem small'.

6. What do you think Miller means by, 'an air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality'? How can that be conveyed through the set?
7. Why do you think Miller has placed the kitchen at the centre of the set?
8. Why are there only three chairs when there are four Lomans? What do you think Miller might be trying to suggest by not placing enough chairs for all the family?
9. Why is the refrigerator the only fixture, apart from the table and chairs? Think about what Willy and Linda say about it in the play and what it might symbolise.
10. Why do you think Miller makes the bedroom look so spartan? Why is there only a straight chair in there? Think about how someone might sit on this type of chair; is it comfortable – could you relax on it? Why does Miller specify a 'brass bedstead'? Is it just because that was the fashion or is it supposed to reflect something else in the play?
11. Why is the athletic trophy over the bed? Why is it on display at all? Why has Miller specified that it is silver rather than gold?
12. What is the purpose of having the window open in the apartment house?

After answering the questions above in detail, prepare questions on the rest of the opening stage directions which will help someone else analyse the opening. Now swap with another pair and discuss and write detailed answers to show careful, analytical thought.