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Author(s): Rebecca Davers

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"I know how to do the play now": A Part of Willy Loman in *Synecdoche, New York*

Rebecca Davers

Charlie Kaufman's film *Synecdoche, New York* has inspired a full range of reviews since its release in 2008. A writer for the *L. A. Times* begins her review with references to Jorge Luis Borges and Jean Beaudrillard, and describes the film as "sprawling, awe-inspiring, heartbreaking, frustrating, hard-to-follow and achingly, achingly sad" (Chocano). Meanwhile, writing for the *Observer*, Rex Reed asserts that it is, in fact, "the Worst Movie Ever," explaining to his readers, "no matter how bad you think the worst movie ever made ever was, you have not seen *Synecdoche, New York*. It sinks to the ultimate bottom of the landfill, and the smell threatens to linger from here to infinity." Falling somewhere in between is Peter Bradshaw's review, in which he admits, "The film is either a masterpiece or a massively dysfunctional act of self-indulgence and self-laceration." Perhaps before coming to any conclusions, one should take the advice of Roger Ebert, who admits, "I think you have to see Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* twice"; this instruction is, tellingly, included on the DVD case.

The film is confusing and frustrating. However, its themes and characters assume more significance and clarity when placed in dialogue with those in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The juxtaposition is far from arbitrary or forced; Kaufman's lead character, Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is a community theatre director in Schenectady, NY, and the film begins as Caden directs a production of *Death of a Salesman*. His decisions as director of this play inform the actions that consume the rest of the film. Let there be no confusion: the plot of *Synecdoche, New York* is not that of *Death of a Salesman*, nor do the characters in one text seamlessly align with those in the other; nonetheless, *Synecdoche* and *Salesman* overlap in unmistakable and meaningful ways. Read together, Miller's play helps to make sense of Kaufman's film, while the film offers new readings of Miller's play. As we near a revival of

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Death of a Salesman, in which Philip Seymour Hoffman is slated to play Willy Loman, understanding the ways these two texts illuminate one another seems more important than ever.

Summarizing *Synecdoche, New York*, Kaufman's directing debut, is quite challenging. At the film's essence is the story of the physical and mental deterioration of a theatre director named Caden Cotard. However, Kaufman's representations of this deterioration are not always straightforward, and because the story is seen through Caden's experiences, distinguishing between the reality of the filmic world and the fiction of its characters' performances can prove confusing. Unlike the "subjective reality" created by Jo Mielziner's 1949 design for *Death of a Salesman* (Murphy 5), the distinctions between reality and imagination are not always clear in the film. Therefore, in the comments that follow, I use the phrase "film world" to denote the presumably "real" objective world of Caden's life; "film audience" refers to those of us in the 21st century watching Kaufman's film; "Miller's play" refers to *Death of a Salesman*, whether it be within the film or not; and "Caden's play" refers to his ambitious New York City production, which has several working titles but no official one, and which constitutes much of the second half of the film. I'll begin my comments with a summary of the film, before moving on to a more extended analysis of a few key issues illuminated by the two texts in conjunction. This analysis is supplemented with excerpts from student writing, leading to conclusions about ways the film may offer new classroom possibilities for teaching the play.

The film introduces Caden at home with his wife Adele (Catherine Keener) and young daughter Olive. Olive is watching a disturbingly morbid cartoon (though no one in the film is disturbed by it); Adele is talking by telephone to Maria (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who is later revealed to be her lover; and Caden eventually begins reading newspaper headlines out loud. Though the viewer is unaware of it until later in the film, suggestions that time may not be functioning normally are present in this opening scene.[1] For example, the dates on Caden's paper range from September 22, to October 15, to November 1, even though the film editing suggests that the events all constitute a single morning. To complicate matters a bit more, my students have pointed out that the time on the clock radio at the start of the film (7:45) is the same as that shown on clocks painted onto

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walls in the film's final scenes.[2] The film audience and their sense of "reality" within the film are challenged from the very beginning.

As Caden's community theatre prepares for their production of *Death of a Salesman*, the film audience sees Caden in rehearsal with his actors and recognizes scenes from Miller's play being performed with minimal creative license. At one point, Caden complains to his wife about the complicated lighting changes—the "560 lighting cues" —recalling Mielziner's 1949 design. The one significant change Caden makes is the decision to cast young actors as the aging Willy and Linda Loman.[3] Caden understands the significance of his decision, and he explains it to one of the actors: "Try to keep in mind that a young person playing Willy Loman *thinks* he's only pretending to be at the end of a life full of despair. But the tragedy is that *we* know that you, the young actor, will end up in this very place of desolation." This direction assumes that the theatre audience in the film, as well as the film's viewing audience, is already familiar with Miller's play. Willy Loman's fate is always already sealed. Moreover, Willy Loman's fate becomes "tragedy" for any young man "pretending" to understand it. It is as if Caden already knows that this "young actor" cannot successfully play Willy Loman, and as if such a failure is itself the performance he wants.

This scene seems relatively unimportant at the time; after all, Caden is just directing his actor. However, as the film progresses, the line becomes more and more prescient. It becomes clear that, first, this young actor is never able to take direction well and, second, Caden himself, as he ages, needs increasing amounts of direction and embodies increasing amounts of tragedy. Caden suffers from numerous medical issues that cause seizures and require him to use biofeedback to create his own saliva and to use fake tears when mourning the alienation he feels from his estranged daughter. Eventually, Caden's reliance on these measures can be seen less as a medical symptom and more as a manifestation of his own performativity. In addition, Caden asks of Hazel, on different occasions, "Then what do I say?" and "Just tell me what to do?" keeping the theme of performativity always near the surface of the film's action.

Though Caden's production of *Salesman* is "a hit," Adele complains that it is uninteresting because unoriginal. As the audience around her rises to a standing ovation, Adele remains seated, having barely been able to stay awake during the Requiem. Afterwards she

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explains, "There's nothing personal in it," and adds, "What are you leaving behind? You act as if you have forever to figure it out." She soon leaves for Germany, taking her daughter and her lover with her, and she is never again part of Caden's life.[4] Meanwhile, the box office employee, Hazel (Samantha Morton), makes romantic gestures toward Caden with little success, and then decides to buy a burning house. Within the film world, the fire appears to be real. Both she and the realtor are aware of the fire, and the fire lasts throughout the several decades spanned by the film. She raises a family there, and Caden visits her there a few times. She even hesitates to buy the house, admitting to the realtor that she is "just really concerned about dying in the fire." The realtor responds affirmatively: "It's a big decision, how one prefers to die."

When Caden wins a MacArthur Genius Grant, he moves to New York City, buys a large warehouse, and begins to work on the "massive" play that he hopes will be "uncompromising, honest," and "brutal." Work on the ambitious production consumes the rest of the film, but it is never completed and never performed before an audience. Caden never settles on a title, but the last one he proposes is *Infectious Diseases in Cattle*. As rehearsals begin, Caden explains his vision ambiguously: "We'll start by talking honestly and out of that a piece of theatre will evolve." Eventually (after 17 years), the play assumes a grand scale. Actors are assigned specific situations through notes on tiny slips of paper, ranging from "You were raped last night" and "Nothing matters anymore" to "You keep biting your tongue" and "You have a hangover." These rehearsed "situations" begin to fill the warehouse. Caden walks through the warehouse, evaluating and correcting the performances, but each situation remains separate from those around it and the play lacks any real form or focus.

The warehouse, however, has become more recognizably the settings of Caden's world outside the play. Caden directs scenes in a doctor's office, a therapists' office, and in a domestic space. But he also uses the warehouse as an experimental space, discovering what might happen if he or others may have behaved differently in certain situations. The realism of Caden's play begins to threaten the reality of the film (and the sanity of the viewer), because Caden hires not just actors to play the people in his life, but also actors to play the actors; after all, the production has to include itself if it is to be a realistic portrayal of Caden's life. Lucien Dällenbach defines *mise en*

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abyme, in reference to André Gide's first description of it, as "any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it" (8).[5] Some examples Dällenbach examines include the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* (12-13) and *The Mad Trist* in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (13-14). However, because these included texts do not accurately reflect the actual plot of the texts they are in, they are not considered ideal or, in Gide's words, "absolutely accurate" (qtd. in Dällenbach 7). Perhaps Caden's play, when he begins to include the warehouse-within-the-warehouse, may be considered a more "accurate" dramatic version of Gide's original visual metaphor for *mise en abyme*, the use of an identical, smaller shield at the center, or "heart", of a heraldic shield (Dällenbach 7-8).

Caden's play, and the play within the play, recycles Caden's past, leaving Caden rather oblivious to the ways the world has changed outside his warehouse. As Caden reaches his senior years, the film audience gets occasional glimpses of a dystopic world around Caden; outside the warehouse, New York City appears to be either at war or in anarchy. People on the street beg for admission to the warehouse, asking when the play will be ready. Like the menacing apartments towering over Willy's "fragile-seeming home" (Miller, *Death* 1), dirigibles and sirens surround the manufactured performances of Caden's memories. Eventually, characters begin to die and Caden's play becomes a recitative of funerals. Sammy Barnathan (Tom Noonan), the character playing Caden, commits suicide when he is finally rejected by Hazel, and Hazel dies after she and Caden finally accept their decades-long love for each other. Following a climactic performance of Sammy's funeral, Caden relinquishes directorial duties to an actress he hired to play Adele's maid, Millicent Weems (Diane Weist). This final casting decision punctuates the significance of performativity for Caden throughout the entire film. Millicent communicates to Caden through an earpiece (the film audience hears these instructions, too), and he lives out the rest of his days within the warehouse. Replacing his earlier self-conscious production of saliva and use of fake tears, Millicent commands Caden at every level of detail, from instructing him to reminisce about failed relationships to telling him to wipe after using the toilet. Her final direction, "Die," is the last word of the film.

Though on the surface, the film seems to veer away from Miller's play after the early performances in Schenectady, closer

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analysis reveals that the film and the play inform each other in ways that offer new classroom possibilities and new readings of a canonical work. Specifically, the series of funerals, the relationship between Willy's daydreams and Caden's play, and the inexplicable burning house deserve more developed attention here. To begin, recall that the film audience only sees a handful of scenes from Caden's version of Miller's play. In rehearsals, we see the young actor, Tom, playing Willy Loman as he intentionally wrecks his car. Tom admits that he "was trying something different" in that scene; he "was crashing differently...ambivalently." This is when Caden offers the advice about the futility of youth pretending to understand Willy. Later, on opening night, we see the very beginning of the play as Caden watches from the audience; we see what we might expect the Loman home to look like, except there are four chairs around the kitchen table, rather than three. And finally, on the second night of production, the film audience gets to see the end of the play, including the Requiem, which nearly puts Adele to sleep. Willy's funeral becomes the first of seven funerals in the film.

When the community theater troupe performs Willy's funeral, it is less than noteworthy. Subsequent funerals are equally ho-hum, if a little quirky. For example, "Worst-Movie-Ever" reviewer Reed admits that he left the theater when Caden's mother explains, at her husband's funeral, that "There was so little left of him they had to fill the coffin with cotton balls to keep him from rattling around." The last three funerals in the film are motivated by the death of Sammy, who breaks script to commit suicide at a point in Caden's life when he himself considered suicide but was stopped by an observer. While Caden (or Caden's version of Willy) may have been "crashing [...] ambivalently," Sammy actively and decisively chooses to die.[6]

At Sammy's funeral, the fifth in the film, Caden seems to have a breakthrough; referring to his ever-changing goal for his production, he says to Hazel, "I know how to do it [the play] now. There are nearly 13 million people in the world. I mean, can you imagine that many people? And none of those people is an extra? They're all leads in their own stories. They have to be given their due." As he buries the man who has become his most visible, and in some ways most idealized, projection of himself, Caden allows for the possibility that Sammy had a life outside of his duties as Caden. This lets Caden out of his own head for a moment, encouraging him to recognize that all

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the other lives in the world must be just as complicated and important as his. Furthermore, Caden's insistence that everyone "be given their due" recalls Linda Loman's order to her sons, that "attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (Miller, *Death* 40). Nearing the end of his life, Caden realizes that in order to finally "do the play" that he has wanted to do, he must achieve the impossible: give everyone their due attention.

The sixth funeral in the film is a performance of Sammy's funeral in the warehouse of Caden's play. It is minimally staged, with only a few people in attendance and tombstones on sticks in the background. A new actor playing Caden repeats Caden's idea that everyone "be given their due" as the real Caden and Hazel watch from the director's table. That night, at Hazel's (burning) house, she and Caden finally reconnect as lovers and go to bed like a couple who have been married for decades. She intones that "the end is built into the beginning" and dies before morning, apparently from "smoke inhalation." Her fatalistic statement reminds us of the realtor's admission that choosing "how one prefers to die" is a significant decision, and it begs the question of whether Hazel's decision to buy the burning house was a prolonged suicide.

The seventh and final funeral in the film is another performance of Sammy's funeral. Caden has admitted that he is tired, and Millicent has offered to take over directing duties temporarily. As the scene begins, she quickly recognizes, "This is tedious, this is nothing." Significantly, her first "direction" is to tell the new versions of Caden and Hazel, "Your scene's over. Would you leave the stage?" Effectively, this removes from dramatic focus the romantic relationship that has been one of the few constants in the film. What results is without question the film's most climactic scene. Millicent becomes an active director, drawing comments from Caden's assistant that, "She's not getting the feel of" Caden at all. Though she is playing Caden, she breaks script as Sammy did and becomes a good director, something Caden is not.[7] The scene that results is striking in its difference from anything Caden has created in his lifetime of directing. During this scene, the minister delivers the following eulogy:

> Everything is more complicated than you think. You only see a tenth of what is true, and there are a million little strings attached

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> to every choice you make. You can destroy your life every time you choose. But maybe you won't know for twenty years, and you may never ever trace it to its source, and you only get one chance to play it out. Just try and figure out your own divorce. And they say there is no fate, but there is. It's what you create. And even though the world goes on for eons and eons, you are only here for a fraction of a fraction of a second. Most of your time is spent being dead or not yet born, but while alive, you wait in vain, wasting years for a phone call or a letter or a look from someone or something to make it all right, and it never comes. Or it seems to but it doesn't really. So you spend your time in vague regret or vaguer hope that something good will come along. Something to make you feel connected, something to make you feel whole, something to make you feel loved. And the truth is, I feel so angry. And the truth is, I feel so fucking sad. And the truth is, I've felt so fucking hurt for so fucking long, and for just as long, I've been pretending I'm okay, just to get along, just for... I don't know why. Maybe because no one wants to hear about my misery, because they have their own. Well, fuck everybody. Amen.

During the speech, actors have been performing grief in various ways, some standing, some sitting, some weeping audibly, others more stoic. The stage setting is more elaborate than it had been under Caden's direction, and the scene affects everyone who sees it, especially Caden, who appears to have been its primary audience. Kaufman has discussed this scene in an interview published with the screenplay, admitting to not having a clear plan but explaining: "I wanted Millicent to replace Caden as director and do something that was stylistically completely different than he would ever do. I wanted it to be mind-blowing for Caden, to feel like he would never write anything like that" (148). He admits that the speech was written "the day before" and that its effect on the film surprised even himself (148).

The minister's eulogy also sheds light on the character of Willy Loman, whom Happy describes as "never so happy as when he's looking forward to something!" (Miller, *Death* 82). One can imagine Willy himself "wasting years for a phone call or a letter or a look from someone or something to make it all right"; one could even

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describe Willy in terms of his "vague regret [and] vaguer hope." The seventh funeral stands in stark contrast to the first in the film, Willy's. Sparsely attended and so unoriginal, it puts Adele to sleep, Willy's funeral, as directed by Caden, is admittedly unremarkable. Linda's performance is affected and, perhaps as Caden had planned, not very believable. But Willy himself would have been disappointed by his funeral, since it fell far short of Dave Singleman's funeral, which Willy mythologizes: "Do you know? When he died—and by the way he 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—when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotta trains for months after that" (Miller *Salesman* 61). The film's final funeral realizes a Platonic ideal. It is the most emotionally charged of the film's funerals, and it is very well attended (more so than Sammy's actual funeral was). Millicent directs the type of funeral Caden never could, and because of the play's (and the film's) layers of performance, it is really the *story* of a funeral. And that, after all, is all we have of Dave Singleman.

When I taught these two texts together, the string of funerals in *Synecdoche* enabled my students to draw certain conclusions about Willy that they may not have otherwise. For example, a student I'll call Lisa analyzed the funeral scenes in the film alongside Willy's repeated suicide attempts. Below is a shortened excerpt from her paper:

> Caden is seeing a scene of a funeral over and over again in his play and he can never seem to perfect it. Caden will never be able to perfect these scenes because he isn't supposed to perfect them. This is because the funerals in his play are actually representing his own funeral. He keeps trying to direct them to be better but in reality you cannot direct your own funeral. [...] This could be why Caden keeps trying to fix all the funeral scenes; he feels like he wants his funeral to be more than it appears to be in any of these scenes. This is the last funeral scene because Caden realizes that he is waiting for nothing and once he realizes this he can die in peace. In Willy's life he repetitively crashes his car, over and over again in attempt of suicide. Willy also can never perfect this car crash; he ends up alive every time. He has

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> crashed his car so many times that insurance will no longer pay for the damages. [...] I believe that Willy couldn't perfect the car crash because he didn't want to die bad enough to actually follow through with it. [...] If he had really wanted to die he would have driven faster so that the car would have hit harder to further ensure his death. I don't think that he wanted to die because his life wasn't complete. He didn't want to die unsuccessful, poor, and unliked. [...] These two very similar instances are both synecdochal because their longing to be liked takes over their lives and they want their lives to end perfectly, full of happiness, success and caring people. These men have only cared about themselves their entire lives and they expect other people to care about them and this is not going to happen.

The film provided students with a comparable character in Caden, whose conflicts and decisions threw Willy's into relief. Lisa was able to see in both Willy and Caden a selfishness that threatened to make each man impotent: Willy unable to kill himself and Caden unable to direct.

It is important to remember that the climactic seventh funeral isn't directed by Caden but is instead directed *at* him. Throughout the film, Caden has alternately directed others and sought direction from others, telling others what to do and then asking someone else what *he* should do. Caden lacks any intrinsic decision-making skill. Even his instructions to others are, at their core, useless. What, after all, is the young actor to make of his director when he tells him he can't possibly understand the character he's portraying? Caden follows instructions from others when flirting (Hazel feeds him lines); when hiring actors (Sammy wins the part by summarizing what he knows of Caden from years of stalking him); and when relinquishing control of his play (Millicent and his assistant assure him that playing Ellen, the maid, is still an important role).

The importance of direction points up the importance of performance: if we can be told what to do, then we have a choice about our actions. One of the few of Miller's lines that make it into Kaufman's film is Willy's beseeching, "Ben where do I...? Ben *how* do I...?" Not only is he, like Caden, asking for someone to tell him what to do, but he is also inventing that someone, speaking to a projected memory that no other character can see. Also I think the

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connection between Willy's day dreams, through which he reenacts or, possibly, revises moments of his past, and Caden's play, through which he accomplishes the same goal, may be the key connection between these two texts.

Kaufman's focalization on Caden throughout the film forces viewers to understand Caden's world through Caden's perception. It isn't until well into the film that the film audience fully understands how tenuous Caden's grip on reality actually is. When Hazel asks him on a date, emphasizing that Adele has been gone a year, Caden insists that it has been only week. So, Kaufman is able to translate onto film what Mielziner was able to achieve "with easily moved props and fluid lighting effects" (Mielziner 26) on the 1949 stage, which allowed Willy's day dreams to be performed without any stoppage or curtains. In *Miller: Death of a Salesman*, Brenda Murphy explains how this technique contributed to the play's "subjective realism." She writes, "Subjective realism provides an anchor in reality—a series of events that are accepted by the audience as the objective reality of the play—but presents them through the mediating consciousness of a single character, a Blanche DuBois or a Willy Loman, whose mind is often in the process of breaking down" (5). *Synecdoche, New York* helps students experience this subjective realism, though the "anchor in reality" is much less steady.

A few excerpts from my students' writing reveal how the film illuminates this aspect of Miller's play. For example, a student I'll call Melissa writes about the challenges of the film's focus on Caden's version of reality:

> While watching the film, the viewer does not receive many visual cues to distinguish between the play and reality. Also, the idea that everyone is everyone makes it hard for the viewer to understand the role that each character plays. Due to this subjectivity, it is unclear as to which perspective the viewer should trust. For example, whose version of Caden should the viewer believe? The real Caden can barely grasp his own identity, so his perspective may not be trustworthy. He cannot rely on his own perspective because he has an altered perception of reality. Therefore, the audience does not know who or what to believe. Caden's skewed perception and countless interactions with individuals played by many actors make it hard to decipher the truth.

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To further develop this idea, a student I'll call Robert writes:

> The most obvious use of synecdoche in the film *SYNY*, is the grand production and setting of Caden's play, *Infectious Diseases in Cattle*. This play is synecdochal of the real world, resting largely untouched by Caden for the majority of the film. This play becomes a world within a world, it becomes Caden's ultimate escape from reality. In this masterpiece, Caden sets out to create a reproduction of his own life. In this way, Caden's massive play resembles Willy's day dreams. Kaufman's viewers are "inside Caden's head" in a way that recalls Miller's original title for the play: *The Inside of His Head* (Murphy 4).

In an interview about his character, included in the DVD bonus features, Philip Seymour Hoffman addresses this phenomenon without referring at all to Miller or to Willy Loman. Hoffman explains the film this way:

> It's like you're inside someone's life, and how life is, and how time moves in life and what you remember and what you don't remember and what you understand and what you don't understand and how things are moving along and relationships end and relationships start and death and how life's just like that, and it's just flying by, and the older you get the faster it's going and he [Kaufman] really captures all that quite beautifully.

In fact, Kaufman has also discussed this subjective reality, again without using that phrase, in an interview, admitting:

> I very much wanted to emphasize that it was from Caden's point of view. It's a very personal experience, so there's really little in the way it's shot that isn't from Caden's point of view. [...] We couldn't, and do not, have any establishing shots in this movie, not one, with the exception of that bird's-eye view, if you could call it that. And so it gives it a sort of uncomfortable feeling, I think—and maybe not for the good of the movie, I don't know—but it was decided that we wouldn't have them. (Feld 136)

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The result, as mentioned above, is a reality based in more subjectivity than Willy's may have been. But like Willy's day dreams, Caden's directed situations are key to the text. The film audience recognizes that Caden may, in the minister's phrasing, be trying to "trace [...] back to its source" the unhappiness that seems to define him. Maybe he is trying to diagnose his "misery" the way his serial doctors' visits try, but fail, to diagnose his physical ailments. What is clear, though, is that Caden uses his play not just as an attempt to do something "honest" and "brutal" but to understand himself better.[8] Similarly, Willy's daydreams help him to rationalize his life, providing a narrative which, though it may not be true, nonetheless provides Willy the meaning he needs. And, just as Willy cannot kill himself without the approval of Ben, a projected memory, Caden cannot die until he has given up control of his play and his life to his own projection: an actor playing Caden in a play. M. Bettina, in 1962, examines "the stylized characterization of Willy's rich brother Ben, who, when closely observed, takes shape less as a person external to Willy than as a projection of his personality. Ben personifies his brother's dream of easy wealth" (410). In this regard, Sammy is Caden's Ben: a projection of himself (or, part of himself) that helps him make sense of his own life. Kaufman mentions this idea of projection, too, explaining, "In order to have the internal experience of the character, which I'm interested in, I decided to project it externally, so that's why the world is interacting with him the way it is" (Feld 144). Quoting John Edward Hardy, P. P. Sharma has identified an "other-directedness on [Willy's] part," seeing it as "his acceptance to have his identity determined by 'images of himself proffered from the outside by other people'" (76). This, too, can apply to Caden, whose life after he inserts the ear piece can only be described as "other-directed."

However, I don't want to suggest that Caden *is* Willy Loman. Other characters in the film share some of Willy's characteristics. A key example is Hazel's house. As mentioned above, Hazel's house is on fire. It is on fire when, as a young woman, she tours it with the realtor; it is on fire when Caden visits her there after a date; it is on fire as she raises her sons with her husband Derek; and it is on fire when she and Caden finally reconnect as lovers in their senior years. Hazel's decision to live in a dangerously unstable home mirrors Willy's insistence on living in his outdated, crumbling one. Willy's refrigerator "consumes belts like a goddam maniac" (Miller, *Death*

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54), and Linda tallies the week's bills in one of Willy's daydreams: "Well, there's nine-sixty for the washing machine. And for the vacuum cleaner there's three and a half due on the fifteenth. Then the roof, you got twenty-one dollars remaining" (23). And though in the present-day of Miller's play, Willy can attest to "All the cement, the lumber, the reconstruction I put in this house! There ain't a crack to be found in it anymore!" (54), Miller's audience recognizes the irony of his statement. The "cracks" are in the home, not the house: relationships among the characters are strained by decades of dishonesty and mythologizing. Moreover, Miller describes the Loman residence as a "small, fragile-seeming home" (1).[9] The only thing that makes the Loman house seem more substantial than a dream is "The kitchen at center [which] seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator" (1). Ironically, it is this "actual enough" refrigerator that continues to break down and that triggers Willy's first day dream in act one.

Both Miller and Kaufman create domestic settings that symbolize meaning beyond their most obvious as "house." In Miller, home is performed, the "walls" of the house disappearing in Willy's day dreams. In Kaufman, home is also performed in the layered warehouse versions of Caden's life. But the fire is not performed; it is not purely metaphorical, since it does eventually kill Hazel. Kaufman has said that the burning house is a metaphor he hesitates to "get too specific with," lest he "[limit] somebody else's opportunity to take it and make it theirs" (Feld 146); in another source, he's quoted as saying, "You don't have to worry, 'What does the burning house mean?' Who cares. It's a burning house that someone lives in—it's funny." (qtd. in "27. SYNECDOCHE"). In an interpretation that is relevant to the current analysis, John Ott suggests that "Hazel will buy into her American dream of a Christian husband and two kids and a house even if it is in flames. This sort of suffocating life eventually leads to death by smoke inhalation." For Willy, "this sort of life," based on the American dream, led to death by suicide, though he "bought into it" entirely.

It might be tempting, to call Caden Cotard's life tragic, and his story a tragic one. Caden himself introduces the concept when explaining to Tom that "the tragedy" of his performance is that he "*thinks* he's only pretending." Including *Death of a Salesman* at the

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beginning of his film suggests that "attention must be paid" to a word like "tragedy." In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller writes:

> As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society. ("Tragedy" 4)

Published shortly after the opening of *Salesman* in 1949, the essay asserts that the literary form of tragedy need not be relegated to the elite classes, or to characters who have attained a height from which they may fall. We can see these elements in Caden, who sees "his 'rightful' position in society" as one of artistic accomplishment. In the 1949 essay "The Nature of Tragedy," Miller expands on his definition in ways that also apply specifically to Caden. Miller here insists that "Tragedy [...] is inseparable from a certain modest hope regarding the human animal" (10) and that:

> Tragedy arises when we are in the presence of a man who has missed accomplishing his joy. But the joy must be there, the promise of the right way of life must be there. Otherwise pathos reigns, and an endless, meaningless, and essentially untrue picture of man is created—man helpless under the falling piano, man wholly lost in a universe which by its very nature is too hostile to be mastered. (11)

By this definition, Caden's story—the film—is pathetic up until a point. Before Millicent directs the seventh funeral, the film audience may very well feel as if they are watching a man get crushed beneath Miller's "falling piano" in tedious slow motion. But the film becomes a tragedy when Millicent takes over; this is why Caden's response to the emotional seventh funeral is not one of exuberance at his vision finally being fulfilled. When Millicent directs the Platonically ideal funeral, the Dave Singleman funeral of the twenty-first century, Caden realizes that it was, after all, possible to say what he had been trying for years to say. He realizes that he "has missed accomplishing

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his joy" not because "his joy" was impossible, but because he was too inept to accomplish it.

Caden's tragedy is compounded by his lack of originality.[10] Like Willy, he doesn't "have a thing in the ground" (Miller, *Death* 96). Willy scrambles to plant a garden in his back yard, even though Linda reminds him he's tried so many times" (55). Similarly, Caden yearns to leave behind something monumental; when he tells his therapist about the MacArthur grant, he admits, "I wanna do something important while I'm here." Recall that, before she left, Adele complained that Caden's *Salesman* was uninspiring because it lacked something "personal"; it was "someone else's old play."[11] From this point on, Caden longs to be original. He sighs dejectedly when his new wife, Claire (Michelle Williams), responds to his idea for the warehouse play with: "It's brilliant. It's everything. It's *Karamazov*." Like the common man in Miller's essay, Caden was "ready to lay down his life" for this originality. He devotes all the rest of his days to it. But he ultimately fails. After Hazel dies, he calls her answering machine and explains: "I know how to do the play now. It'll all take place over the course of one day, and that day will be the day before you died. It was the happiest day of my life. And I'll be able to relive it forever. See you soon." Of course, this is *Salesman*, which takes place the day before Willy dies. This correlation may explain why the clocks in the opening and closing scenes show the same time, 7:45. Caden hasn't gained any original insight from his lifetime of directing, but instead returns to Miller. And like Willy, Caden dies before this new seed of thought can grow into anything at all; but he and the viewing audience have Millicent's ideal funeral in our recent memory. Like Caden, we know he missed it.

In 2008, the year *Synecdoche, New York* was released, Janet Balakian offered some strategies for teaching *Salesman* to a population of students who may be more familiar with iPods and their own pressing familial and economic obligations than with tape recorders and the Great Depression (Balakian 61). She offers ideas about teaching the play that involve as much historical contextualizing as literary analysis, pointing up the challenges of teaching the play to students whose understanding of American society is so different from Willy's. To Balakian's strategies I'd like to add Kaufman's film. As explained above, it raises many of the themes and styles that Miller and Mielziner used in 1949, but in a 21st

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century context. I've only taught the two texts together in a writing course, but propose that the strategy could be useful in literature and drama courses as well. Both Caden and Willy are dealing with issues of mortality and suicide. Kaufman has admitted that the film began as a horror film, though the horrors he wanted to explore were the real horrors of human existence, like "illness, fear of death, loneliness, lack of meaning in life, guilt, passage of time" (Feld 133).

Also, the film allows students to experience and discuss subjective realism. Though I won't go so far as to suggest that the movie could replace attending a live performance, I do think it opens lines of discussion about dramatic styles as well as the theme of performativity itself. In a collection of essays published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *Salesman*, Christopher Bigsby examined Miller's focus on time in several of his plays. In a passage that eerily could just as easily refer to Caden Cotard, Bigsby writes of the capacity of theater to help us transcend time and space:

> In *Salesman* the two—theatre and memory—come together as the play recapitulates not only the processes of memory but the processes of art as Willy Loman constructs a past, trying to find form in contingency, a logic in mere event, a character and an identity in incidents and social relationships, a connection, in short, with his own life. In effect he is the author of much of *Death of a Salesman* as Tom is the author of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, in that he constructs the text out of the memories he chooses to recall and in park remake. To a degree he writes the script and performs himself quite as if it were indeed a play and he an actor, albeit one who has lost the attention of his audience. (4-5)

Using the film in the classroom may allow students a way to discuss these intersections between memory, performance, and authorship.

Lastly, the film continues a discussion of tragedy begun in 1949 with the opening of the play and the publication of Miller's essays on the topic. Neil Heims acknowledges this debate and contributes to it in his analysis of the similar tragedies in *Salesman*, *King Lear*, and two Oedipus plays. Heims quotes an unnamed critic who saw in *Salesman* "'something comparable to an American *King Lear*'" (63). Because Caden himself mentions Lear and "the storm" when he first sees the huge warehouse space, situating Kaufman's film within the

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"tragic strategies." Heims examination could foster class discussions about tragedy more broadly.

As we near a revival of *Salesman* in which Philip Seymour Hoffman is scheduled to play Willy, some have questioned whether the relatively young actor is capable of playing the role. When Patrick Healy announced the revival on nytimes.com, his article drew mixed comments, some wondering if Hoffman is too young, others questioning his acting skills. Yet in some ways, I think he has already proven himself ready for the role through his work on *Synecdoche, New York*. He has explained subjective reality (without admitting he was doing so), he has articulated the challenges of a young actor playing a tragic, desperate older man, and he has played a character who is fraught with hesitation and uncertainty. His role as Caden Cotard put him as close as possible to the anxieties and motivations of Willy Loman without actually putting the suitcases in his hands.

Notes

[1] Though I missed this on first viewing, several film critics have pointed this out. Also, Kaufman discusses this sequence in his interview with Bob Feld, explaining: "In the very first sequence in the movie—I don't know if you've noticed this, but the day keeps changing. The dates on the newspaper keep changing, the milk goes sour"; Kaufman sees this as evidence that Caden's experience of time is that, "it's moving" (Feld 143).
[2] Manohla Dargis sees this as an indication that the entire film is a dream as Caden dies ("Mirror").
[3] Who knows how original this casting decision actually is? At least one other director, in real life, has made this decision. See Kimbrough.
[4] I use this phrase, "never again part of Caden's life," though I recognize it as problematic in discussing a film that is, ostensibly, about synecdoche. To clarify, Adele never returns to Caden, and neither does his daughter Olive, even though Caden does get to say goodbye to his daughter as she dies. But Dargis points out that "Adele and Olive [...] become a structuring absence for Caden, determining the contours of his life" ("Mirror").
[5] My thanks to Professors Rosen, Scanlan, and Shapiro for bringing this useful term to my attention.

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[6] Ott suggests that Sammy's suicide plays a role in Caden's attempts to understand himself better, offering that "the ultimate truth Sammy shows him is that Caden would have committed suicide on the roof if he hadn't been stopped."
[7] Bradshaw calls this "a bizarre twist [through which] his own identity as the 'director' of his life is taken over by someone more competent, and his individuality is annulled." That Millicent is a better director seems evident to everyone in the scene: she is decidedly unlike Caden, and produces a scene that has Caden's assistant gushing afterward.
[8] In his blog, David Grundy suggests that Caden's huge play "Is simply an attempt to work through some emotional issues (a kind of giant, disguised therapy session where the patient is in charge and there is not [*sic.*] therapist)."
[9] While the connections between Kaufman's film and Miller's play are obvious to me, I've found nothing in the literature about the film that explicitly links the two texts; the closest I've found is a review by Manohla Dargis, titled "Dreamer, Live in the Here and Now," in which she writes that "Caden lives with Adele and Olive in a 'fragile-seeming home,' which is true even if those particular words were written by Arthur Miller, who uses them to describe Willy Loman's home."
[10] Dargis suggests that, "Among many, many other things, "Synecdoche, New York" is about authenticity, including the search for an authentic self in an inauthentic world" ("Dreamer").
[11] Kaufman has recounted this element of the film as part of the original idea for the film: "There was the issue of illness; getting sicker and sicker and trying to find some way of proving himself, his value; of feeling a lack of confidence and self-doubt in his work brought about by Adele, her leaving, and her lack of interest in his work. He was trying to somehow prove something in a vacuum, in a way, because she's not even there anymore" (Feld 134).

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