

Lab Theater's 'Death of a Salesman' intense, emotional, cathartic



Tom Hall, 2014



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Make no mistake. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is an intense, emotional play. "Cathartic," offers Lab Theater Artistic Director Annette Trossbach. And she's absolutely right. But this production's cataclysmic denouement works so effectively because cast and crew do such a masterful job of converting the audience from mere spectators into members of the dysfunctional Loman family.

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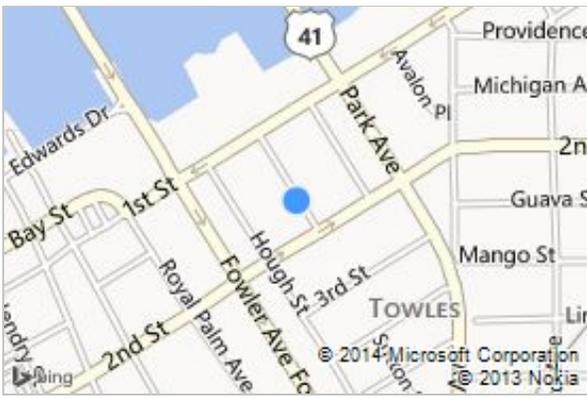
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The actors' task is made easier because of where the play takes place. Lab Theater performs in an historic old church on Woodford Avenue on the eastern fringe of the **downtown Fort Myers River District**. There isn't a bad seat inside this cozy sanctuary. Even in the back row of this 200-seat theater, you are close enough to the action to feel like a household guest who happens into the midst of a family imbroglio so ardent that they forget you're sitting there



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uncomfortably, taking it all in.

Director Louise Wigglesworth also uses a clever theatrical device to draw the audience in. The play opens with a bone-tired Willy Loman shuffling from the back of the theater down the center aisle with his brief case full of sales samples, puffing and sighing as he returns home from another day of unsuccessful calls in the Boston or Providence of some other New England venue. The audience doesn't just watch Willy

wearily climb the steps to his bedroom, they mentally will him up those stairs.

Willy is a salesman in his sixties who has been furiously chasing the American Dream his whole life without ever catching it. When he started out 34 years earlier, the life of a salesman seemed like a dream job. But Willy failed to work at his profession, believing that success comes to those who are well liked and good looking rather than those who know more and work harder than the competition.

Sadly for Willy and his entire family, he's neither well liked nor respected. As his friend and neighbor, Charley, observes, Willy should have been a carpenter, an electrician or a builder. "He was a happy man with a bag of cement." But as Willy's oldest son, Biff, knows, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong."

The role of Willy Loman makes most actors' "top ten ever list," and that's true for Mitchell Haley, who is up for the challenge. "The show is, without a doubt, a challenge," Haley admits. "The character has to fluctuate between different points along the time-space continuum." But this play is not about Willy's descent into dementia. And first produced in 1949, it wasn't written to explore the onset of Alzheimer's either. "Willy has lost his balance," Haley observes, but he and director Louise Wigglesworth are careful not to portray him as crazy.

Loman is frustrated and depressed. He's tired and confused. He has but a loose grip on reality, but only because he's repeated lies to himself for so long that he's come to believe them himself. You see, Loman is a man who struggles to exude a confidence and self-control

he does not now and has never really possessed. Haley does a tremendous job of reflecting this dichotomy, which makes his rants and outbursts all the more shocking and arresting when they inevitably erupt.

But the best part of Haley's performance is that he portrays Willy not as some kind of Greek tragic hero who is defeated in his quest for the golden fleece by events that are beyond his control. Haley's Loman simply makes bad choices and poor decisions - just like the rest of us everyday, common folks. And it's his unwillingness to admit those mistakes, fix them, and face the truth about himself that leads to his undoing, which is therefore wholly deserved. All the sadder for those he leave behind to pick up the pieces of his broken life.

Willy's wife, Linda, is played Mitchell's real-life wife Joann. Linda has been oft described as an enabler. Joann Haley provides her character with so much more dimension than that. A study in contradiction, her Linda vacillates between strength and abject weakness when it comes to her husband and sons. She'll defend her husband like a lioness, telling her son Biff that he's not welcome in their home if he can't make his father feel wanted and respected. But she isn't strong enough to take Biff to the woodshed to remedy his chronic self-sabotaging kleptomania. Nor is she strong enough to confront her husband when she finds a cord in the basement that she knows he intends to use in order to commit suicide.

Biff is played by Rob Green, who last appeared at the Lab Theater along with Stephanie Davis in *Miss Witherspoon*. While Mitchell's part is emotionally draining and Joann Haley is asked to cry and sob convincingly throughout much of the play, Green's challenge is take Biff through a character arc that takes him from cocky football Adonis to a broken bum afraid to pursue his own dreams, never lone live up to those his father had for him. Whether it's Green's crazy good skills as an actor or Wigglesworth's genius for direction, Green assumes the aura of little lost soul - from the way he stands and moves to the manner in which he speaks and enunciates his lines. Which is all the more astonishing given that he must show these differences in a time-space continuum that is anything but linear or chronological.

For all of this, Stu Colon performance as younger son/brother Happy nearly steals the show. Not because it's in-your-face outrageous, but because his super-suave, sexually-charged demeanor conjures images of what Willy Loman must have been like in his heyday. Colon's Happy needs his father's approval so badly that he's turned himself into a younger version of his dad. But poor guy, no matter how much he adores his father and strives to emulate him

(bad traits and all), Willy is obsessed only with Biff and his success. (Miller does provide an explanation for why this is so, but you will have to see the play to find out why this is.)

Taylor Adair, Ken Bryant, Caitlynn Crawford, David Jennings, Bill Molesky, Mary Powell, Jeffrey Schmitt and Rick Sebastian also turn in strong performances in support of the play's big four. But in spite (or perhaps because) of how good a job they do, the focus at all times remains on the sometimes-dynamic, other-times-static relationships between Willy and Linda, father and sons and even Biff and Happy.

Ironically, the cast has spent more time brainstorming, running lines and rehearsing their roles it took Arthur Miller to write the play (namely, a scant six weeks). But it's time well spent. The show's remaining performances are on tonight, January 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30 and 31, with a final performance taking place on February 1. Tickets are \$12 for students, \$18.50 for seniors and military on Thursdays, and \$22 for adults. They are available for purchase at the door, online at www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com or by calling the box office at 239-218-0481. There will be an audience talk-back after the Sunday, January 26 performance.

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