

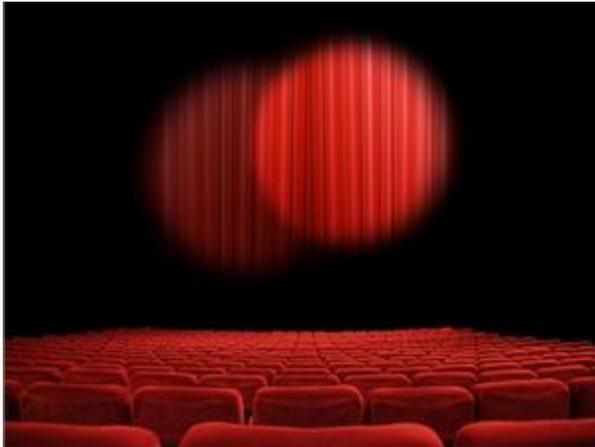
Theater Review: Lab Theater's 'Salesman' a worthwhile revisit

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Jan. 20

news-press.com

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Lab Theater takes on the classic tragedy 'Death of a Salesman' and largely succeeds.



If You Go • **What:** Lab Theater's "Death of a Salesman" •
When: Now through Jan. 26. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, with one 2 p.m. matinee Sunday, Jan. 26.
• **Where:** The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers • **Tickets:** \$20 (\$12 for students) •
Info: 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

Every serious theater, it seems, eventually picks up that road-worn valise and travels with that greatest of American tragedies, "Death of a Salesman."

Now it's Lab Theater's turn.

The resulting drama isn't perfect, but it certainly can pack a punch. Especially its resounding finale with Biff's heartbreaking cry echoing through your head long after you leave the theater.

"Death of a Salesman" is America's version of tragedy, not told with Shakespeare's kings and castles, but with a flawed businessman and the soul-crushing reality of the American dream. And Arthur Miller's 1949 classic still has the power to shake you to your bones.

Director Louise Wigglesworth (who freelances as a theater critic for The News-Press) doesn't break much new ground here, but she does coax strong performances from her community-theater cast and creates an atmosphere of chronic disappointment that permeates Ken Bryant's two-tiered set.

I sometimes longed for more subtlety from J. Mitchell Haley's shattered dreamer, Willy Loman, but the actor dives in deep where it counts. You can feel all 700 miles of road in the aging salesman's weary frame from the moment he shuffles onstage with his valise and exhales an exhausted "Oh boy ..." And you can see the desperation and sadness clawing around the edges of the successful-businessman image he shows to his family and his business associates – an image that's crumbling along with his sanity.

"Death" explores the disconnect between reality and Willy Loman's grandiose delusions about himself as a well-liked businessman. But those glory days are long gone, the Lomans are struggling to pay their bills, and poor brain-addled Willy starts to wonder if he might be worth more to his family dead than alive.

It's a complex role, and Haley steps up to the challenge. He projects worlds of pain, weariness and confusion with his slumped shoulders, quivering voice and bleary, haunted eyes. And his belittling scene with his boss (David Jennings) – with Willy literally holding his hat in hand, his fingers clutching the brim

with sweaty tension – makes you squirm in sympathy for this sad, desperate man. Haley doesn't maintain that level of intense focus in every scene, but when he's on, it's quite impressive.

Haley is matched by his real-life wife, Joann Haley, as Willy's long-suffering wife, Linda, who adores her husband and won't have anyone abuse him – especially his own sons. Her devotion is firm, passionate and believable. Joann Haley especially nails that famous “attention must be paid” speech, laying into her irreverent sons with a righteous fury that builds to an emotional climax.

As rudderless older son Biff, Rob Green burns with anger and disappointment over his father, and we don't find out why until later. His disillusionment stands in stark contrast to the younger Biff shown in flashbacks, a bright-eyed football star who basks in his dad's presence with unfiltered adoration.

Rounding out the core cast is Stu Colon as Biff's amiable horndog of a brother, Happy. Lab Theater apparently had trouble casting this part, with several actors dropping out and Colon stepping into the role just two weeks before the show opened.

The show marks the film actor's first time on a theatrical stage, and he has an energy and an organic acting style I'd love to see more of in the future. But his Happy – while likable enough – didn't make much of an impression on opening night. Perhaps that's changed after a week onstage.

The show has some other problems, too. The most glaring one happened opening night when an actor apparently missed his cue, leaving the stage dark for a minute or two and causing nervous chatter in the audience.

And too often, there's a tentative quality to the actors' performances with too many unnatural pauses in the dialogue. Consequently, these characters just don't feel lived-in yet – at least not all the time. Again, more stage time might have loosened up these performances.

Despite these issues, I still found myself sitting on the edge of my seat by the end of the play, my eyes wet as Willy's final fate was revealed. So Lab Theater must be doing something right.

“Death of a Salesman,” it turns out, is still a road well worth traveling.