

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Death of a Salesman

by Arthur Miller

State Theatre Company
of South Australia
Dunstan Playhouse

Arthur Miller once said his plays were about how the birds come home to roost, one by one, back to the branch. He meant that there is a tragic theme in his work, and his characters, more than most, reap what they sow. But his pessimism is not to be mistaken for futility. In the struggle against their fate and the gathering consequences of their actions, the men and women in Miller's drama are fully astride their lives. Their effort and action, he would say, is heroic, their flawed humanity, the very truth of life.

It is certainly the case that when he wrote *Death of a Salesman* in a six week rush in the spring of 1948 his ambition was to write a play about the tragic fall of an ordinary man. He called his protagonist 'Loman' just to underline the point. But his play - subtitled "Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem" - reads as more than a quibble with Aristotle's definition of the genre. In the fifty- something years since the play first astonished New York audiences, *Death of a Salesman* has only grown in stature as the forces Miller describes have become more apparent and the tribulations of the Loman family more painfully recognisable.

Radicalised, like all his generation, by the Great Depression when the financial systems failed and capitalism had a nervous breakdown, Miller examines the American paradox - that it is propelled by a dream, and betrayed by it at the same time. If Willy Loman has got it wrong, he asks, where did he get his ideas from ? What are these truths he holds to be self-evident - that if you are popular and good at sports you will stay forever in the sun ? Willy Loman, without realising it, has the aspirations and mentality of a teenager and it is Miller's prescience that he saw successive generations in American society hostage to the same fatuous materialism and mired in the same perpetual adolescence.

In an excellent production the State Theatre Company has given substance to these themes and reminded us of the invention and authority of Miller's text. Rosalba Clemente's direction is some of her most assured to date and

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the production team has also risen to the challenge. Philip Griffin's music follows Miller's requirement for solo flute and adds an interlude of his own composition. Cath Cantlon's black-framed set, faithfully incorporating much of Jo Mielziner's original concept, rises from the family kitchen, complete with the hire-purchase refrigerator, up to a mezzanine for the bedroom scenes, and beyond to spangled skyscrapers which, in a metropolis which is not what it seems, are only wire framed cages. Mark Shelton's lighting periodically exposes their deceptions just as it bleakly interrogates the domestic scenes with unflattering fluorescence.

Death of a Salesman is a relentless play, uncovering and scrutinising what Henrik Ibsen called "life lies" - those convenient self-deceits that make life bearable and also unbearably dishonest. And no-one is more trapped in such anguish than Willy Loman himself. William Zappa is outstanding in the role. From the very first entrance he captures the haggard anxiety of a man losing the fight, round by round, punch by punch. With his hitched up tweeds and a nasal Brooklyn snarl, Willy is defiant to the world, broken and bullying to his family. It is painful to see Zappa's salesman summon buoyancy from a fabled past only to be pole-axed by the realities of the present - his wife, Linda's tentative reminders of payment owing, the truth of his wayward and wastrel sons, or the bewilderment of a manager too young to know the veracity, or otherwise, of his sales commissions in the year of 1928.

Margot Fenley is excellent as Linda, long-suffering in defence of a man who is not what he once was, fiercely contesting the injustice to one so diminished. Linda's statements of devotion, like her graveside speech in the Requiem, are like the reports of Greek messengers reminding of things we have not seen. The sons, Happy and Biff - with their gee-whiz nicknames and easy excuses - are cornerstones of the drama. Like O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, this is a family tragedy where the present has been exquisitely shaped by events long ago.

For Biff, played with affecting openness by Justin Moore, the night he visits his father on the road, only to discover his infidelity, is a paralysing moment that never lets go of him. It is proof of the strength of the play - and this production - that this scene has gravity and not mere melodramatic contrivance. In other roles, Martha Lott plays trophies and goodtime girls, Edwin Hodgeman is other-worldly as brother Ben and Don Barker is neighbourly as Charlie. Nathaniel Davison is suitably spivvy as Hap and Brendan Rock is especially convincing as Howard, the

young manager, oblivious to the extremity of a man whose obsolescence is as inevitable as it is for the home appliances he is slaving to pay for.

Death of a Salesman has a disturbing momentum. We know things are unravelling - everyone on stage keeps reminding us of the fact - but no-one can intervene. Willy Loman may irritate us with his stubbornness and self-deception but we cannot deny him. The play won't allow it, and William Zappa's closely detailed, commanding performance certainly will not. Attention must be paid, Linda says, in a phrase that teeters on sentimentousness, but she is right. There is a continuing timeliness to Miller's play and with this first rate production Rosalba Clemente, William Zappa and the strong ensemble from State Theatre Company have renewed our vigilance.